I. THE ORIGINS OF TRAGEDY

The documented history of Greek tragedy begins in 472 B.C. with Aeschylus' *Persae*. Of his earlier career we know little; we know something but not much about one or two of his contemporaries; we have a date (536/533) for the institution of a competition in tragedy at the Great Dionysia. The origins of tragedy lie in the sixth century. So complex, however, and so obscure is the evidence, so various are the theories advanced, that the hardened scholar approaches this subject with dismay.¹

The surviving plays of Aeschylus tell us what needs to be explained. There is a chorus, dramatized as the play demands. Their songs are elaborate and bulk large and, in pre-Aeschylean tragedy, may have bulked larger, since Aristotle informs us that Aeschylus reduced the choral element and 'gave the leading role to the spoken word'.² For the earlier plays two actors are required (either of whom could, with a change of mask and costume, take more than one part). Aeschylus is said himself to have added the second actor and either he or Sophocles the third, and Aeschylus uses three in his later plays.³ The actors deliver speeches, often of considerable length and formality, but also enter into dialogue with the coryphaeus (chorus-leader) or with the other actor. Particularly characteristic are passages of line-by-line interchange (stichomythia) which, like the narrative speech, remains a formal convention of tragedy as long as we know it and may well go back to its earliest beginnings. The plays (except *Agamemnon*) are of moderate length, rather over 1,000 lines. In what kind of performances did plays like these originate?

It is easy to list contributory influences. (i) Tragedy took its stories, with few exceptions, from mythology. These stories had been treated by the epic poets, Homer and the Cycle and other epics now lost; and Aristotle, with a sure instinct, regarded the Homeric handling of myth as a prototype of tragedy.⁴ But myth

¹ For bibliography see Appendix. ² *Poetics* 1449a17f. ³ *Poetics* 1449a18 (with note in D. W. Lucas's edition). ⁴ *Poetics passim*. A famous Aeschylean trilogy now lost clearly followed the plot of the *Iliad* very closely.
THE ORIGINS OF TRAGEDY

had also been treated by lyric poets. It seems that, from an early stage, it had been characteristic of hymns and other types of choral lyric poetry to contain a narrative; and Stesichorus had developed lyric narrative on a big scale. One could say that the stories came to the tragedians rough-shaped for drama by epic and lyric poets. (ii) The choral songs of tragedy, metrically complex and linguistically rich, written in a literary dialect which is not pure Attic (using, for instance, the \( \alpha \) of the lyric koine for Ionic-Attic \( \eta \)), are clearly indebted to the choral lyric tradition of the Peloponnesian and western Greeks: Attica had no great tradition of the kind. (iii) For a noble rhetoric in spoken iambic trimeters we must look elsewhere. Aristotle thought – it may or may not have been a guess – that the original dialogue metre of tragedy was the trochaic tetrameter. Both the tetrameter and the trimeter had developed in Ionia, at the hands of Archilochus and his successors, but tragic trimeters may have owed most to Solon who, at the turn of the seventh and sixth centuries, had elevated the metre to be a medium of political exhortation.

It is easy to list these influences: but on what were they brought to bear? Few today would agree with Murray in deriving tragedy from a ritual passion play. Aristotle, on what evidence we do not know, believed that it originated by extemporization on the part of ‘those who led the dithyramb’; and the dithyramb was a choral hymn to Dionysus, which is likely to have included a narrative. Ignorant as we are about early dithyramb, it seems likely that the burden was carried by the leader and the main function of the chorus was to utter conventional refrains. But how does a choral performance, even with mimetic dancing (the extent of which we cannot judge), become a drama? There was a tradition, known apparently to Aristotle (though not mentioned in his extant works), current in the Hellenistic period and adopted by Horace in his Ars poetica (275–7), which ascribed this development to a certain Thespis from the country-deme of Icaria in Attica. There are many obscurities in the various accounts, but we must suppose that he separated himself from the chorus which he led (what kind of chorus we are not told), assumed a dramatic role and addressed speeches to the chorus: in other words, he stopped singing a story and began to act it. He brought his new invention to Athens, in mid-sixth century or later, where he acted before and after the institution of competitions.

The role of the actor was at first strictly relative to the chorus. The word for actor is hypokrites, the sense of which is debated. Some scholars think that it means ‘interpreter’: the actor elucidated the complexities of the mythical story, partly perhaps through a spoken prologue. (Whether early tragedy had a prologue is itself debated, since two of the surviving plays of Aeschylus, including the earliest, open with the entry of the chorus.) There is still, how-

2 Poetics 1449a21.
3 For criticism of this and other theories see DTC 174ff.
ever, much to be said for the view that hypokrites means 'answerer'. He answers the questions of the chorus and so evokes their songs. He answers with a long speech about his own situation or, when he enters as messenger, with a narrative of disastrous events; or else he submits to a catechism in stichomythia. Naturally, the transformation of the leader into an actor entailed a dramatization of the chorus, which was easy enough if a citizen-chorus became the spokesmen of a city. The process envisaged, if rather vague, is plausible enough. The problem, however, is complicated in several ways, all controversial.

Thespis was an Athenian, and tragedy was generally regarded as an Attic product. But Aristotle tells us that some of the Dorians in the Peloponnesse laid claim to tragedy. There is indeed elusive evidence bearing on tragedy from just those parts of the Peloponnesse which were nearest to Attica: from Corinth, Sicyon and Phlius. At Corinth Arion was a notable figure in the days of Periander; that he helped to turn a primitive extemporized dithyramb into an elaborate form of art is beyond doubt. Herodotus tells us this, and only this, but a later writer gives Solon, in his elegies, as the authority for saying that Arion put on 'the first drama of tragedy'. Solon cannot have used the phrase but must have said something to evoke it. The Suda-lexicon mentions Arion's work on dithyramb (clearly following Herodotus), but also says that he was the discoverer of the tragic mode or style (tropos), whatever that may mean, and that he brought on the stage 'satyrs speaking verse'. Obscure though this all is (the last words sound like a quotation from comedy), the combination of dithyramb, tragedy and satyrs in one notice is bound to be suggestive. At neighbouring Sicyon, Herodotus tells us that the tyrant Cleisthenes, at war with Argos, wishing to suppress the worship of the Argive heros Adrastus whose sufferings were honoured with 'tragic choruses', gave them over to Dionysus. What was it about these choruses that caused the friend of Sophocles to call them tragic? Finally, Pratinas of Phlius is said to have been the first to write satyr plays; and the presumption is that he introduced them from his native city to Athens, where he also practised as a tragedian in the early fifth century. One problem leads into another.

The evidence of Aristotle's Poetics is not lightly to be disregarded. Not only does he tell us that tragedy arose from the 'leaders of the dithyramb' but he also uses, mysteriously, the adjective 'satyric' (satyrikos): he says that tragedy, beginning with short 'myths' (plots or stories) and ridiculous language, was late in attaining dignity through a change out of a 'satyric' state (or performance), and he adds that the tetrameter was used first because the 'poetry' was 'satyric' and 'more danceable'. Aristotle may, but need not, have meant that tragedy

1 Poetics 1448a20–b2. 2 Herodotus i.23; Joannes Diaconus, Comm. in Harmogenem, ed. H. Rabe, Rh.M. 61 (1908) 150; Suda s.v. 'Arion'. 3 An anapaestic tetrameter? 4 Herodotus 5.67. 5 Poetics 1449a20, 22.
developed out of a dithyramb sung and danced by a satyr chorus; if he did, he could have been right or wrong. There is little or no independent evidence for a satyric dithyramb, but naturally we think of the notice which associates Arion with dithyramb, tragedy and satyrs. At this point in the argument looms up the grotesque shadow of a goat. The members of a tragic chorus were ‘goat-singers’ (tragoidoi). Were they so called because they sang in goatskins or for a goat-prize or in connexion with a goat-sacrifice? Or because they were masquerading as goat-like demons? This sounds attractive but encounters the difficulty that Attic satyrs or silenoi had horses’ tails. But they were conceived as shaggy and lustful; nor need we rule out this association simply because tragedy became sober and serious. Not only is the evidence on satyrs complex and disputed (see pp. 346ff.), but we are confronted with a basic dilemma. The fact that, in the competition, three tragedies were followed by a satyr play, that satyr plays were written by the same poets as tragedy, on stories drawn from the same fount, and were governed broadly by the same conventions, strongly suggests, if it does not prove, that there was a genetic connexion between the two forms. On the other hand, the members of a satyr chorus are already masked and ‘dramatized’ as satyrs – a serious obstacle to their re-dramatization as elders (or whatever it might be); and it can be argued that out of a satyr chorus no kind of drama could develop other than a satyr play, which did in fact so develop, perhaps at Phlius. Non liquet: neither the degree to which choral performances had approximated to drama in the Peloponnese nor the question whether dithyramb and tragedy shared a satyric background with satyr play can be determined on the evidence.

All three forms, along with comedy, were from the beginning, and remained, part of the cult of Dionysus. The myths sung in dithyramb and then acted in tragedy may originally have been taken from Dionysiac legend, but of these there was a limited supply. The proverbial expression ‘nothing to do with Dionysus’ (οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διὸνυσον) may suggest that the introduction of non-Dionysiac myths gave rise to protest, but this is likely to have happened fairly early in both contexts. In point of theme, tragedy moved away from Dionysus. But was its nature and character, its emotional impact, still in any degree determined by its Dionysiac associations? That there was a political factor is fairly clear. The cult of Dionysus was popular and may have been encouraged by tyrants seeking popular support, as a counterpoise perhaps to established cults under aristocratic control. We have seen some hint of this at Corinth and Sicyon; and at Athens the establishment of tragedy clearly owed much to Pisistratus and his sons (under whom Lasus of Hermione was active in the field of dithyramb). To suggest that their motives were purely political, that they had no concern to promote these new developments of that traditional choral art so intimately bound up with the cultural life of archaic Greece, might be
unfair. It is likely, however, to have been under the Cleisthenic democracy that tragedy attained the greater dignity and seriousness of which Aristotle speaks; and one may speculate, if hazardously, about the effect on tragedy of a new social climate in which responsibility for grave decisions was placed upon the body of citizens meeting in the assembly - citizens who would then, at the festivals, meet in the theatre of Dionysus to hear and watch the tragedies.

Certainly, by 472 tragedy had become highly serious, political (in some sense) - and religious. Religious it had always been as part (like comedy) of a cult; and it was no doubt to cult that it owed those masks which became progressively less appropriate to the kind of plays which were written. It cannot be too strongly insisted, however, that tragedy was not itself a ritual, having none of that rigid repetitive character by which ritual is marked, though tragedies did incorporate ritual features if the action so demanded (and choral odes often take the form of hymns and use hymn-language). Nor should we attribute to Dionysus both a hypothetical early grotesquerie and the later seriousness, which tragedy will have owed far more to the fact that it used and interpreted myths that were themselves impregnated with religion and had been treated lyrically in religious contexts, and to a tradition of thought upon great issues of human destiny and divine government which descended to the tragic poets from thinkers such as Hesiod and Solon. The tradition runs from them to Aeschylus.

How much tragedy owed to the sheer genius of Aeschylus, with what truth Murray called him 'the creator of tragedy', is not demonstrable, since we know so little of his predecessors and contemporaries. It is just possible that four mythological play-titles (including *Pentheus*) attributed to Thespis are genuine, but nothing secure can be said about the character of his plays. Choerilus is little more than a name: he is said to have competed with Pratinas and Aeschylus in 499/496. Of Pratinas it is said that 32 of his 50 plays were satyric, which, if true, means that he cannot have operated entirely within the normal fifth-century Attic scheme. There is one substantial and very interesting fragment under his name, in which a chorus of satyrs protest that their words are being drowned by the *aulos*-accompaniment. That this comes from a satyr play rather than a lyric is pure surmise, and it has recently been suggested, with great plausibility, that the fragment really belongs to the late fifth century and has been wrongly attributed to this Pratinas. Of Phrynichus, who won his first victory 511/508 and must have been senior to Aeschylus, we know a little more and get the impression of a considerable figure. In 493, during the archonship of Themistocles, he produced 'The capture of Miletus' (Μιλήτου διώκειτο), as a result of which he was fined, says Herodotus, by the Athenians for 'having reminded the citizens of their own misfortunes'. In 476 (probably), with

\[\text{\footnotesize 1} \text{ Cf. Vickers (1973) 41f.} \quad \text{\footnotesize 2} \text{ For bibliography see Appendix.} \quad \text{\footnotesize 3} \text{ Cf. Lloyd-Jones (see Appendix) 15-18.} \quad \text{\footnotesize 4} \text{ Herodotus 6.21.}\]
THE ORIGINS OF TRAGEDY

Themistocles as choregos, he won a victory with Phoenissae, on the theme of Salamis. He also wrote on normal mythical subjects, about the Danaids, about Actaeon, and others. From Aristophanes we learn that his songs were still famous and sung in the late fifth century. That is, however, no ground for asserting that his plays were more lyrical than dramatic. What kind of plays he wrote, and with what tragic content, we simply do not know, except that he twice used contemporary themes and showed the way for Aeschylus' Persae.

2. TRAGEDY IN PERFORMANCE

Anyone who asks: What was Greek tragedy like? What was its effect, in performance? will find the business of answering these questions somewhat frustrating. For we are the prisoners of our evidence, which is everywhere slighter than we could wish, often much later than the period we are chiefly concerned with (the fifth century B.C.), and almost always difficult to interpret. There are all too many vital questions which we cannot answer without some measure of guesswork and speculation, nor without relying on a priori assumptions whose validity we can never adequately test. And yet it is essential that we do raise these questions, or else the texts of Greek tragedy must remain inert, like musical scores which we cannot and do not even try to perform. For the texts are essentially scripts for performance, and the style and context of that performance are fundamental to our understanding of the texts themselves.

We can roughly classify our evidence under three heads: the discoveries and conclusions of archaeological research, later tradition about the theatre, and the play texts themselves. Each kind of evidence has its own pitfalls. The evidence of archaeology is itself of two rather different kinds. The first depends on the conclusions to be drawn from the excavation of theatre sites, the second upon the interpretation of visual imagery drawing on the theatre which appears in the painted pottery of fifth-century Attica (and to a lesser extent in other pottery) and also in the relief sculpture and terracotta figures of the late fifth and fourth centuries.

The first stone-built theatre in Athens was the work of the late fourth century, in the decade which saw Athens fall under the domination of Macedon: the site was almost totally reworked in later centuries. Earlier performances, and thus all those in the period which most interests us, relied largely on temporary constructions in wood, which have left little or no trace in the archaeological record. Late tradition connected the earliest performances of tragedy at Athens

1 Wsps 120; Birds 748ff.

2 Unless we attribute to him a papyrus fragment containing part of a tragedy based on the story of Gyges (cf. Herodotus i.8ff.). Scholars are not agreed whether this is a work of the early fifth century or of the Hellenistic period. For bibliography see Appendix.
with the *agora*: we have no reason to doubt the tradition, but the raised platforms for the performers and tiers of wooden seating for the audience have left no mark behind. For most of the fifth century the performances took place in the theatre of Dionysus at the foot of the southern cliff of the Acropolis, where an acting area had been terraced up with a stone retaining wall, but the theatre 'building', the *skene*, at the end of the century was still of wood on a stone foundation, and we can learn very little for certain from what is left of those foundations about the nature of the wooden building above. The evidence of vases and other representations is somewhat better, even if it is thin. Theatre scenes, which characteristically represent actors and chorus-men seen off-stage, before or after performance, occur as early as the first surviving plays of Aeschylus (perhaps earlier), and we have a number of such scenes covering most of the fifth century. But there is a problem of deciding what is relevant: it is never easy to distinguish between pictures of actors presenting roles from the heroic repertory of Greek tragedy and scenes showing the heroic figures themselves, with the artist influenced perhaps by dramatic performance in his imagining of the scene. Before we can be sure that what is being presented to us is a scene of actors and not of mythical figures, we have to have undeniably 'theatrical' features present (dressing scenes, unmistakable masks, or the figure of the *auletes*, the musician who played the double pipe that accompanied sung scenes in Greek tragedy). And even then we have always to reckon with the play of the artist's imagination and with the conventions within which he worked.

With the evidence of later tradition our problems are different again. Here, with the exception of Aristotle, we are dealing with antiquarians, men of the Hellenistic or Roman periods assembling a miscellany of information, almost entirely from their reading, in order to produce encyclopaedias and commentaries which would make intelligible a vanished past. For the most part we can assume that their first-hand knowledge, even of the contemporary theatre, is nil, and we cannot read their sources and assure ourselves of their reliability: often we do not even know to what period their information refers, and this last point is crucial since theatrical productions and indeed the actual pieces performed had changed radically by, say, the second century B.C., let alone by the second or third century A.D. Their evidence can never be used to contradict the evidence of archaeology; it can sometimes fill gaps in that evidence.

Our last category of evidence, that of the play texts themselves, raises problems that are like those we encounter when we try to interpret the painted scenes on pottery: how do we separate the theatrical experience presented solely through the playwright's imaginative use of language from what was there, in concrete fact, before the audience's eyes? In a masked drama, as Greek drama was, it is obvious enough that some things evoked in the play text, such as tears or smiles, existed only in language and in gesture, and did not, in the literal sense,
TRAGEDY IN PERFORMANCE

'happen'. But how are we to decide, for example, how much of the scene evoked by the chorus in the Parodos of Euripides' *Ion*, the temple sculpture of Delphi to whose detail they respond with such emotion, or of the complex cave setting in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, was actually represented in the stage construction of the late fifth-century theatre? What of the presentation of dramatic events such as the earthquake in *Prometheus vinctus*, or Orestes' shooting his arrows at the Furies in the mad scene of Euripides' *Orestes*? As we shall see, these are not easy questions to answer.

The first thing we have to take account of in trying to assess the impact of Greek tragedy as it was experienced in performance is the context of that experience, the place of tragic drama in the life of the Athenian community. Though it was not itself a liturgical, ritual act (see p. 262 above), it was nevertheless part of the worship of divinity, a sacred event with its place fixed in the religious calendar of Athens, and marked as sacred by the actual rituals which surrounded it (such as the torchlight procession in which Dionysus' statue was brought from the altar on the road to Eleutherai to his theatre in Athens, the great phallic procession on the first day of the Dionysia, and the sacrificial rites of purifying the theatre), as well as by the suspension of profane activities of the community during the festival. A second important aspect of the dramatic experience also derives from its social context: it is the analogy with the great religious contests of the Greek world, such as the Olympic and Pythian 'games'. In both, the endemic and potentially disruptive competitiveness of ancient Greek society was validated and sanctified by dedicating conspicuous display of competitive achievement to the worship of the gods. The dramatic performances of Athens, like the athletic contests, took much of their meaning for those who witnessed them from being contests in achievement before the eyes of the community. Playwrights, actors and *choregoi* (Athenians who displayed their wealth by paying lavishly for the costs of performance) were all taking part in competition with one another and the 'victories' of each were publicly proclaimed and attested in the records of the Athenian polis and in conspicuous private monuments alike. The role of the audience, thought of as both 'the Athenians' and 'the Greeks', is to give its recognition to the triumphant prowess of the victor, and, conversely, to deride unmercifully the humiliation of the defeated.

The very size of the audience at Athens (perhaps 15,000) made it natural and indeed accurate to think of the performances as an expression of the Athenian people's solidarity and as an act of the community, with two aspects; the first an act of celebration honouring the gods, and the second the provision of an arena for the acknowledgement of prestige and standing within the community.

TRAGEDY

Both aspects are reflected in the fact that, as we learn from Aristotle, the organization of the festival, the processions and the dramatic performances, was one of the major responsibilities of the archon, the chief magistrate of Athens.\(^1\) The same two aspects of the dramatic performances also mean that, though they represented something radically new in form and presentation, the tragic competitions were rooted in tradition. The plays themselves not only draw heavily on traditional stories and on the traditions of religious imagery which gave those stories much of their significance, but also, in enacting heroic struggle both of man against man and of men against all that is alien to man, contribute to the reinforcing of the traditional values of ancient Greek society, even though the traditional values are at the same time subjected to scrutiny through the constant reshaping of myth. For the whole community, represented in the audience, the performances of tragedy constitute a fusion of the traditional past with a new, innovating present.

This is to put the double-sidedness of past and present, tradition and change, in sociological terms. We can see it equally clearly expressed in the concrete realities of the place and circumstances of performance. The centre of the performance space is the level circular area of the orchestra, the dancing-floor, now vanished at Athens in the re-ordering of the theatre of Dionysus for later styles of performance, but present and unaltered in the best preserved of Greek theatres, the theatre of Epidaurus (Pl. IV\(a\) and Fig. 1). This was built probably no earlier than the third century B.C., to plans by an otherwise unknown architect, Polyclitus, but was already famous in later antiquity for the beauty and symmetry of its architectural composition.\(^2\) The orchestra is the focal point of the whole design. It measures some twenty metres in diameter (the orchestra at Athens was probably a little larger), and is almost two-thirds enclosed by the rising tiers of the auditorium, in the shape of a cone, inverted and truncated. The origins of the orchestra are very much earlier than those of drama; in all probability they are to be found in the circular threshing-floors, often terraced out of the hillside, which are dotted in large numbers over the Greek landscape. As well as being the place for threshing grain or drying grapes and figs, such threshing-floors were a place for dancing. Dancing upon a circular floor, with a crowd of spectators surrounding it, is figured in the design of the shield of Achilles in the Iliad: 'a dancing-floor like the one Daedalus made in the wide town of Cnossus', on which the dancers circle effortlessly 'like the wheel of a potter when he crouches and works it with his hands to see if it will run' (18.59ff.). Upon such a floor the chorus of tragedy moves: it is the fixed and essential element in the construction of a theatre for dramatic performances. By contrast the ground for spectators might vary considerably in shape and sitting. After the abandonment of temporary wooden stands, spectators were almost

\(^1\) Aristotle, Ath. Pol. 56.2-5. \(^2\) Pausanias 2.27.5.
always placed on a hillside, usually curving but often far from the symmetrically graded and curving auditorium at Epidaurus: at Athens the curve is noticeably flatter, hardly more than half enclosing the orchestra, with acoustics that can never have been as good as those at Epidaurus, while local village theatres, such as the late sixth-century theatre at Thoricus in Attica, might be wholly lacking in symmetry. Orientation also varied very widely: the theatre at Athens faced roughly south-south-east, while that at Epidaurus was almost diametrically opposed, facing north-north-west. In every case the orientation of the most appropriate hillside determined that of the theatre: at Athens the theatre overlooked the sacred precinct of Dionysus and his archaic temple, while at Epidaurus the sanctuary of Asclepius lay only some 500 metres away below the theatre.

The circular form of the orchestra is related to the ring-dances of early Greek folk celebration, and the traditional dance pattern was retained in the circling dance of the fifth-century dithyramb. Dithyrambic competitions for choruses of men and boys, each fifty strong, representing the ten tribes of Attica, also formed part of the celebrations in honour of Dionysus, and seem to have taken

1 For the date of the theatre at Thoricus, see T. Hackens in Mussche et al. (1965) 75–96.
TRAGEDY

place in the theatre of Dionysus on the same days as performances of drama. But the chorus of tragedy characteristically moved in line, like a military unit parading, and did not, except rarely, reflect the traditional plan retained in the orchestra circle. It was also very much smaller (probably twelve in the plays of Aeschylus; fifteen in the later plays of Sophocles and Euripides), and had consequently a relatively much larger space in which to move.

The sense of openness of space pervades the performances of tragedy; open, not only to the light of the sky, with a total absence of walls or roof to give a feeling of enclosure, but also with open sight lines which converge from every angle on the huge, uncluttered orchestra and what lay beyond it. It is with the question of what lay beyond that our difficulties of interpretation begin. At a tangent to the orchestra circle but set back a little from its edge there was, by the time of the Oresteia at least (458 B.C.), the theatre building called the skene, and on either side of it, in the space between it and the forward edge of the half-circle of spectators, two open passage ways by which actors could enter the acting area from outside the theatre. These are the eisodoi, the entry passages, and at Epidaurus they pass through formal gateways of stone which stand at right-angles to the supporting wall of the auditorium. Since the late fifth-century skene at Athens was built of wood, there are questions we cannot very well answer as to its height and external appearance, the number of doors and other openings in it, and its painted decoration. It was a solid construction, of fairly substantial timbers, but could be taken down between festivals;¹ it seems to have had a flat roof, strong enough to support several actors upon it, and at least one double doorway facing the spectators. It is probable that from the first some such building served as a store-room for masks, costumes and props, and as a green room for actors preparing to make their entries. But we cannot be certain how early it came to be part of the fixed and accepted design of a theatre area or how it was at first interpreted. In Aeschylus' earliest surviving play, Persæ, it has been convincingly argued that the action of the first part of the play is to be somewhat loosely imagined as taking place inside, not in front of, a building: this is certainly the most obvious and least strained interpretation of the words of the chorus of Persian elders in council with Xerxes' mother, Atossa: τὸ ἀρχιτεκτονικο τέως στέιος ἀρχιον 'sitting in (near? on?) this ancient building' (140f.). In that case, the skene was presumably either not yet in a position behind them as the spectators viewed the scene, or at least not thought of as part of the imagined scene of action, but rather as a non-dramatic piece of theatre equipment, like the banks of spotlights and floods in a modern theatre. But by the early 450s at least the skene is thought of as bounding the scene of action and in certain moments part of it. It may represent a building (commonly a palace or a temple) or the background of a scene of seashore or of mountainside. Entrances

¹ Xenophon, Cyropaedia 6.1.54.
are made from it and the scene of action is now clearly marked as being out of
doors: interior scenes can be shown only in tableau.

It is convenient and natural to speak of the 'acting area', but as soon as we
ask where it was, and how if at all it was distinguished from the orchestra,
controversy intensifies. There is some slight evidence, partly in the plays them-

selves, partly in tenuous traces in the theatre of Dionysus and the fifth-century
theatre at Eretria in Euboea, that the space in front of the skene, between it and
the orchestra, was raised a little above the latter, at Athens probably on a low
wooden platform with one or two steps down into the orchestra. We cannot be
certain of this but it seems the most plausible interpretation of our slight evidence.

What we can be confident of is that there was no high stage, lifting the actors a
metre and a half or more above the level of the chorus, such as was imagined in
the last century when reconstructions of the Greek theatre were attempted.
Not only do the texts of the plays (such as the scene in Sophocles' Oedipus at
Colonus (822ff., esp. 856–7) in which the chorus try physically to intervene as
Oedipus and Antigone are carried off by the ruthless Creon and his armed men)
tell strongly against it, but it is far more convincing to connect the high stage
with the much later Hellenistic and above all Roman elaboration of the wooden
skene into a stone-built façade of several stories. Such structures threatened to
dwarf the actors and this effect was countered by raising them above the audience
(the chorus having now effectively vanished from the theatre) and then, as we
shall see, by elongating their figures with new kinds of mask and footwear which
gave added height to suit the new perspective. For the fifth-century Athenian
theatre we have to imagine the actors for the most part speaking and moving
in front of the skene and close to it, on a low platform. One of the functions of
the skene will thus have been to project the actor's voice forward towards the
spectators and lessen the vocal demands made by the scale of the auditorium
and theatre space.

The scene displayed before the spectators will thus have been one in which
their eyes could travel across the breadth of the acting area and beyond it, into
the side passages. The figures in that area will have been relatively few in relation
to the space available and their movements therefore the more significant in
spatial terms. There are important implications to this. The fact, for example,
that entrances and exits, other than through the doorway of the skene, had
measurable duration for the spectator and were made in full view, means that
they had added dramatic weight. They were not instantaneous passages from
the invisibility of the wings to the visibility of the stage, but extended happenings
with considerable dramatic potential. It is only when we appreciate this that we
can understand the dramatic strategy of the scene, for example, in Oedipus at
Colonus in which Ismene enters. Her long approach is heralded and accompanied
by an ecstatic account from Antigone, her sister, who describes to her blind

269
TRAGEDY

father, in a controlled unfolding of detail, the appearance of the approaching figure, the mare she rides on, her broad Thessalian traveller's hat, until she is within the range of speech, and finally of touch (310ff.). Such moments of intense acceptance contrast with the silent, unacknowledged approach, equally visible, of characters whose arrival is, as it were, rejected and denied and who have to force themselves past the barrier of silence into the world of the play. An example of such entrances is given by the several arrivals of Jason in Euripides' Medea: he comes and goes in silence, addresses no greetings and receives no farewells. The dramatic weight of comings and goings is proportional to the openness of space that the Greek theatre presented to the playwright, who was also the producer, for exploitation.

In its function as part of the scene of imagined action, the skene is the place where those dramatic events which occur, as we should say, 'off-stage' are imagined as happening. Though it is not true that death is an event which, in Greek tragedy, can never occur in view of the spectators (the deaths of Alcestis and, more disputably perhaps, of Ajax in Sophocles' play are obviously exceptions), nevertheless violent death characteristically occurs within, that is, inside the skene, and has its dramatic impact through the death-cries of the victim and the controlled passion of the messenger-speech. But there is another way also open to the playwright to give weight to violent death in his plays, through the use of the interior tableau. Late tradition provides evidence for the existence of a theatrical device known as the ekkyklema, most probably a low trolley which could be thrust forward towards the spectators through the doors of the skene, and several passages in Aristophanes, parodies in which its use is transferred to tableaux of the domestic interiors of tragic playwrights, make it certain that the device was used in the fifth-century theatre. We can form some idea of its dramatic effect by looking at two scenes. In Aeschylus' Agamemnon, the death-cries of the king are followed almost at once by the opening of the skene doors and the first words of Clytemnestra's speech of triumph. At line 1379 she says 'I stand where I struck, over the work that I have done', and in the light of the other evidence, it is clear that we are to imagine Clytemnestra standing within the palace over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, the tableau revealed by the thrusting out of the ekkyklema. The scene is hauntingly repeated in the second play of the Oresteia, where (Choephoroi 973) the doors open again and this time Orestes stands over his mother's body and that of Aegisthus. In Euripides' Heracles, at line 1029, the doors of his palace open, revealing the scene of slaughter and havoc within, which the appearance of Iris and Lyssa (815ff.) had predicted and the messenger-speech (909ff.) described: Heracles is seen slumped unconscious over the bodies of his own children.

2 Ar. Ach. 395-479; Thesm. 95-265.
whom he has murdered, then gradually returns to consciousness. In scenes such as these the device of the interior tableau is used to powerful effect.

Another piece of theatrical equipment is also best attested in use in the fifth-century theatre by Aristophanic parody. In Peace (154ff.) the hero Trygaeus flies up to heaven on an enormous dung-beetle to interview Zeus, and as with the ekkyklena dramatic illusion is suddenly abandoned with a panic-stricken address to the crane-operator (the mechanopoios). The mechane is a device also attested in later tradition about the theatre, and the scene in Peace looks like a parody of one in Euripides’ lost play Bellerophon, in which Bellerophon flies to heaven on Pegasus. In extant tragedy it may have been used for the appearance of divinities who are described as winging their way through the air, as with Oceanus in Prometheus vinctus (284ff.), or Thetis in Euripides’ Andromache (1228ff.), Athena in his Ion (1549ff.) and the Dioscuri in his Electra (1233ff.): Euripides attained some notoriety for his use of the ‘god from the machine’.

It was customary in the theatre of a generation ago, and in the West End commercial theatre of domestic comedies and farces still is customary, for the acting area to be occupied not only by actors but by a proliferation of objects, furniture, ornaments and the like, whose function is to give a naturalistic impression of lived-in space. By contrast the theatre space of Greek tragic drama was starkly bare: the actors were not lost in, nor their movements confined and determined by, a profusion of things defining and occupying space. Stage properties were certainly used, but for their dramatic quality, not to create an ambient illusion. Those of which we can be most certain are the focus of continuing and powerful dramatic emotion: thus, for example, the robe in which Agamemnon is killed in the Oresteia. Related to the purple cloths upon which Agamemnon walks to his death, it figures constantly as an image (often as a ‘net’) in the language of the first play, linking the death of Agamemnon to the fall and sack of Troy; and in the second it is displayed to the spectators by Orestes after the killing of his mother (Choephori 980–1020). It is spread out before their eyes (‘stretch it out and standing in a circle display the thing that trapped a man’) and insistently referred to in the sequel (‘this robe’, ‘this fabric’) as the visible symbol of Orestes’ right action in killing his mother.1 Sophocles has a particular inclination towards the use of such powerfully emotive properties: the sword of Ajax, the bow of Philoctetes, the urn in which the ashes of the supposedly dead Orestes are brought to his sister Electra. In Aeschylus stage properties have something of the uncanny force of an object with the power to cause of itself death and destruction, and are analogous in their use to the stage

1 A recently published red-figure vase in Boston, without evident theatrical connexion but dating from the same period as the production of the Oresteia, gives a good idea of how Agamemnon’s death-robe was imagined, as an almost transparent ankle-length garment without holes for neck or hands: cf. Vermeule (1966) 1–22 and plates 1–3; Davies (1969) 214–60.
TRAGEDY

events of an eerie strangeness, such as the ghost-raising scene in *Persae* or the Cassandra scene in *Agamemnon*, from which Aeschylus derives much of his theatricality. In Sophocles, on the other hand, they are felt more as the focus of powerful human attachments and feelings, and around these feelings much of the stage action revolves. Their use in Euripides seems more attenuated, even ironical (the shield of Hector in *Troades* 1136ff. or Apollo's bow in *Orestes* 268ff. are slight instances beside the Sophoclean examples: the latter even may be imaginary, the product of Orestes' insane hallucinations), but in all three dramatists their effect in the theatre derives from the sparseness of the use of properties in general.

Another kind of property, the appurtenances of splendour and power, seems also to have been used. Such are the chariot in which Agamemnon returns with Cassandra from Troy (*Agamemnon* 906), or that in which Clytemnestra visits her daughter, supposedly in childbirth, at the peasant cottage to which she has been exiled (Euripides, *Electra* 966, 998ff., 1135ff.). They too have a dramatic point to make and underline the ironies of splendour in a context of violent death: they are very different from the illusionistic properties of later theatres. It is much more difficult to be sure about the use of properties, and of painted scenery generally, whose function is largely or solely to create a specific sense of place, the illusion of a scene designated by objects. How, for example, was the raising of Darius' ghost in *Persae* actually staged? Our difficulties in interpreting the contemporary archaeological evidence are well illustrated by a fifth-century Attic vase-painting which has, unconvincingly, been used to answer this particular question. Fragments of a hydria found in Corinth (Pl. IVb) show a scene which is seemingly marked as theatrical by the presence of the *aulentes* playing his double pipe; five or more Oriental, probably Persian, figures are depicted in trousered costume with a flapped headdress, and in attitudes of horror or amazement, but without any attempt to suggest that they are wearing masks. The central figure is a king, to judge from a wooden pyre, constructed of logs with each row laid at right angles to the one below. The pyre is alight and flames are licking about it. What are we to make of this? It seems unlikely, though on purely *a priori* grounds, that burning pyres formed part of the stage properties of a fifth-century tragedy: perhaps the combination of the *aulentes* and the horrific scene presented was meant to evoke a dramatic moment described in a messenger-speech or even in a dithyramb. Perhaps, though, our assumptions are false and such a scene could have been staged literally as depicted. The question is an open one.

The problem of such properties and of scenery inevitably brings in the evidence of later tradition: our earliest source is Aristotle who records laconically that Sophocles introduced *skenographia* ('painting the skene') into performances of tragedy (*Poet.* 1449a18f.). A much later source, the Roman architect
TRAGEDY IN PERFORMANCE

Vitruvius, asserts that Aeschylus adopted the idea from the painter Agatharchus of Samos. Like the introduction of a third actor, this development seems to have been attributed to the decade in which the theatrical careers of Aeschylus and Sophocles overlapped, with some uncertainty about which of the two was responsible. But how are we to interpret the assertion? Tragedies were performed at the Athenian City Dionysia in sequences of three, followed by a satyr play, and it was normal for the three tragedies to have no continuity of setting: even Aeschylus, who alone seems frequently to have written connected sequences of three plays presenting different stages in the unfolding of a single story, did not seek to place his plays within a single setting. Indeed the third play of the Oresteia itself involves a change of setting, from before the temple of Apollo at Delphi to the Areopagus at Athens. Another of Aeschylus’ plays, the Women of Aetna, seems to have had a setting which was imagined to shift five times within the play. But here (the play is lost and the assertion occurs in the ancient hypothesis) the inference must be from the language of the play and we may be dealing with an action very loosely anchored in spatial terms, as we are in Persae, where the relationship between the “ancient building” of line 141 and the tomb of Darius later in the play is left entirely open and the setting almost freely variable. There is a world of difference between this and the opening, for example, of Sophocles’ Electra, where the evocative landmarks of Argos are pointed out one after another by the paidagogos to Orestes on his return as a young man from exile since childhood. The introduction of “painting the skene” almost certainly falls between these two plays. Indeed we have already seen that in the earliest plays there may have been no skene-building placed so as to focus the acting area immediately in front of it. In the early plays of Aeschylus (Persae, Septem contra Thebas, Supplices) it is noticeable that the setting is either left without precise locality or imagined as an open space: there are several references to a rocky crag or mound (Persae 659ff., the tomb-mound of Darius; Supplices 189; the crag recurs in the probably somewhat later Prometheus vinctus, lines 20, 130, 272 etc.); moreover in the theatre of Dionysus at Athens the ground beyond the orchestra from the spectators was almost two metres lower than the orchestra terrace itself. Thus the placing of a skene in that area may have been a development of the middle or late 460s and “painting the skene” may have occurred very shortly after the building itself was first constructed so as to close the spectators’ view.

As to what was painted we have no contemporary evidence and are left to guess: the most plausible guess is that it represented a building or buildings or a landscape-setting painted in a kind of primitive perspective with multiple

1 Vitruvius, De architectura 7.1.11; cf. 1.2.2. For Agatharchus’ date, which is disputed, see also Plutarch, Alcibiades 16.5; Pericles 13.3 and the discussion in Pollitt (1974) 236-47.
2 Aesch. fr. 287 Lloyd-Jones.
TRAGEDY

vanishing points. This tradition of painting was connected with Agatharchus and found its fullest expression considerably later, in the Hellenistic wall-paintings which were the source for the painted 'theatrical sets' used to decorate the houses of southern Italy, at Pompeii, Herculaneum and Boscoreale. Our earliest evidence for this tradition comes from a vase of the mid-fourth century from Tarentum in southern Italy which shows (on Erika Simon's interpretation),1 not a stage-building, but a painted theatre set of a building, with projecting porticoes at either end, each crowned by a pediment with gilded akroteria and ceiling panels, and with two double doors, one at the end of each portico (Pl. VIa). But the relevance of this painting to the fifth-century Athenian theatre is highly uncertain.

When we turn to the question of actors and acting styles, we are to begin with on firmer ground. The first, essential fact is that all actors and chorus-men in Greek tragedy were male: that is, that female parts were acted, not by boys as in the Shakespearian theatre, but by adult men, often of middle age or older. For acting careers in the tragic theatre seem to have been long.

The actor Mynniscus who acted for Aeschylus (that is before 456 B.C.) won first prize in a play by Menocrates in the competition of 422 and in the late fourth century the actor Polus was still performing eight tragedies in four days at the age of seventy.2 It is tempting to suggest that the part of Clytemnestra in the Oresteia was played by Aeschylus himself, then in his late sixties: tradition recorded that it was Sophocles who was the first playwright to abandon acting the leading part in his own plays, and that was not at the beginning of his career (he almost certainly acted in his early plays Thamyras and Plyntriai). Thus we have to imagine not merely female roles that convey an almost aggressively masculine feeling, such as that of Clytemnestra or of Euripides' Medea, played by men, but also highly 'feminine' roles such as those of Io in Prometheus, Deianira in Trachiniae or Euripides' Creusa (in Ion), Iphigenia or Helen: the only comparable theatrical experience available to us is perhaps the same tradition in the Japanese No and Kabuki theatres. The parts of children were indeed played on stage by children, but as silent mimes: children are never given spoken lines in Greek tragedy, and it is noticeable that the brief snatches of sung lamentation, which is all the utterance that they are given, are always so placed that there is a male actor available to sing them off-stage.

In his account of the development of tragedy, Aristotle records the introduction of a second actor by Aeschylus, and of a third by Sophocles: at this point, in Aristotle's view, tragedy had 'attained its natural form' and no further changes took place (Poet. 1449a14ff.). Correspondingly, the series of nouns 'protagonist', 'deuteragonist', 'tritagonist' does not continue beyond its third member. It follows that, down to Aristotle's time, only three actors were avail-

1 Simon (1972) 35. 2 Plutarch, Moralia 785b.

274
TRAGEDY IN PERFORMANCE
able to the playwright in writing and casting his plays. Silent walking-on parts might be used: hence the unspeaking figures such as Pylades in the Electra plays of Sophocles and Euripides. The explanation for this limitation may have been financial but is more likely to have been aesthetic and practical. It will not have been easy to find large numbers of trained voices capable of meeting the vocal demands of text and theatre. In addition, masked drama makes it difficult to identify the source of speech, so that if a considerable number of speakers are all engaged together in dialogue the audience may become confused: it is very noticeable that even with three actors a genuinely free-flowing three-cornered dialogue is extremely rare in Attic tragedy. Usually, if two speakers are engaged in dialogue, the third is silent until one or other has fallen out of the exchange: a carefully patterned sequence of utterances is the norm, as in the scene between Oedipus, Creon, Jocasta and the chorus in Oedipus tyrannus (512ff.). An important consequence of the limitation, of course, is the doubling of parts by a single actor; occasionally, even, the splitting of a single part between two actors. We cannot in the nature of things be certain which actor played which parts in a given play (a subject on which we have no direct evidence), but sequences of entrances and exits, speech and silence, often suggest inferences, and the likely doubling of parts is sometimes striking in its histrionic possibilities. The probability that the parts of Deianira and Heracles (in Trachiniae), of Phaedra and Theseus (in Hippolytus) or of Pentheus and Agave (in Bacchae) were played by the same male actor gives an idea of the challenge to an actor's technical skills, and a messenger-speech will often have been delivered by an actor who in the same play also acts the part of one of the central figures in the scene he is describing: again Bacchae produces an example, since the messenger is likely to be the same actor as he who played the part of Dionysus.

The extreme case of doubling and splitting parts is that of Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus, where on a strict interpretation of the three-actor limit the role of Theseus must be played by two, perhaps even three, actors and Ismene is present but silent for almost a third of the play, played by an 'extra' (in the technical language of the theatre a kophon prosopon, a silent mask), because no fourth actor was available. The story of Oedipus' death, involving his two daughters, his son, Creon and Theseus in a shifting pattern of conflict and loyalty, presented a fifth-century dramatist with major problems of dramatic construction.

Soon after the introduction of the third actor, acting as such, as a skill distinct from that of play-writing, became a sphere of achievement in its own right, and from 449 B.C. actors, as well as playwrights, were ranked in competition and awarded prizes. The entry into the theatre of the new specialism is perhaps reflected in the extent to which sung passages (not unlike operatic recitatives and arias) are given to actors of the later fifth century: already in the Oresteia such sung passages are important (the Cassandra scene of Agamemnon is the
TRAGEDY

most striking example: the part of Cassandra was perhaps played by Mynniscus, the recently introduced third actor), and in Euripides actor-arias figure from the first and play a steadily increasing and important part in his later productions. The actor's apprenticeship in the chorus may be one of the factors lying behind this development.

Before we turn to the question of acting techniques, we must look at the evidence for the actor's theatrical appearance, his costume and mask. All actors, whether playing speaking or silent parts, and the members of the chorus, were masked: indeed the word *prosopon* means not only 'face' and 'mask', but also 'character' in the theatrical sense. Only the *auletes* (who played throughout in view of the spectators) was unmasked. Masks were full face and covered the whole of the front half of the head, including the ears, with wigs attached. Fifth-century masks seem to have been made of linen or other flexible material, stuccoed over with plaster and painted: none has survived. Vase paintings are our best evidence. The earliest certain example of a theatrical mask appears depicted on fragments of a red-figure jug found in the *agora* at Athens and dating from 470/460 B.C. (Pl. VIIa). It is the mask of a female character, painted white in the conventional way in which female skin colour was shown in all Greek art, with hair cropped short and held in with a head-band; the eyes are fairly wide-set, almond-shaped not circular, and the mouth is small in proportion to the breadth of the face and the lips only slightly parted. There is no striving after intense emotional expression in the painting of forehead, eyebrows or mouth; rather a certain openness of regard. The style is reminiscent, as has been pointed out, of the so-called 'severe style' of the temple sculptures of Olympia, which date from around 460 B.C., and there seems to be nothing specifically 'theatrical' in its presentation. The general impression of clarity and simplicity of expressive means is confirmed by other paintings of masks on Attic pottery in the decades from 460 to 430 or a little later, such as the dressing scenes on a bell-krater in Ferrara (Pl. VIb) and on a pelike in Boston (Pl. Va), and a more imaginatively treated scene of a chorus-man who has become the maenad whose role he is playing, with theatrical reality retained only in the mask and in the figure of the *auletes* who faces him: in the last two, the mask is shown in profile and we can form a clear impression of its relationship to the actor's own head and hair, which is commonly cut short and held in by a sweat-band. To the last decade of the fifth century probably belong two vases (Pl. VIIb illustrates one of them), perhaps by the same painter, and a relief from the Piraeus. From all three we can see that the mask mouth is now somewhat larger and more widely open, though still very far from the gaping, almost trumpet-like mouths of Hellenistic and Roman masks: the effect of emotional strain in the painting of the face is also rather more marked, with the forehead and the area of the mouth heavily lined.

One of the two vases, the so-called Pronomos vase in Naples (Pl. VIII), is our...
TRAGEDY IN PERFORMANCE

most detailed and magnificent depiction of a scene of actors: it figures three, perhaps four actors carrying masks and in costume, and a complete satyr chorus, as well as the auletes (the central figure, who must have commissioned the painting), the playwright and a lyre-player, all three named on the vase. One of the actors is dressed to play the part of Papposilenus, the stock old man who accompanies the satyr chorus, wearing neck-to-ankle tights of white fleece flocked with tufts of wool, with a leopard-skin over his left shoulder and carrying a mask of grotesque and sad old age: his role in extant satyr plays makes it clear that he is not the chorus-leader. This is presumably the figure to the right of the altar bearing the victory tripod, who holds a satyr mask (indicated by its snub nose, wrinkled forehead and animal ears) but wears an elaborately decorated chiton. The other satyr chorus-men wear only bathing-trunk shaped tights of animal skin with a large, erect phallus and animal tail attached: they too have their human names on the vase. There is continuing argument over the three figures dressed as actors and carrying masks, two of whom flank the central couch in the upper bank while the third is perched on its foot: are they actors from the cast of a tragedy or from a satyr play? Happily there is no need to pursue the argument here, since the silence of all our sources makes it virtually certain that, apart from Papposilenus, the actors in a satyr play (as distinct from the chorus) were not distinguished by mask or dress from those in a tragedy.

The actor who faces Papposilenus is playing Heracles, as his club and lion-skin (worn with a breastplate over it) make clear, while the figure who balances him at the other end of the couch has a mask with an oriental tiara attached: his part is not that of a Greek. The third figure with a mask (also with tiara) has the face of a woman, not a male actor: we are perhaps to think of her as the image of an abstraction, perhaps Tragedy or Paidia, the burlesque personification of the satyr play, dressed as though an actor. Interpretation is difficult, since in the artist’s eye these last three figures have become fused with their parts and have taken on a heroic and distant dignity: none is named on the vase. The latest (and persuasive) suggestion of a subject for the play in which these actors appeared is the story of Heracles and Omphale.1

Two other representations of actors come from later centuries and from outside Athens, but are still of interest. The first is a fragment from Tarentum (Pl. VIIc), like the skenographia painting we have already discussed, and is of much the same date in the second half of the fourth century. The mask, again seen in profile, is not very different from those on the Pronomos vase of half a century earlier, the eyebrows and forehead perhaps more strongly marked but the mouth-opening no greater, the forehead no higher: it suggests that there had been little change in masking designs. The piece is particularly interesting for a new, sociological point that it makes in the eloquent contrast between actor and

1 Simon (1971) and (1972) 30.
TRAGEDY

part: the actor is stocky, balding and greying, square-faced and flat-nosed, with the stubble of a beard strongly marked on his chin and jaws; beside his mask he is palpably ordinary. Conversely, on a wall painting from Herculaneum but drawing probably on a Hellenistic picture of around 300 B.C. (Pl. VIb), the actor appears as matinée idol, handsome, tall and slim with delicate hands and hair elegantly ruffled. The painting of his mask is in equally striking contrast with its vast, staring sunken eyes, mouth hugely open and towering pointed forehead and peak of hair, the onkos of theatre handbooks. It belongs to the new theatre of the Hellenistic world, in which as we have seen the actor has to compete with the towering stone façade behind him, and will serve as a classic reminder of what the fifth-century mask was not like.

Besides giving us, at least in general terms, a fair idea of the look of fifth-century masks, the pottery scenes we have considered also remove another widespread misunderstanding about the actor’s appearance. In the Hellenistic and Roman theatres actors wore shoes and boots with blocked soles and heels to give them extra stature by perhaps as much as six inches. The pottery scenes make it absolutely clear that footwear of this kind was never worn in the fifth-century theatre. What we find on the vases is actors either barefoot or wearing shoes or boots (it is not always possible to tell which, but in some cases certainly they are calf-length) made of soft, pliable leather with a thin sole and a marked turning up of the toes. Such shoes appear on the pottery scenes from the 460s right through to the end of the century, sometimes elaborately decorated, sometimes plain: they seem to be early established as the traditional actor’s footwear. If the actor’s boot was, in the fifth century, called a kothornos (and there is no contemporary evidence that it was), then passages in Herodotus, Aristophanes and Xenophon make it clear that its associations were not with added stature but with women (Dionysus in actor’s gear is even more effeminate than usual) and with a degree of looseness of fit that ruled out distinctions of left and right. The tradition that connects Aeschylus with the platform-soled boots of the Hellenistic theatre is certainly the result of some misunderstanding, which goes back at least to Horace, probably to the third century B.C., and presumably arose when the word kothornos had come only to refer to what was by then the characteristic footwear of the actor.

Our evidence for costume is somewhat confusing. If we take the pottery scenes as our guide, the picture is of a dress that becomes markedly more elaborate and stylized as the century proceeds, though interpretation is complicated by the fragmentary state of some of the pots and the fact that while some of the scenes can be firmly identified as representations of chorus-men and others

1 Herodotus 1.155.4; 6.125.3–4; Ar. Frgs 47; Lys. 677; Eccl. 313ff.; Xenophon, Hellenica 2.3.10f.
2 Horace, Ars poetica 280.
of actors, some remain uncertain. The earlier scenes show actors or chorus-men generally in a long, ankle-length *chiton* with a heavier *himation* over it: decoration consists largely of borders and there are no sleeves, any more than there were in contemporary dress outside the theatre. But by the end of the century, on the Pronomos vase, for example, and on other scenes that seem to have at least heavily theatrical overtones, the actor appears wearing costumes of elaborately decorated and heavy material, with sleeves that stretch to the wrist: an example is an Attic krater found at Capua showing the captive Andromeda surrounded by figures some of whom have a distinctly theatrical air. From now on, sleeves seem to be an unchanging and characteristic feature of costume in the theatre as they never were in the world outside. At all periods, of course, distinctive costume can be used to identify characters (such as Heracles, Hermes or Dionysus) or groups (the Persians on the pyre scene from Corinth (Pl. IVb) wear trousers, like the Ethiopian girl on the Andromeda krater). But rich and elaborately patterned fabrics made up into sleeved garments are the mark of the actor dressed to play a part. It seems likely enough that the sleeved *chiton* came into the theatre through being worn by the *auletes*, who is shown wearing it from the first, in a garment of almost standardized patterning of black circles with a central dot and a long stripe running from shoulder to ankle. We could be fairly confident of recognizing the late fifth-century actor by the richness and stylization of his costume if it were not for a string of jokes in Aristophanes about Euripides' repeated use of actors dressed in rags (*Acharnians* 412ff.).

Aristophanes' jokes seem to suggest that we are wrong, about Euripides at least, but perhaps a simple inference as to theatrical fact would be a mistake: Aristophanes has a habit of making comic capital out of treating the metaphors of tragic language as statements of literal fact (for example, the stage business with the chopping-block in *Acharnians* when Dicaeopolis offers his head as guarantee of his words, 335ff.) and this may be merely another example. Certainly Euripidean characters do talk of themselves as tattered, dishevelled and sometimes filthy (his Electra or the shipwrecked Menelaus of *Helen* are good examples), but already in Aeschylus' *Persae* the defeated Xerxes is described as returning with his clothing torn to shreds.1 Faced with this contradiction between the evidence of the pottery and that of comedy, we can only back a hunch: it seems most likely that the vases show what the spectators actually saw in the theatre, and that Aristophanes' jokes do no more than exploit Euripides' intensification of the language of degradation in his plays. The nearest we get to 'rags' in the pottery evidence is the rather muted brown fringed *chiton* of the actor on the Tarentum fragment (Pl. VIIc).

From the evidence we have been discussing we can form a good impression of an actor's visual impact in the theatre. But what of his acting? We have to

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279
TRAGEDY

make do here with generalized accounts of the emotional effect that acting could have on an audience, with scrappy references to voice production and to gesture, and with what we can infer from the play texts and from the actor’s costume and mask. Descriptions of an actor’s performance in terms of the emotional experience involved are certainly important, but they can tell us almost nothing of the technique that produced that experience. Descriptions of Japanese actors in the No and Kabuki theatres, of actors in the Shakespearian theatre from those of his own day through to Garrick, Kean and Irving are all evidence for the sense of ‘life’ displayed and for the emotions aroused in the audience, but where we can compare these accounts with more technical descriptions or with present-day representations of the same tradition, we can readily perceive the stylization involved and the extent to which it is the audience’s acceptance of a particular stylization which leads to the experience of ‘naturalness’ and to a strong, direct emotional response. That there was such a response to the performance of Greek tragedy is clear enough: it is attested in stories such as that of the great fourth-century actor Polus moving an entire audience to tears by his playing, under the impact of his own son’s death, the part of Electra in the recognition scene of Sophocles’ *Electra* (Aulus Gellius 6.5). That is a late story: other similar stories refer to fifth- and fourth-century actors such as Callippides, Theodorus and Satyrus. A near-contemporary analogy is Ion’s account in Plato (*Ion* 535c–e) of his solo performances of the Homeric poems: the audience weep, their faces filled with anger, while his own eyes well with tears and his heart pounds. But references to the actor’s technique are more often concerned with qualities of voice, and many of them refer to dieting and to vocal training and exercises that suggest the world of opera rather than the spoken theatre. Actors, of course, might have to sing, but it is clear that vocal control, the capacity to vary tone and colour as well as dynamic range, was a prime requirement for delivery of the spoken as well as the lyric portions of the complex texts of Greek tragedy in a large, open-air theatre space.

As for style in movement and gesture, there are traces of changes in the fifth century. Aeschylus’ third actor Mynniscus is reported by Aristotle (Poet. 1461b26ff.) as having described his younger contemporary Callippides as an ‘ape’ for his excessively emotional and extravagant style of gesture and movement: Callippides won a victory at the Lenaea of 418 B.C. It is a reasonable guess that the development of sleeves in the actor’s costume and the increasingly striking decoration was partly at least a response to the need to make gesture more expressive and more clearly visible, so that an actor’s ‘line’ (to use a ballet term) was more marked. On the other hand, both the thin soled shoe and what we hear in later tradition about the movements of the chorus suggest that a smooth and gliding movement of the body was more typical of tragedy than angularity and muscular tension, a sinuous continuity rather than explosive
TRAGEDY IN PERFORMANCE

staccato movements. The construction of the plays themselves, the formality of long speeches on the one hand, and of such exchanges as stichomythia on the other, must have inhibited the development of a wholly naturalistic delivery and movement. It would be contrary to what we know of theatre history elsewhere to assume a divorce between styles of writing and styles of acting since the playwright was himself very much of the theatre, and it is not until the fourth century, when revivals become a feature of the dramatic festivals, that the question of 'interpreting' in the theatre an existing body of classic plays can have arisen. An increasingly 'expressive' use of voice and gesture in the last quarter of the fifth century would be exactly what we should expect from changes in the writing of plays, particularly in the later theatre of Euripides. In his plays, along with a spoken line that becomes steadily freer and more flexible in its metrical patterning goes a rapid adoption of the new possibilities of expressiveness offered by developments in music. In the hands of composer-poets such as Melanippides and Timotheus, the tight structuring of sung passages by the demands of symmetrical response of stanzas and the harmonic discipline of modal composition gives way to a new astrophic use of long, highly flexible stanzas and to the abandonment of the strict demands of the musical mode. Euripides adopts these features as early as Troades, and late plays such as Ion, Helen and Orestes are marked by a quite new style of writing in which long, elaborate arias are given to actors as well as by increasing experimentation in the use of new versions of old forms, such as immensely extended passages of stichomythia and of whole scenes written in trochaic tetrameters. It is likely enough that all of this goes closely with developments in acting style aimed at a greater range of expressive possibilities. If we imagine Callippides in the role of the Phrygian slave in Orestes (1369ff.), we can well understand the reaction of an older generation of actors whose style had been moulded by the far more severely controlled writing of Aeschylean theatre.

3. AESCHYLUS

Aeschylus won his first victory in 484, which will be a firm date based on records; and it could throw some slight suspicion on 525/524 as the date of his birth (floruit-dating?), though, if he competed as early as 499/496, it may not be too far out. He was born to Euphorion, a eupatrid, at Eleusis. The known facts of his life are few. He fought at Marathon, where his brother Cynegeirus fell; doubtless at Salamis, which he describes; and perhaps also at Plataea. When he wrote of war, he wrote as one who knew its glory and its misery. He visited Sicily at least twice. Some time between 472 and 468 he was at the court of Hieron I at Syracuse, where he is said to have revived Persae and, in honour of the newly-founded city of Aetna, produced a play called Aetnaeae (part of the argu-
TRAGEDY

ment to which may be preserved on a papyrus). In 458 or later, after the fall of the Sicilian tyrants, he went to Gela, where he died in 456. What part, if any, he played in Athenian politics is debated, but there is reason to suppose he was sympathetic towards Themistocles, who was in trouble when Aeschylus wrote his *Persae*; and it seems clear from *Eumenides* that he accepted the radical reforms of the Areopagus by Ephialtes, but scholars are not agreed whether it was with enthusiasm as an extreme democrat or with reserve as a 'moderate'. His importance to us is that he wrote plays. He wrote, acted and produced, devising new dance-movements for the chorus. His mastery of stage-effect is obvious.

The number of his victories is given both as 13 and as 28. The latter figure must include victories won after his death, since we are told he was granted the unique honour that his plays might be entered in subsequent competitions; the lower figure in itself suggests a considerable pre-eminence. Some 80 of his titles are known to us, but only seven of his plays survive entire, three of which constitute the trilogy of the *Oresteia*. The trilogy was a striking feature of his dramatic art. It had become a rule of the competition (we cannot say when) that each poet should put on three tragedies followed by a satyr play. These plays could be, and after Aeschylus generally were, unconnected with one another, but it was clearly his practice, at least during his later career, to write three tragedies dealing with successive phases of the same myth, followed by a satyr play on a closely related story. (It is to these linked plays that the terms trilogy and tetralogy are alone properly applied.) We have the rare good fortune that a complete Aeschylean trilogy has survived, since without it we could hardly have understood how he used this form to explore human destiny upon an extended time-scale or how he imposed architectonic unity so as to create, virtually, a single work of art. It follows that, where, as with *Septem contra Thebas*, *Supplices* and (probably) *Prometheus*, we possess only one play out of three, interpretation labours under a grave disability. Of the lost plays some can with certainty, and others with fair probability, be grouped in trilogies. It is quite likely that Aeschylus invented the form (though others are known to have used it), but how early we cannot tell. Some titles are known, and others conjectured, to be satyric, about 15 in all, but, since we do not know when the rule of three tragedies and a satyr play came in, we have no idea how many

1 Cf. Lloyd-Jones (1957) 593.
2 Works: for references and bibliography see Appendix.
3 E.g. the satyr play of *Oresteia* was *Proteus* (Menelaus and Helen in Egypt, cf. Homer, *Od.* 4.351ff.); of the Theban trilogy *Sphinx*; of the Danaid trilogy *Aynymone*.
4 A *Lycurgia* is certain, cf. schol. ad Ar. *Thesm.* 134 (*Edon*, *Bassaides*, *Naniskoi*, satyr play *Lycurgus*), and an *Achilleis* virtually certain (*Myrmidon*, *Nereides*, *Phryges* or *Ransom of Hector*). A second Dionysiac trilogy (including *Semele* and *Pentheus*) is highly probable; also a trilogy on the Ajax-story (*Judgement of the arms*, *Thresiases*, *Salaminiae*); possibly trilogies on the Argonauts and on *Odyssey*. In some cases there may have been only two related plays. Cf. Mette (1959) and Lloyd-Jones (1957).
AESCHYLUS

satyr plays Aeschylus had been required to write, though we know that his reputation in this line was great. His early career is thus quite obscure, and it is not until 472 that we reach firm ground, and that with a play which differs from the other extant plays in two respects.

Between *Persae* and the lost plays produced with it (*Phineus, Glaucus Ponticus, and the satyric Prometheus pyrakeus*) there is no discernible link; it is the only extant tragedy on a subject taken from contemporary history. It might seem surprising that a tragedian could move from, say, Achilles to Xerxes, from Xerxes back to Agamemnon, but this is to misunderstand the twin facts that the Greeks regarded myth as history and that Aeschylus treated history as myth. If the emotions of a recent threat and triumph were vividly evoked (if Themistocles, and perhaps Aristides, were not forgotten), the Persians are not mocked, and patriotic exultation takes second place to a religious interpretation of events which has, to a degree, determined the form of the play. Stiff and archaic the form may seem. The play opens with the chorus of Persian counsellors: concerned that no news has come from the great expedition, they declaim and sing for 150 lines before the first character appears. It is the mother of Xerxes, who tells them of an ominous dream that the great king's chariot had been wrecked, when he tried to yoke two women, one in Persian dress, one in Greek. Then enters the second actor, a messenger, giving the news of Salamis to queen and chorus. Messenger-speeches are a staple feature of Greek tragedy: so also are *kommoi* or lyric-scenes between chorus and actor (or actors); and *Persae* ends with a long and tense lamentation between Xerxes and the elders. But the return of a humiliated Xerxes is postponed, while the ghost of Darius is raised from his tomb. Spectacular effects are found elsewhere in Aeschylus, who was held by ancient critics to aim at 'astonishment'; and this apparition, prepared by an incantation, must have been sensational enough. But Darius was introduced not merely to amaze but to instruct; not merely because he has foreknowledge of that other great disaster at Plataea, but because he alone (though a Persian) understands the significance of events and the moral order upheld by Zeus who 'is set as the chastener of minds that are over-proud, and heavy is the account which he exacts' (827). Earlier in the play the divine power is seen as cruel, fickle and unpredictable; so it is seen by Xerxes on his return. The final *kommos* - a ritual dirge with its music and dance-movements - may be the emotional climax of the piece, but by reverting to the religious notions and superstitious tone of the earlier phase it highlights the advanced morality of the Darius-scene, which is thematically and structurally the central feature.

In *Septem contra Thebas* five years later (467), if we find once more an austere simplicity of structure, we are confronted with far more complex problems of interpretation, and that not only because the plays which preceded it in the trilogy (*Laius, Oedipus*) are lost. In *Persae* the moral and religious issue is
TRAGEDY

straightforward: Xerxes and his Persians offend and are punished. The Theban trilogy is, like Oresteia, the story of a doomed house; and Septem came at the end of a series of disasters – and doubtless crimes – in the royal house of Thebes, initiated by Laius and affecting the destinies of Oedipus and his sons. How the earlier events were distributed and handled in the lost plays we do not know with any certainty. The third play opens after the death of Oedipus and the quarrel of his sons; Polynices, in exile, has brought a foreign army against Thebes, and Eteocles leads the defenders. It opens with a speech by Eteocles, who is virtually the sole character in the play. That a play should be so dominated by a character is something new, and we shall not find it again except in Agamemnon and Prometheus vinctus. A word should be said at this point about characterization in Aeschylus.

It is austere and limited and in keeping with the archaic simplicity of the dramatic action. The extent to which Aeschylus was interested in character for its own sake is not easily defined. It has been said, with much truth, that the Aeschylean character is his role in the play and nothing more. What complicates the case of Eteocles is the fact that his role is twofold: he is at once ‘lord of the Cadmeans’, leading the defence of his native-city, and ‘son of Oedipus’, lying under his father’s curse which he is bound to fulfil in the mutual fratricide; and he is thus the focus of a twofold issue, since the fates of family and city are both involved. When, at the climax of the play, he decides to fight his brother at the seventh gate, this has been seen as the instantaneous transformation of conscientious patriot into demon-haunted fratricide. It is less simple than that. The motivation of Eteocles is specifically explored, and a complex fabric is woven out of patriotic duty, personal honour, brotherly hatred, and paternal curse. If Aeschylus has not created a ‘character’ in the modern sense, he has imposed a notable figure on the stage, but how, exactly, we are meant to understand the relationship of the curse-Erinys to the human motives of Eteocles is hard to determine in the absence of the earlier plays.

We are left with a strangely gripping, if elusive, play. Once again, there is a big central scene, in which a spy describes the foreign champions at each gate and Eteocles posts a defender against each. The sombre rhetoric is magnificent; but what could be more static? Yet a tension is built up towards the moment of decision, when Eteocles finds his brother at the seventh gate. At the end of the play we are confronted with one of those textual problems which dog the study of Aeschylus. Enter Antigone and Ismene and a herald who forbids the burial of Polynices. But many scholars believe that all this was interpolated subsequent to the Antigone of Sophocles, that the authentic play ended with the young women of Thebes who form the chorus lamenting over the brothers.

If there is an archaic stiffness about Persae and Septem, what could be more archaic than Supplices? The play opens, like Persae, with the entry of the
chorus, to which well over half the lines belong. There are still only two actors, and little use is made of the second; there is no dominant figure, but as it were a collective heroine; the dramatic interest is in their fate, the dramatic tension is generated by their songs. It is not surprising that this was long regarded as the earliest play, datable perhaps to the 490s. Perhaps scholars should have been more cautious, reflecting, among other things, on the leading role played by the chorus in *Eumenides*, on the function of choral odes in *Agamemnon*, and in general on that deep concern of the Aeschylean chorus with the action, and the interpretation of action, which is nowhere more evident than in *Oresteia*. In 1952, however, there was published a fragmentary didascalic notice on papyrus which indicates that the Danaid trilogy was victorious in competition with Sophocles, who first competed in 468 (or at the earliest 470); the plausible restoration of an archon-name would date the production to 463.¹ Rearguard actions have failed, and there is now general recognition that the early dating must be given up.

The story of the fifty daughters of Danaus, living in Egypt but descended from Argive Io, who fled to avoid marriage with their cousins, the fifty sons of Aegyptus, was a myth of great antiquity which had already been treated in tragedy (see pp. 262ff. on Phrynichus). The surviving play was first in the trilogy. It opens with the Danaids newly arrived in Argos, their cousins in hot pursuit. They appeal to the king Pelasgus, who needs ‘deep salutary thought that plunges, like a diver, into the depths, with seeing sober eye’ (407–9). He is confronted with a dilemma between war with the Egyptians, if he protects the suppliants, and the wrath of Zeus Hikesios, if he rejects them; to which is added the prospect of pollution, if they carry out their threat to hang themselves from the images of the gods. Pelasgus decides that he will commend their case to the people of Argos, who have the final word. This word is favourable, but a herald lands from the Egyptian fleet and with barbarous violence seeks to drag the Danaids from the altars. They are saved by the king, but war seems inevitable.

The king’s dilemma and decision are clearly a factor of dramatic importance, and his reference to the people adds to the play a political dimension which was doubtless taken up in the sequel. But Pelasgus does not emerge as an individual, while Danaus is merely characterized as the planner and plotter behind his daughters. Not even a tormented Pelasgus really takes the stage from the Danaids. It is their play and remains their trilogy - a trilogy of remarkable unity in point of place, time and theme, the events of the three plays following in quick succession at Argos, concerned with the fate of the same set of persons, who formed the chorus of two - and perhaps of all three - plays. *Aegyptii* and *Danaides* are lost, but, if we cannot work out their economies in detail, we know

¹ Cf. Lloyd-Jones (1957) 591ff. and A.C. 1964 (see App.).
TRAGEDY

some of the things that happened.¹ We know that the Danaids did marry their cousins and, on the instigation of their father, killed them on the wedding-night, the victims (and threatened suicides) of the first play becoming murderers in the sequel; that one Danaid, Hypermestra, spared her husband and so created the dramatic situation of the final play; that Aphrodite appeared and proclaimed her universal power in nature. There may or may not have been a trial, on stage or off stage, of somebody. There must have been a solution: but of what problem?

It is a remarkable fact that the whole trilogy seems to have been focused upon the relations between men and women and the place of marriage in the structure of society. The Danaids have an abhorrence of marriage which may have stemmed less from the cousinship than from the violence of their suitors. Yet women must marry, as their handmaidens (who are introduced as a subsidiary chorus at the end of Supplices) knew, and as Hypermestra accepted, and as Aphrodite will have proclaimed. How the trilogy ended we cannot be sure, but it may well have ended with a ‘conversion’ of the Danaids. If this is a social issue (becoming political through the involvement of the Argive democracy), it is also religious, not merely because of Aphrodite, but because Zeus presides, with his mysterious purposes, the protector of suppliants, who nevertheless are wedded against their will, and of strangers, whom nevertheless they kill, the god who, with Hera, presides over marriage.

With the Oresteian trilogy, produced in 458, we can at last survey an Aeschylean drama in all its sweep and intricacy. It consists of three plays (Agamemnon, Choephoroi, Eumenides), each with its own action, its own tone and character, but constituting a single dramatic exploration of a single tremendous theme. Agamemnon is the longest, as it is the most complex; yet in some ways its dramatic technique is the oldest. The action could not be simpler: Agamemnon returns from Troy and is killed by his wife. It receives, however, an elaborate preparation through the exposition of past events and an accumulation of foreboding, to both of which the chorus (of Argive elders) contributes. The choral odes, particularly the entrance-song, are long and highly elaborated. Though Aeschylus now has three actors at his disposal, scenes tend to be played between one actor and the chorus; genuine dialogue is rare: the more impressive, therefore, when Clytemnestra persuades her husband to enter the palace treading on scarlet draperies. The third actor provides a Cassandra who is silent, until, left alone with the chorus, the prophetess weaves past, present and future into a single fabric, in an astonishing scene of song and speech. But the play is dominated by the figure of Clytemnestra, the injured mother and wife, but also the man-woman who threatens the principle of male domination.²

² Cf. Winnington-Ingram (1948).
AESCHYLUS

If the dramatic technique of Agamemnon is in several ways archaic, the play is full of colour and variety; its horizons are wide, since they embrace the earlier events in Argos and at Aulis and the Trojan War itself, all leading in their different ways to the fall of Agamemnon, the quality of whose vengeance upon Troy is revealed by chorus, Clytemnestra and Herald. By contrast, Choephoroi is sombre, narrowly concentrated upon the theme of vengeance through matricide: Orestes – a relatively colourless figure – has returned to avenge his father and restore male domination in Argos. Now we meet for the first time two more staple features of Greek tragedy: a recognition, when Electra recognizes her brother returned from exile, and an intrigue, when together they plot the killing of Aegisthous – and of their mother. In the second half of the play, the action moves rapidly, and the old nurse of Orestes plays her part, but perhaps the most striking feature of all is lyrical, a great kommos in the centre of the play, when son and daughter join with the chorus of palace-slaves to pay respect to the dead Agamemnon within the earth and invoke his aid. A tensely moving ritual, it is also a preparation (of Orestes and of the audience itself) for the bloody acts to come.¹

Eumenides is a play of gods, even the chorus is divine; it is a play of brilliant variety and scenic effect. Orestes is pursued by the Erinyes – to Delphi, where he is disclosed in the shrine of Apollo surrounded by sleeping demons, and then (a change of scene rare in Greek tragedy) to Athens, where they dance round him singing their Binding Song. Athena empanels the Areopagus; Apollo enters to oversee the defence of Orestes; there is a trial and a ceremony of voting. Orestes goes free, and Athena persuades the Erinyes to accept his acquittal and a cult in Athens. The play ends with a procession: singing songs of good will, the Erinyes, now Eumenides, are escorted by torchlight to their new home in the rock.

The three plays are forged into a unity not only by the causal sequence of events but by the carrying through from play to play of themes – and above all of one paramount theme, which is justice, the justice of men and the Justice of Zeus; indeed the trilogy can well be seen as a vast dramatic exploration of the nature of justice human and divine. Which raises a problem, since at both levels justice first appears to be a matter of retaliation, of talio. It is characteristic of the earlier stages of the trilogy that, at every point, the issue is complicated. In Agamemnon, the just punishment of Troy involves, mysteriously, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the dilemma – and the guilt – of Agamemnon. The stage is held far more, however, by Clytemnestra the avenger, who is studied and presented (so it has been held) as herself involved in a tragic situation, being a woman with the will and power to dominate within a man-dominated world; and if as an avenger she has her case, her menace lies within the context of a social situation.

¹ Cf. Lesky, TDH 125 and Appendix bibliography.

287
This social theme runs, like a counter-subject, throughout the trilogy. In *Choephoroi*, the dilemma is obvious: justice must be done, but it can only be done by Orestes and through an act of matricide, by a crime parallel to that of Clytemnestra, the parallelism being brought out in many ways. Orestes acts at the command of Apollo, but under threat of persecution by Erinyes, and he is pursued by Erinyes. In *Eumenides*, Apollo and Erinyes are in dispute before the court of the Areopagus; and a human jury is in its turn confronted with an apparently insoluble dilemma. The human votes are equal: it is Athena who resolves the situation, giving her vote on preference for the male; and the arbitrary fiat of a prejudiced divinity may well convey what Aeschylus saw as a social necessity. But Athena does more than decide the case: she persuades the menacing Erinyes to accept a home and worship in Athens. To what extent the close of the trilogy can be said to resolve the complications of its earlier phases is a question to which we must return.

*Prometheus vinctus* raises special problems: even its authenticity has been impugned. This hypothesis, based upon real peculiarities of language and technique (if not also of thought), needs to be taken very seriously. If a majority of scholars do not accept it, this is partly because some of the linguistic arguments have little cogency when so few Aeschylean plays have survived, more because of an unlikelihood that there were two poets alive, one of them anonymous, capable not only of the grand dramatic conception but of such an Aeschylean effect as the entry of Io. Perhaps the strongest argument for authenticity is the fact that the play demands a sequel and what we know of *Prometheus lyomenos* ("The loosing of Prometheus"), which is more than we had any right to expect, provides the kind of sequel required: in fact the *Prometheus vinctus* and the *Prometheus lyomenos* would seem to stand or fall together, and both were accepted as Aeschylean by Hellenistic scholarship. Since there is a good deal of linguistic evidence to associate the play more closely with *Oresteia* than either with earlier plays, it is likely, if Aeschylus wrote it, to be late and there are reasons for supposing that it could have been written in Sicily during the last years of his life. A third title remains to be considered: *Prometheus pyrphoros*, which may have been the third play of a Promethean trilogy. If so, it is more likely to have been the last play than the first, the title referring, not

1 Some scholars believe that Athena cast a vote for Orestes as a member of the jury, so that a majority of human jurors found against Orestes. It depends on the interpretation of *Eum. 734–41*, which is controversial.

2 The case for authenticity is well put by Herington (1970) but Griffith in a careful study (1977) suggests the opposite conclusion. (See also Taplin (1975) 184–6.) The present writer must confess that his faith in the traditional authorship has been severely shaken, but it seemed right in all the circumstances to discuss the play here as Aeschylean, not least because, if another wrote it, he did so under strong Aeschylean influence. Perhaps we assume too readily, thanks to Aristophanes and Aristotle, that there were three great tragedians only and the rest were indifferent performers.
AESCHYLUS

to the bringing of fire to men, but to a torch-race cult of Prometheus at Athens. We cannot be quite sure, however, that there were more than two plays or that a trilogy, if planned, was ever carried to completion. We have to make what we can of the extant play, helped by some knowledge of the Lyomenos.

One of the puzzles of Prometheus has always been its presentation of Zeus, whose character, as seen by the hero and his friends, corresponds at every point to the traditional Greek picture of the tyrant. Prometheus is the persecuted friend of man. Taking the trickster-god of folk-lore (and Hesiod), who also bore a significant name ("Forethought") and had become the patron of Athenian potters, Aeschylus made of him a great symbol at once of goodwill to mankind and of practical intelligence. In a long speech which is an astonishing feat of historical imagination, Prometheus tells how he not only gave men fire but brought them out of a Hobbesian state of nature into the semblance of civilized life by teaching them the practical arts (technai). For this he is punished by that Zeus who, in Oresteia, "set mortals upon the path of wisdom" (Ag. 176f.).

The shape of the play is determined by the situation: other heroes come and go, but Prometheus, crucified upon a rock in the Caucasus, abides and is visited. He is visited by the chorus of Oceanids and by their father Oceanus; he is visited – the entry is sensational and unprepared – by another victim of Zeus, the 'cow-horned virgin' Io, whose sufferings match his own but whose ultimate destiny foreshadows his own release. The hero remains for a brief span of dramatic time at a remote point in space, yet no play has broader horizons. The whole world is embraced, when Prometheus tells us of the journeymings past and future of Io (matched, apparently, by the journeys of Heracles in Lyomenos); and, brief though the traffic of the stage may be, the dramatist conveys the long process of development from the bestial state of primitive man to that settled community in which the story of Io is placed. Much of the play is taken up with long expository speeches. Where, then, does drama reside? It resides in the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus, the intensification of his obstinate resistance, and the fact that he holds a weapon against his oppressor, a secret. Zeus, whose lust appears to be victimizing Io, will one day lust after a goddess destined to have a son greater than his father, and so Zeus may fall from power.

Our knowledge of the sequel is limited. We know that Heracles, in Lyomenos, killed the eagle which came to devour the liver of Prometheus and, ultimately, released him from those bonds that Hephaestus had made so firm. Somehow the quarrel between Zeus and Prometheus must have been resolved. The secret was revealed, because Zeus did not marry Thetis; there was reconciliation, but on what terms, and at what level, we cannot easily judge. It has been suggested, with plausibility, that Zeus not only accepted the survival of the human race but to the material and intellectual gifts of Prometheus added
his own gift of justice necessary to human society. To say that Zeus has ‘developed’ may go beyond the evidence; and perhaps the question we should ask ourselves is this: Under what other mode could the government of the world present itself to primitive man, as depicted by Aeschylus, than that of harshness and force?

This review of the extant plays may have given some impression of the power – and the range – of Aeschylean tragedy. To sum up the character of Aeschylus as dramatist and as religious thinker – the two roles are indissociable – is no easy task, and the difficulty resides partly in a combination of all but contradictory qualities. There is a traditional picture of Aeschylus – the stern moralist, prophet of a Zeus who is concerned with the inexorable punishment of offenders; master of a grand style, with an imagination so lofty as to set him apart from common humanity. The picture is both true and false.

His style is indeed grand, though not grandiloquent, since it is strikingly free of ornament applied for its own sake. Rich but disciplined, if at times it appears lavish, it is lavish with a density of meanings. Style cannot profitably be discussed without a degree of illustration which is impossible here, but some points can be made. If the wide vocabulary of Aeschylus owes a debt to his epic and lyric predecessors – a debt which, with the loss of most of the early poetry, cannot be particularized – he was doubtless a bold innovator in his own right, particularly perhaps in the coinage of those compound epithets which are so characteristic of his diction; and, like many great poets ancient and modern, he had a bold way with language. Not only in smaller matters of semantics and syntax did he strain normal usage but in metaphor, where he has no peer except Pindar, his combination of images seems sometimes to strain figurative language almost to breaking-point; when he wished, however, he could elaborate a single image with amazing skill. Of the Greeks who died before Troy, the Chorus of Agamemnon sing:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{'Ajax, god of war,}
\text{Man of many names,}
\text{Who bears a two-eyed sword,}
\text{Has an eye for everyone,}
\text{A man with a heart of stone,}
\text{And a soul made of iron.}
\end{align*}
\]

But the money-changer War, changer of bodies,
Holding his balance in the battle
Home from Troy refined by fire
Sends back to friends the dust
That is heavy with tears, stowing
A man's worth of ashes
In an easily handled jar. (tr. Louis MacNeice)
Aeschylus

The style is grand, in dialogue as well as in lyric, but he could also write very simply and give colloquial turns of speech to humbler personages.

For his minor characters are not to be forgotten or else we shall miss the wide range of his sympathies. In Agamemnon, for instance, alongside Clytemnestra (and her beacon speech) and a cold triumphant Agamemnon, we have the Watchman and the Herald, with their wry peasant humour and that concern for their own affairs which reveals the effects of high tragic events upon common people. These are 'character-parts'; and it could well be that it was through such figures that a degree of naturalness in characterization first found its way into Greek tragedy. The Nurse in Choephori harks back to the incontinence of the infant Orestes and to his dirty linen. Perhaps we should not have been surprised, when extensive fragments of some Aeschylean satyr plays came to light, to discover with what a light touch he could handle the traditional obscenities, what a charming song (in Dictyulci) Silenus sings to the infant Perseus, as the child plays with the monstrous phallus.¹

Aeschylus combines with an intricate detailed art a mastery of overwhelming emotional effects, which are often produced by the sheer force – or poignancy – of language. All three tragedians, however, in their different ways, used spectacle as well as language for dramatic ends; and the visual effects of Aeschylus are particularly striking. Reference has already been made to the raising of Darius, the unprepared entry of the cow-horned Io, and to the whole sequence of spectacles in Eumenides; to these could be added the irruption of the terrified female chorus in Septem, not marching sedately but dancing in to the dochmiac metre, or the cries and contortions of Cassandra when, after her long silence, she enters into trance. This is the ekplexis 'astonishment' ancient critics spoke of. In Agamemnon Clytemnestra is disclosed standing over the bodies of her victims; in Choephori Orestes stands over his. The effect is visual and powerful, but the aim is different, since a comparison is invited between the two pictures and a question is thereby raised about the relationship of the two actions. There is a pattern; and such structural patterning is not rare in the art of Aeschylus.

A certain formality is characteristic of Greek art, literary as well as visual. Much has been written recently about ring-composition, which is found in Homer and may have originated as a convenient device of the oral bard, which we can observe in Pindar and infer from him for his lyric predecessors. A section, long or short, is concluded by returning to a word or theme with which it began. With a great artist, this is not a mere formal device for its own sake, but the word or theme when it reappears may carry more meaning than it had before: 'release from troubles' means more at the end of the first half of the Watchman's speech than it meant at the beginning (Ag. i; 20); the words and

¹ Cf. Lloyd-Jones (1957) 531ff.
TRAGEDY

themes, images and symbols, picked up at the end of Oresteia mean more and other than they meant early in the trilogy. Ring-composition on every scale is all-pervasive in Aeschylus. Another device of emphasis concerns his imagery. It is characteristic of him to sustain an image or images throughout a play: in Septem the ship of state, in Supplices birds of prey, in Oresteia nets and snares, indeed a whole complex of metaphors from hunting and fishing. But these are only special cases of a much wider phenomenon. Words, or groups of words, carrying an important theme are repeated, often at points of emphasis. For instance, in Oresteia we find words of mastery and victory associated with the theme of male/female domination; words of heredity; words of justice and legal process. The polarities of good and evil, light and darkness, joy and sorrow, paeans and dirges, force and persuasion, run right through the trilogy. Scholars may dispute this or that interpretation, but there would be wide agreement that the texture is dense, that repetitions are deliberate, that themes are carried through. Similarly with those ambiguities which Aeschylus uses as a kind of compressed metaphor, often looking backwards or forwards to link the superficially disparate. Some scholars are more cautious than others in identifying ambiguity, but few would deny that the language of Aeschylus is often deliberately ambiguous, that references to parents and children in Agamemnon are made with thought of the matricide in Choephoroi, that references to legal process in the earlier plays look forward to a trial in Eumenides.

These are some of the resources of the art of Aeschylus, ranging from overwhelming, and often spectacular, effects to the intricate working-out of themes. To what dramatic ends are they applied? How did Aeschylus see the world, and see it as tragic? And here perhaps we come up against the most remarkable combination of all. The thought and art and language of Aeschylus are deeply rooted in an archaic past, in a world haunted by terrors and superstitions; and yet many have found in his drama a rational control, a power of general thought, a profound insight into fundamental problems of the human condition, a movement out of darkness into the light.¹ Disagreement is, however, fairly wide within this field, and no coherent statement can fail to be in some degree personal.

Aeschylean tragedy is concerned with human destiny, with the individual fate of an Eteocles or an Agamemnon. But the individual is part of a family, a cohesive kinship-group: Eteocles suffers under his father’s curse, Agamemnon for the sins of his father. And the family is part of a wider kinship-group, the polis. All are closely bound together, as they still were in the contemporary Greek world: the relationship of oikos to polis is a fundamental theme in Septem and hardly less important in Oresteia. All the great issues are social, and they

¹ Cf. e.g. Dodds (1951) 40. Contrast the Introduction to Denniston–Page (1957). See also Lloyd-Jones (1956) and (1971).
AESCHYLUS
touch the social life of the poet's own time. If, in the heroic context, the polis
is rudimentary, neither could he speak nor his audience hear of the polis without
thought of their own political experience; and it is indeed an essential feature of
Oresteia that the action moves from the heroic monarchy of Argos to Athens
and the Areopagus, to a court and a trial; and the Eumenides pray for blessings
on an Athens that Aeschylus and his hearers knew. He wrote for his own time
and for his fellow-citizens.

Individual, family and state, all are dependent on the gods, so that there is an
integration of personal, social and religious issues. But what were these gods,
and how did they operate in the world of men? It is generally, and rightly, held
that Aeschylus, his thought centred upon Zeus, was greatly concerned with what
is sometimes called theodicy, with the justice and the justification of the gods.
But theodicy was not an invention of Aeschylus or of the fifth century. The
more the Greeks felt gods about them (and within them) and the more dependent
they felt, then the more concerned they were to understand how the gods worked.
Were they jealous of human greatness and prosperity? Were they, as men
wished to believe, just? Or were they themselves, by sending infatuation, the
ultimate cause of the offences they punished? Was this the way offenders were
punished through their descendants? Aeschylus had inherited these questions
and, from Hesiod and Solon, some answers. To questions and answers he had
given his own thought.

One does not look to a poet for the strict formulation and solution of philo-
sophical and theological problems. On one issue, however, Aeschylus formu-
lates clearly, when he makes the chorus of Agamemnon sing (Ag. 75ff.) that it
is not wealth and prosperity in themselves that cause woe, but impiety and
outrage which breed after their kind. They breed, in this case, within the family;
and we discover that Agamemnon dies not for his own offences only but for
those of his father; and Clytemnestra claims to embody the avenging spirit
which haunts the house. Here we get another formulation: because the
daimon has lent its aid, she cannot therefore disclaim her own responsibility.

Κλ. αὖχες εἶναι τόδε τοῦργον ἕμον,
μὴ δ' ἐπιλεξθῆς,
'Αγαμεμνόνιον εἶναί μ' ἄλοχον·
φανταζόμενος δὲ γυναίκι γενροῦ
τοῦδ' ὁ παλαιὸς δριμὺς ἀλάστωρ
'Ατρέως χαλέπτοι θειατήρος
tοῦδ' ἀπέτεινεν
tέλεον νεκροῖς ἐπιθύμος.
Χο. ὡς μὲν ἀναίτιος εἶ
τοῦδε φῶνον τῆς ὁ μαρτυρίων;
πῶ πῶ; πατρὸθεν δὲ συλλή-
πτωρ γένοιτ' ἄν ἀλάστωρ. (1497-1508)
TRAGEDY

CLYT. You say this is my work – mine?
Do not cozen yourself that I am Agamemnon’s wife.
Masquerading as the wife
Of the corpse there the old sharp-witted Genius
Of Atreus who gave the cruel banquet
Has paid with a grown man’s life
The due for children dead.

CHORUS That you are not guilty of
This murder who will attest?
No, but you may have been abetted
By some ancestral Spirit of Revenge. (tr. Louis MacNeice)

It seems to be generally true that, in Aeschylus, while divine and human causes operate simultaneously, the divine justice accomplishes itself through human motivation; that, whatever the pressures of hereditary guilt and delayed vengeance, a responsibility does lie upon the human agents.

In the background there is a problem of freedom and compulsion of which the Greeks, who had slaves and oxen, were well aware. The metaphor of the yoke is common in tragedy, and so is the notion of ananke. Passionate for freedom, conscious at all points of the constraints put upon them by the gods, they may well have asked themselves how free in fact they were. When our own philosophers and theologians have got these matters straight, then will be the time to criticize the mental competence of ancient writers, but meanwhile there is perhaps something to be learnt from a poet who faced the questions of divine government and human responsibility with so much honesty. We shall not learn it, until we realize that, for Aeschylus, Zeus was not so much the solution of a problem as the problem itself (which is why he could present it through myths as disparate as those of Oresteia and the Prometheus-plays).

It is only in Oresteia that we can observe the full development of Aeschylean trains of thought. The main theme is justice in the mode of talio, human and divine. Human beings resent their wrongs and retaliate, but in doing so they are ministering to a divine justice. They are not wrong – neither the Atridae going against Troy nor Clytemnestra and Aegisthus – to claim this function, yet the result is a sequence of horrific events. Again and again there is a reference to Erinyes, those demons in whom Aeschylus found – or created – a symbol of rigid punitive justice, of an inflexible past. In the last two plays the issue is firmly focused on the case of Orestes, who commits matricide, at the command of Apollo but also in furtherance of a law cited by the chorus in the great kommos, which had already been proclaimed as an ordinance of Zeus by the chorus of Agamemnon – the law that doers must suffer for their actions.¹ Must Orestes suffer for his? He is pursued by the Erinyes of his mother; he is acquitted

¹ Cho. 306–14, 400–4; Ag. 1560–6.

294
AESCHYLUS

at Athens, thanks to the vote of Athena, who endorses that preference for the
male which had been part of Apollo’s defence of Orestes. If the sociological
problem admits an answer, the votes of the human jury were divided, and the
Erinyes fume and threaten. There is still a problem to be solved; and the play —
and the trilogy — end not with the acquittal of Orestes but with the persuasion
of the Erinyes. Angry demons could not be left threatening Athens. If they
acquire benevolence (without losing their punitive role), it could be said that
Aeschylus has invoked, in the interests of Athens, another aspect of chthonian
powers, as givers of fertility. One may doubt, however, whether this exhausts
the significance of the closing scene.

No poet has presented tragic evil with less mitigation than Aeschylus. Yet
Oresteia — and so far as we can judge both the Danaid and Promethean plays —
end with reconciliation and the prospect of harmony, which is a kind of tragedy
that has found few imitators. Clearly Aeschylus was no sentimental optimist.
What, then, is it that makes reconciliation possible? Among the tools of Greek
thought was a polar opposition between force (or violence) and persuasion.
There is no more insistent theme in the later Aeschylus. In the Danaid trilogy
force and persuasion are contrasted modes of sexual approach and Aphrodite
will have come to persuade. The ministers of Zeus in Prometheus are Mastery
and Violence, evoking an answering stubbornness in the hero, but already there
are hints of that persuasion which must have brought about the ultimate
reconciliation. The earlier stages of Oresteia are a story of recurrent violence,
as the justice of Zeus is carried forward by Erinyes, making a mystery, if not a
mockery, of the Hymn to Zeus in the Parodos of Agamemnon, in which the
Chorus sings, in one breath, of the favour (χαρία) and the violence of the gods
(Ag. 182f.). Apollo commands the matricide and, when it has been committed,
threatens the Erinyes with his bow; Athena persuades them. In a context of
democratic Athens, she brings persuasion to bear upon the very exemplifications
of violent revenge. If this is a notion which dominates the last phase of Aeschylus,
then perhaps it was his supreme religious insight that the Greek gods of power
could also be seen to work persuasively.

4. SOPHOCLES

Sophocles’ long life almost spans the fifth century B.C.: he was born c. 496
before the first Persian invasion and died c. 406 in the last years of the Pelopon-
nesian War. He has often seemed to symbolize all that is Attic and classical:
dignity, formal perfection, idealism. At the same time critics have found him
in some ways the most elusive of the three great tragedians. No one disputes
that he is a dramatist of the first rank; and in the surviving plays at any rate —
a mere seven out of 123 — it is hard to find any trace of the ‘unevenness’
criticized by Plutarch;\(^1\) but beyond this there is no critical consensus: now serene, pious and conventional, now passionately humanist or despairingly pessimistic, Sophocles undergoes transformations with every new book that is written about him. Paradoxically, the impact of his work on reader, actors, or audience, is one of striking lucidity, even of simplicity, but it is a lucidity like Virgil's, which gives expression to deep complexities of meaning, difficult to discuss except in the poet's own terms.

Interpretation is made all the harder because so few plays have survived and most of these cannot be securely dated. Thus it is impossible to give a reliable account of Sophocles' development; four plays and some fragments are all that is left to represent the first fifty years of his extremely productive career. 468 is the date given for his first contest, which was also a victory over Aeschylus, but none of the extant plays seems likely to be earlier than the 450s. Most scholars would put Ajax before Antigone (probably late 440s: see Appendix), though the evidence is not conclusive. Trachiniae is often placed next after Antigone and before Oedipus tyrannus (in the 420s), again on very insecure evidence. With Electra (between 418 and 410), Philoctetes (409) and Oedipus at Colonus (c. 406) we are at last on firmer ground, and some characteristics of 'late' Sophocles can be identified, but in general we simply lack the materials for a literary biography.

There is some record of what the ancients thought of his merits and of his place in the history of drama: this can help to fill some at least of the gaps in our knowledge, provided that it is treated with great caution and pruned of the more fanciful growths of anecdote. The biographical tradition is overwhelmingly enthusiastic: Sophocles was well born, handsome, accomplished, patriotic, outstandingly pious. The picture looks suspiciously roseate, but the warmth of contemporary references must count for something. Sophocles was treated very favourably by the comic poets, who normally missed no opportunity of making fun of tragedians, and his friend Ion of Chios told stories illustrating his gaiety and wit which give credibility to the picture drawn in the ancient Life of his magnetic charm of personality. He was by far the most successful, and therefore presumably the most popular, of the tragedians of his time: he won the first prize with about two thirds of his plays and was never placed lower than second. Moreover he was a well known public figure, and if our authorities are to be even partially believed he was entrusted with responsible public offices. He was certainly elected strategos at least once (441/0), and it was probably he and not a namesake who was hellenotamias in 443/2 and one of the probouloi after the Sicilian disaster; according to the ancient Life (1) he also served on embassies. He was deeply involved in the city's religious life: the role he played in establishing the cult of Asclepius at Athens

\(^1\) De recta ratione audiendi 13; cf. 'Longinus', Subl. 33.5.
SOPHOCLES

was so important that he himself received heroic honours after his death under
the cult name of Dexion. Like Aeschylus, he founded a family of dramatists:
his son Iophon and grandson Sophocles were both tragedians of some note.

The ancient sources have a good deal to say about Sophocles' place in the
history of tragedy. Aristotle (Poet. 1449a18) gives him credit for introducing
the third actor, presumably sometime between 468, the date of his first contest,
and 458, when Aeschylus used a third actor in the Oresteia. It is easy to see
how this gave scope for sophisticated dramatic effects (see p. 315), but it is
harder to deduce what lay behind another Sophoclean innovation, the raising
of the number of chorus men from twelve to fifteen. The same source (Life 4)
says that he gave up the habit of acting in his own plays owing to the weakness
of his voice, but changes in the organization of the Dionysia may in any case
have discouraged dramatists from doubling as actors. According to the Suda
it was he who began the practice of presenting plays on different subjects at
the same contest rather than writing connected trilogies (or tetralogies, count-
ing the satyr plays).1 This cannot be quite true, since we know that Aeschylus
presented unconnected plays at least once (Phineus, Persae, Glaucus Potineus
in 472), but it is likely that Sophocles deliberately broke with what had latterly
become a regular Aeschylean habit. So he established the norm – the single
play – that has prevailed throughout the entire European dramatic tradition.

Aristotle refers cryptically to Sophocles' introduction of skenographia
(Poet. 1449a18). We know too little about the fifth-century theatre to be able
to say for certain what this implies; probably skenographia refers to perspective
painting of panels for the wall of the stage-building, which perhaps to begin
with represented an architectural façade rather than anything more closely
connected with a particular play (see pp. 273f.). Evidently there was still plenty
of scope for pioneering work in the theatre, at any rate in the earlier part of
Sophocles' career, and he must have influenced Aeschylus as well as following
in his footsteps. We must certainly also allow for close interdependence
between Sophocles and Euripides, as many parallel passages testify;2 for nearly
fifty years the two playwrights were in active competition at the Athenian
festivals.

Sophocles appears to have been a highly self-conscious writer. The Suda
records that he wrote a book On the chorus, but despite all the speculation this
has prompted nothing is known for certain about it (even the title may mean
something more like 'On tragedy'). The literary pronouncements attributed
to him in various ancient sources could possibly be quotations from this book,
but they are more likely to have been bons mots recorded in the memoirs of
friends and contemporaries. He said of Aeschylus that he did the right thing

1 This seems to be the correct interpretation of the Suda's confused text, cf. DFA 80–1.
without knowing what he was doing, which has been taken to suggest a strong interest in technique on Sophocles’ part (though the remark occurs in a gossipy passage in Athenaeus about Aeschylus’ drunkenness, 1.22a–b). Euripides occasioned the famous dictum, preserved in the Poetics (1460b35), ‘I portray men as they ought to be, Euripides as they are’. On his own development Sophocles is recorded as making a more detailed comment, which turns out to be extraordinarily difficult to interpret: ‘Sophocles used to say that after practising to the limit the pomp of Aeschylus and then the harsh artificiality of his own manner of elaboration, he turned finally to the kind of style which was best and most expressive of character’ (Plutarch, De prof. in virt. 7).

With only seven surviving plays it is impossible to identify these three stages convincingly. Many scholars think that the early ‘Aeschylean’ stage is not represented, but whether we have an extant example of the second stage is less clear. All that the passage actually proves is Sophocles’ literary self-awareness and his interest in character.

Portrayal of character is indeed singled out by the ancient critics as one of Sophocles’ chief merits. One of the most interesting comments in the Life (21) runs as follows:

οιδε δὲ καιρὸν συμμετρῆσαι καὶ πράγματα, ὡστε τὸ μικρὸν ἡμιστιχίου ἢ λέξεως μιᾶς ἠλον ἠθυποίειν πρόσωπον. ἦστι δὲ τούτο μέγιστον ἐν τῇ ποιητικῇ, δηλοῦν ἥθος ἢ πάθος.

He knows how to arrange the action with such a sense of timing that he creates an entire character out of a mere half-line or a single expression. This is the essential in poetry, to delineate character or feelings.

Elsewhere (6, citing Istrus) the Life records that Sophocles composed his plays with the talents of his actors and chorus-men in mind. This may be further evidence of a special interest in character portrayal, but there is no certainty that it refers to acting rather than to musical talent: it could mean that Sophocles varied the proportion of lyric for solo performance according to the musical capabilities of his cast.¹

Unanimously the ancient sources praise Sophocles, nicknamed ‘the Bee’ for his ‘honeyed’ style, the highest compliment that could be paid to poet or speaker. ‘Sweetness’ (γλυκότης), which to the Greeks suggested flowing eloquence as well as charm, is noted in the Life (20) as one of Sophocles’ prime qualities; the others are a sense of appropriateness and timing (εύκαιρία), boldness (τόλμα), and intricacy of ornament (ποικιλία). This is praise of the kind that the ancients gave to Homer himself; and when they called Sophocles ‘the tragic Homer’ (Polemo, cited by Diogenes Laertius 4.20) or ‘the only disciple of Homer’ (Life 20) they were making a qualitative judgement, not just alluding to the strongly Homeric colouring of his style.

¹ Owen (1936) 148.
SOPHOCLES

For Aristotle, whose work lies behind most of the ancient critical tradition, Sophocles plainly exemplified what was most to be admired in tragedy. This is clear from his repeated use of *Oedipus tyrannus* as a model example and from his generally very favourable comments on Sophocles, as at 1456a25 on the superiority of his handling of the chorus. It is no doubt the overwhelming influence of the *Poetics* as much as Sophocles' midway historical position that has led critics to treat him almost as the norm of Greek tragedy, by comparison with whom Aeschylus has often been judged primitive and Euripides decadent.

In one important respect there has been a marked shift away from the critical emphasis of Aristotle. For modern interpreters from the nineteenth century onwards the question of meaning, which was traditionally either ignored or taken for granted, has been a major concern. In its cruder forms, as the search for an explicit 'moral' or 'message' or 'philosophy', it is bound to lead to distortion and bafflement: the focus of Sophocles' plays is not on ideas, but on the doing and suffering of men and women, and although he shows his characters facing the fundamental problems of life the plays never offer unambiguous solutions. It would be simplistic to expect anything more clear-cut; but at least a remarkable consistency of attitude can be detected in the seven extant plays, despite the fact that they must span a period of forty years or more, and it is not misleading to speak of a distinctively Sophoclean treatment of certain tragic issues.

Fundamental to all the plays is the same two-sided view of man, in which his heroic splendour is matched by his utter vulnerability to circumstance. Of course this had traditionally been the way the Greeks looked at the human condition, as we can tell from Homer, the early elegists, and the lyric poets, but Sophocles gives it new expression in dramatic form. Like all these poets Sophocles seems to require an assumption that the human spirit has an ultimate dignity and value: man can be brave, clever, morally strong, humane (though filled at the same time with what Bernard Knox calls 'passionate self-esteem'), and most of all he can face suffering with endurance, not the mere uncomprehending submission of an animal. These qualities are not negated and their value is not nullified by the presence of misfortune, suffering and wrong-doing in the world, what the Greeks called *to kakon* and we translate, for want of a better word, as 'evil'. This is always recognized by the poet as part of the way things are: alongside man's potentiality for greatness are set his helplessness and mortality. He may indeed be 'godlike' in his endowments or his achievements, but he is caught in the infinite web of circumstances outside his control, limited by time, by ignorance of past, present and future, by his passions which impede his judgement or undermine his will, always liable to

1 Knox (1964) 17.
TRAGEDY

destroy himself and others through failure – or unwillingness – to understand.

This is the consistent Sophoclean background, though the emphases vary from play to play. In Ajax the dualism in man's condition is brought sharply into relief, particularly through the contrast between two different ethics, the heroic code and the fifth-century ideal of sophrosyne, though (as always) the centre of the play's interest is not a conceptual problem but human action and suffering: the disgrace, death and burial of Ajax. A great military hero, believing himself to have been grossly insulted because he did not receive the highest mark of honour, plans to take bloodthirsty revenge on his former associates, but he suffers from a delusion which causes him to butcher animals instead of his intended victims. The action of the play centres on his return to his senses, his shame and regret at finding that he has not after all killed his enemies, and his subsequent suicide. What is the meaning of these events, particularly of his self-chosen death? What kind of significance is there in this portrait of Ajax? Is it a case-study in abnormal psychology, a celebration of heroic ideals coupled with a recognition of their unsuitability in the modern world, an edifying example of the punishment of arrogance, or (more simply but also more subtly) an insight into a universal human predicament?

In bare outline Ajax's behaviour seems psychopathic, yet the play ends not with his dying curses but with his rehabilitation through burial accompanied by full heroic honours. Indeed, the audience's sympathy is so much directed towards Ajax (following the cue of Odysseus in the Prologue, then of the Chorus and Tecmessa) that critics have tended to overlook his brutality and to stress the heroism of the great man who refuses to compromise, choosing to sacrifice his life rather than abandon his view of what a hero should be. 'The well-born man should either nobly live or nobly die' (479-80). But this approach, too, is open to objection on the ground that it could not be honourable to intend the treacherous murder of the Atridae and the torture of Odysseus. Besides, Ajax has twice boasted that he does not need divine help in battle (774ff.): his behaviour has been either savage or inspired by the more-than-human thought that he is too special and too strong to need the gods' favour. One way of reconciling revulsion at his deeds and intentions with the strong sympathy generated for Ajax is to see him in historical rather than universal terms as representing the old heroic code which must make way for the new 'quiet' ethos of the fifth century typified by the sophrosyne of Odysseus. The trouble with this view is that the dramatic focus is not on Odysseus, who though admirable and sympathetic cannot command our attention in the way that Ajax does: it is Ajax who is the tragic figure, and we look for an interpretation which will not confine him so narrowly to a particular set of historical circumstances.

Ajax, superficially an improbable paradigm of humanity, acquires a universal
SOPHOCLES

significance by virtue of his suffering, which is caused by the sense of total
disgrace and shame following a disastrously mistaken action. He has enjoyed
a fantasy of revenge only to discover that his victims were simply animals.
His first reaction is the deepest possible dismay that he should be the object
of society’s derision; all he wants is that the sailors should kill him (361).
His relations with his crew and with his wife and son (towards whom he is
tender and brutal by turns), and his thoughts about his parents are all part of
his tragic situation: Ajax can only be fully himself if he is surrounded by his
family and dependants, filling his place in society. But now he is hated by the
gods (as he knows from the fact of his madness, which he can interpret only as
a divine visitation), by the Greeks, and by the Trojans, and he cannot go home
to face his glorious father in disgrace. The only escape from shame is by a
‘noble’ death, but it is hard to find room for nobility when a man is so humili-
ated. Then something happens to lift Ajax out of this state of despair, though
not to deflect him from his intention to commit suicide. Hitherto he has seen
only one side of the dual picture of man, the capacity for great achievement of
the talented individual, with a corresponding sense of that individual’s unique
importance and of the total unacceptability of insult. Now in his great speech
at 646ff. he sets himself in the context of unending time and sees that all men
have to accept the reality of change; he too will learn to behave with a proper
sense of his human limitations (sophronein 677).

This speech makes his wife and followers think he has given up his plan to
kill himself, but the terms he uses are ambiguous, and the audience must at
least fear that he is still intent on suicide. It is less important to answer the
question how far Ajax is deliberately deceiving his hearers; what matters is our
sense of the intensity of his insight. He is not recognizing that he has been
wrong to hate the Atridae and Odysseus, or feeling sorry for it: a simple moral
interpretation would be very wide of the mark. He is using his newly found
awareness (which he says has been prompted by pity for Tecmessa, a new
emotion for Ajax, 652) in order to come to terms with himself, instead of
allowing his overwhelming shame to take possession of him and make his
suicide another senseless killing. The suicide speech (835ff.) confirms that he
still hates his enemies, even to the point of calling down curses on the entire
army, and it is clear that the only gesture he can make towards change is
through death, but there is no longer any word of his shame.

The end of the play after 973 is an emotional anticlimax until the final
tableau of the funeral procession, but the issue on which the action turns—
the burial and rehabilitation of Ajax—is important for the audience’s response
to his story. His last two speeches in particular have given us reason for believ-
ing that despite all his savagery he deserves honourable burial, no longer just
in memory of his great achievements in the past, or because (as at the beginning

301
of the play) he is an object of pity; and this feeling is confirmed by the final success of Odysseus in persuading the Atridae. Their meanness and lack of dignity confirm all the more strongly our sense of the grandeur of Ajax.

This play's appeal for an audience derives both from the reality of Ajax's suffering – as a man most acutely susceptible to feelings of shame – and from the moments of self-knowledge which he seems to experience: out of his despair he finally recognizes (though he cannot will himself to accept) that his view of himself has been mistaken. He has succumbed to the temptation, ever present to the competitive Greek mind, of thinking more-than-mortal thoughts; he has behaved in a way that has been more bestial than heroic and has been brought low, yet his fall itself is not what matters: it is his response to the fall that the play explores. Ajax tells us little about the gods and their purposes or the working of divine justice, but it profoundly illuminates the value and the fragility of man.

Ajax's speech at 646ff. says much about time and the rhythm of change. Sophocles often returns to the theme of time, as one of the great limiting and therefore tragic factors in human life. Time must be taken into account because it brings death, but even more because it brings change: how can a man ever be sure that what he believes is worth dying for will not be transformed or swept away? Is there anything permanent in this mortal world?

Both Ajax and Oedipus in the Coloneus (607ff.) emphasize that in the course of time friends become enemies and enemies friends. This might seem to suggest a relativist or cynical attitude, an assertion that there are no absolute values, but Sophocles is offering a deeper insight. The imagery in both these speeches is drawn from the natural rhythms of the universe: winter alternating with summer and night with day, the endless reciprocal relation of winds and sea, sleep and waking, decay and growth, death and life. One is reminded of the language in which he describes the mutability of human fortune, another aspect of the process of time and change. In the Parodos of Trachiniae the cycle of good and bad fortune is compared to 'the circling paths of the Bear' (131), the constellation which for the Greeks of antiquity never set, but was always visible in its rhythmic movement round the Pole. Similarly, Heracles experiences successes and reversals like a swimmer raised and thrown back by a succession of waves (112ff.). Tossing on the sea is a more violent image than the movement of the stars, but Sophocles makes the two essentially comparable: like the rhythms of the seasons and of natural life they suggest permanence in change. In every instance the stress is on regular alternation rather than on chaotic and unpredictable diversity. Hence time is a principle of order as well as an inescapable destructive force.

This sense of time and mutability is important in Sophoclean tragedy because it gives the essential context for man’s endeavour. He must do and
SOPHOCLES

suffer in the awareness that nothing remains as it is, except the gods and their eternal laws; Knox was right to insist that Sophoclean man is heroic precisely because he resists ‘time and its imperative of change’. But there is an important gloss that needs to be added: the hero may defy time, but he can never ignore it; his defiance is made in full knowledge that he is bound to lose. Time’s tragic lesson is that mortal creatures never win. For the advantage is always on the side of time, which is linear as well as circular: as it draws each man and woman nearer to death it makes them what they are. ‘Accompanying time’ (O.C. 7) may damage or embitter the sufferer’s mind as irreversibly as old age affects his body. So Electra sees her chances of marriage and childbearing fading as she lives enslaved by her mother and stepfather, dedicated to keeping alive the memory of Agamemnon whom they murdered: ‘... the best part of my life is already gone leaving me without hope, and I have no strength left; I, who am pining away without children’ (185–7). What the audience see is the tragic effect of this dedication on her personality, an effect which cannot be reversed when the vengeance is at last achieved. The Chorus in this play may call Time a ‘soothing god’ (179), but the action of Electra does not bear them out.

The process of arriving at an understanding of time and its power over man, and the ordeal of facing and enduring it, are central preoccupations of Sophoclean thought. A great part of all men’s lives is lived in ignorance or rejection or evasion of the truth, particularly about their own natures and their mortality. Sophocles, like all great tragedians, is concerned with the attainment of knowledge; his characteristic emphases are on the ironic contrast between appearance and reality, on the climactic moment of revelation, and on how men come to terms with the truth about themselves. Two plays which give particular prominence to this theme are Trachiniae and Oedipus tyrannus, both of which explore the irony of human ignorance and show their characters arriving, through extremes of suffering, at knowledge which totally alters their lives.

Oedipus tyrannus makes a more explicit and insistent contrast between appearance and reality, most of all through its sustained use of the imagery of sight and blindness: Oedipus who has physical sight is blind to the truth about himself and puts out his eyes when he learns it; Tiresias who is physically blind is the true seer. In Trachiniae the stress is on the irony of finding out too late: Deianira, Hyllus and Heracles all discover too late the true nature of their situations, and Sophocles so designs the structure of the play that each discovery is given great prominence. Deianira tries to win back the love of her unfaithful husband with what she supposes to be a benign love charm; only when she has taken the risk and sent Heracles a robe anointed with it does she find out that it is a deadly poison. Their son Hyllus sees Heracles tortured in the robe and rushes home to denounce his mother as a murderess; but she kills herself

1 Knox (1964) 27.
TRAGEDY

before he discovers her innocence. Heracles understands only when he is on the point of death the meaning of an oracle told him long before, that he would be killed by the hand of the dead: the poison that Deianira unwittingly administered came from the centaur Nessus, who was killed by Heracles himself. Almost everything the characters say has an ironic import for the audience, who know — or guess — better than they. But this use of irony is not easy sensationalism; for Sophocles irony is a means of conveying profound insights into the nature of man and his world.

Similarly, the climax of revelation is not a mere melodramatic thrill of horror, but what John Jones has called 'the flash of perfect clarity' which comes at 'the moment when a man perceives the operation of the powers that are destroying him'.\(^1\) At such moments there is a very strong sense that things are as it were swinging into place: now at last the oracles are seen to be intelligible and true. loú loú, cries Oedipus when the truth is out at last, 'everything comes out clearly!' (1182). So Heracles, who utters the same great cry (Trach. 1143ff.), 'Now I understand ...' Knowledge is combined with a strong sense of inevitability.

Acceptance of the revelation is the mark of the great human being, who unlike the ordinary unheroic person, the average member of any audience, does not evade or deny or seek to shift the blame. Jocasta's reaction in Oedipus tyrannus to the discovery that her husband is also her son is to stifle the truth and allow Oedipus to live on in ignorance. This is deeply understandable, but for Sophocles the extreme of endurance is only met when like Oedipus a man faces and accepts that truth, with whatever appalling implications it may have. In effect this acceptance may be identical with the hero's 'defiance' discussed above; when he refuses to ignore the implications of the truth he does so because of the need to retain his integrity. The ordinary person runs away and tries to forget, or patches up some compromise, but for the heroic individual no such evasion is possible. Thus Ajax does not try to save himself, as Tecmessa and the Chorus hope he may, and Oedipus both persists against advice in making his discovery and when he has made it finds ways of coming to terms with his new identity.

If knowledge of reality is endurable only through intense suffering, what of the authors of this reality, the gods? Is it right, critics have asked, that men should have to suffer these things, men like Oedipus, who committed his terrible deeds without knowing what he was doing? In other words, are Sophocles' characters justified in worshipping the gods and trying to live by their laws, and does Sophocles himself endorse their attitudes, or present them with ironic detachment?

Like almost all Greeks before them, Sophocles' men and women believe in

\(^1\) Jones (1962) 170.
SOPHOCLES

gods who are the source of everything in life, evil as well as good. The universe controlled by these gods is involved in a constant process of rhythmic change, but they themselves are outside time. "Only to the gods comes neither old age nor death..." (O.C. 607f.); Zeus is "unaged by time" (Ant. 608). Worship them as they must, men cannot expect unmixed blessing from the gods: it is the condition of mortals to experience pain as well as happiness (Trach. 126f.). The only sure event in any human future is death; "tomorrow does not exist until today is safely past" (Trach. 943ff.). But men who are eusebes should expect more divine favour than the asebes, who are unfailingly punished, either in their own lifetimes or through their descendants. 'Pious' and 'impious' are inadequate translations of these terms: being eusebes means respecting the divine laws that are the foundations of human society, and hence it includes right behaviour towards others as well as proper worship of the gods. These are the 'unwritten and unfailing statutes' invoked by Antigone (Ant. 454f.) when she defends her burial of Polynices in defiance of Creon's decree; in Electra it is clear that for the Chorus as well as for Electra herself loyalty to Agamemnon's memory is in harmony with the eternal laws (1095f.). It is an affront to the gods to allow a corpse to remain unburied or to fail to respect parents; and if a man is guilty of this sort of insulting behaviour he is forgetting his place as a mortal and courting divine disfavour.

It used to be claimed that Sophocles' purpose was to justify the ways of these gods to men. 'Undeserved suffering', wrote S. H. Butcher in a sensitive essay published in 1891, "while it is exhibited in Sophocles under various lights, always appears as part of the permitted evil which is a condition of a just and harmoniously ordered universe. It is foreseen in the counsels of the gods..." Much was made of Sophocles' known personal piety to corroborate this reassuring view, and so to create the stereotype of the serene, conventional poet untroubled by the more disturbing aspects of life around him and of the stories he chose to tell. Many modern critics, reacting against what they see as wishful thinking in this approach, have preferred a Sophocles who is more humanist, more Euripidean, vastly more pessimistic. But there is a danger here, too, that a misleading stereotype will impose itself.

'Pessimism' after all seems to be a misplaced term for the traditional Greek attitude to human life. Men may be creatures of a day, but they are not abject, unworthy, valueless unless redeemed by god. And the gods are objects of worship, not of mere brute fear: Dodds was right to speak of the beauty as well as the terror of the old beliefs.2 If human achievement at its greatest is thought to be 'godlike' and the humane virtues are believed to be enjoined by divine law, that is, to have absolute value, then there is a sense in which traditional Greek thinking is not pessimistic. The cosmos may be cruel, but it cannot be

1 Butcher (1891) 127.
2 Dodds (1951) 49.

305
TRAGEDY

simply meaningless. Against this background Sophocles creates a drama that explores unmerited suffering, without protest on the one hand or justification on the other, but with pity and respect. When he chooses Oedipus as the paradigm of human blindness - and human intelligence - he uses him as a consolatio, not to question why these horrors should happen to a man. They do happen, the play says, but we with our imperfect understanding cannot tell why; all we can do is try to come to terms with the strange necessities of being human. Even the most perceptive and intelligent of our kind, Oedipus, was hopelessly wrong, even about his own identity; but he endured the revelation of the truth.

It can of course be argued that Oedipus tyrannus shows the work of malicious gods playing with men's sufferings for their sport. But that is not how it is seen by Oedipus himself, or by the Chorus watching his ordeal. When all is revealed they reflect not on the unfairness of the gods but on the fragility of human success and the inexorable revelatory process of time: ἐφηπερε' ἔκοινθ' ὁ πάνθ' ὁρῶν χρόνος 'time the all-seeing has found you out against your will' (1213). Even so, one might ask, are we, the audience, not to recoil with disgust at the cruelty of Apollo, who did not give Oedipus a straight answer to the question 'Who are my parents?' but simply told him that he would kill the one and marry the other? This no more undermines Apollo than the story of the oracle he gave to Croesus, told by Herodotus (1.53, 91): 'If you invade Persia you will destroy a great empire'. Men do not always know what are the important questions to ask, and when told the truth they are prevented by their human limitations from understanding it. As guardian of the truth Apollo is actively concerned to see it fulfilled and revealed, but he has no ultimate responsibility for what happens to Oedipus.

If Apollo, the play's presiding deity, cannot be made to carry the responsibility, what of the will of the gods generally? Sophocles nowhere illuminates the divine purpose by explaining why it had to be that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother, but he does lay stress on the idea that such was his destiny. How important, then, is the idea of fate in this play, or for that matter elsewhere in Sophocles? It would be anachronistic to think of fate as a detailed predestined programme of each man's life, an idea which only makes its appearance in Hellenistic thought.1 Sophocles treats the notion of fate in a way much more appropriate to tragedy: in his plays fate is simply being mortal and being the person one is. A man's freedom to act is at every point limited by his circumstances and temperament, which are an inheritance from the past; about the future the only thing he knows for certain is that he will die; for the present he is compelled to act as if he knew all the things of which he is ignorant.

1 Reinhardt (1947) 108.
Oedipus' act of parricide was freely chosen: it was his decision to take the road to Thebes, his choice to retaliate when Laius insulted him. But if we ask what lay behind these decisions we see the limitations of human knowledge and the complexity of human action. Oedipus' avoidance of Corinth and choice of the road to Thebes were prompted by the commendable wish to avoid harming his parents, but since he did not know who his parents were this was a misconstruction of the oracle and in fact he was leaving Corinth unnecessarily. Once on the road to Thebes he was more likely to meet Laius, though the timing of their meeting was a matter of coincidence — the coincidence that he and Laius should have chosen to travel when they did. The actual killing was provoked by Oedipus' natural resentment at the high-handed behaviour of Laius; this vigorous self-defence was characteristic of Oedipus' royal temperament, and of course the deed was done in ignorance of his own and Laius' identity. If Laius had been more gracious ... or Oedipus had been a milder man ... or if he had for a moment suspected that there could be any kinship between them ... then things might have turned out differently. But for the audience listening to the story of these events there is a strong feeling of inevitability, just as the actions of Oedipus within the play itself seem inevitable, though each is freely chosen and fully motivated. Thus the poet achieves that 'tension between freedom and necessity which seems essential to the tragic paradox'. And the importance of the idea of fate lies in its power to convey the compulsions of the human condition.

Sophocles' characters and choruses describe these compulsions as supernatural forces, daimones like Ate and the Erinyes; this was traditional in Greek religious thought and may well have been part of the poet's own belief. But the question of what he personally believed is only marginally important; it is more interesting to study the use he makes of the traditional religious language. It is through this language that he expresses the mysterious, non-rational, frightening and awe-inspiring aspects of life, both the 'dark underpit' (to use Lattimore's phrase) and the inscrutable orderliness of the cosmic design.

Antigone and Oedipus at Colonus illustrate very well how Sophocles uses the ambiguities of religious language to express his deepest insights. A crude analysis of the two plays might lead one to posit an historical development in his attitudes: in Antigone, one might say, he protests at the gods' arbitrariness; in Oedipus at Colonus he celebrates their making amends to one of their most notable victims. But it would be hard to find a more misleading formulation. In both plays Sophocles creates a powerful sense of the forces outside man's control and the emotions that they inspire; in neither does he take up attitudes or sit in judgement or find answers.

1 Winnington-Ingram (1965) 50. 2 Lattimore (1958) 102.
TRAGEDY

For many modern critics *Antigone* is one of Sophocles’ darkest plays: ‘the *Antigone* conceals vast potentialities of unreason and chaos’;¹ ‘the message of the Chorus in their odes is one of helpless bewilderment and dark despair; but it is fully consonant with the evils that we have witnessed on the stage’.² Creon the new ruler of Thebes issues an edict forbidding the burial of Polynices, who has committed treason by attacking his native city. Antigone disobeys the prohibition, claiming that she has a sacred and overriding duty to bury her brother; for this Creon punishes her with imprisonment in a rocky tomb and leaves her to die. But when the seer reports that Polynices’ corpse is polluting the city Creon goes to release her, only to find that she has already hanged herself. A question that is often raised is why the gods allow Antigone to die if she is really upholding their laws. They show their displeasure quickly enough when Creon leaves Polynices unburied; why do they not intervene to keep Antigone alive so that she can be released when Creon changes his mind? Sophocles almost encourages his audience to expect—or hope for—a miracle by lavishing so much detail (998ff.) on the signs of divine displeasure at the unburied corpse, but no miracle happens: Antigone is dead by the time Creon arrives. She had freely chosen to risk death in order to bury her brother; when that death actually comes it tells us nothing about the gods, only about life as it really is in which actions have their consequences and the consequences have to be faced. The task of a tragedian is to confront the worst facts of life; in such contexts miracles can too easily seem like evasion or fantasy.

But a more subtle question can be raised about our view of Antigone’s action. She believes that she is right to bury Polynices because this is in accordance with the eternal laws, a god-given and permanent moral order, whose validity she never doubts until her last pathetic scene in which she confronts the fact of death. ‘Nor did I think’, she says to Creon at 453ff., ‘that your decrees were so compelling that a mortal could override the unwritten and unfailing statutes of the gods. For they endure not just today and yesterday, but eternally, and no one knows when they were ordained.’ It is natural for an audience to approve Antigone’s generous act of loyalty to her brother and her courage in dying for her beliefs; but for some critics there is only pathetic self-delusion in her claim that these beliefs are divinely sanctioned. How then are we to interpret the language used by the Chorus at the end of the episode in which Antigone makes her great speech?

¹ Torrance (1965) 300. ² Coleman (1972) 27.

308
SOPHOCLES

κατέχεισ 'Ολυμποι
μαρμαράσσασαν αἰγλαν.
tó τ' ἐπείτα καὶ τό μέλλον
καὶ τό πρὶν ἐπαρκέσει
νόμος δὲ· οὐδέν ἐρπεῖν
θνατῶν βιότωι πάμπολυ γ' ἀκτὸς ἄτας.

(604-14)

Your power, O Zeus, what human transgression can limit? That power neither
Sleep the all-aging nor the gods’ tireless months can master, but you dwell, a
ruler unaged by time, in the dazzling radiance of Olympus. And for the future,
near and distant, as for the past this law will be found true: nothing that is vast
comes to the life of mortals without ruin.¹

It is true that this stasimon is full of irony: the Chorus are trying to explain
the frightful situation of Antigone in terms of the family curse of the Labdacids,
yet in doing so they use language of sin and punishment which is much closer
to Creon’s case and foreshadows his fall. But these ironies do not reduce the
power of the lines on the unchanging certainty of Zeus’s laws. If the poetry of
this passage carries conviction it is hard to feel so sure that Sophocles is denying
the existence of a suprahuman order.

But if protest is not a characteristic Sophoclean mode neither is the positive
assertion of divine benevolence. The nearest he comes to this is in the sense
of holiness and blessing which he evokes in Oedipus at Colonus, for instance
in his description of the sanctity of Colonus and the grove of the Eumenides
(16ff., 36ff., 54ff., 466ff., 66ff.), or in the intimacy with which the divine voice
summons Oedipus (ὁ οὖν οὖς Οἰδίπους, τι μέλλον; χωρεῖν; ‘Οδίπος,
Oedipus, why are we delaying to go?’ 162ff.), most of all in the mystery of
Oedipus’ favoured passing, which only Theseus was allowed to witness.
‘... and we could no longer see Oedipus anywhere, but the king alone and
holding his hand over his face to shade his eyes, as if he had seen some terrible
sight that no one could bear to look upon’ (164ff.). In this play, indeed,
Sophocles places a miracle at the centre of the action, but even here he is so
reticent that we are given no illumination of the gods’ purposes. Certainly
it would be wrong to interpret what happens to Oedipus as a sign of divine
recompense for his sufferings; perhaps even the view that the gods rejoice in
human heroism goes further than Sophocles suggests (though it is a natural
Greek idea). The most that can be claimed is that the sense of holiness conveyed
in this play implies something more than a purely humanist vision of the world.

The question of crime and punishment is not central to Sophoclean tragedy.
His characters are caught in complex destructive situations which – being
human – they have helped to create for themselves, but the issue never turns

¹ The text of 614 is not certain, but most editors interpret the passage in the sense given here.
on the precise degree of their guilt: in tragedy as in life it is common for a man's suffering to go far beyond what he morally deserves. Even in *Ajax*, where some stress is laid on the hero's hubris, the sequence of pride and punishment is plainly not the main subject of the play. The function of the Messenger's report at 748ff., in which we are told of Ajax's arrogant behaviour and Athena's anger, is partly to create a sense of crisis (if only Ajax can be kept safe for one day the danger will pass), partly to give a fateful pattern to his story, not to spell out the moral 'message' of the play. In *Trachiniae* some critics treat the sins and punishment of Heracles as the real issue; but Heracles is more convincingly interpreted as a paradigm of man's helplessness. Even the greatest of Greek heroes 'the best of men' (177, 811) - the strongest, bravest, most successful - is a slave to his sexual passion (Sophocles makes much of the idea of 'slave' in this play) and no better able than anyone else to escape the limitations of his ignorance.

What matters, evidently, is the way the characters respond to their appalling predicaments; and here we meet the question of Sophocles' idealism. He notoriously represents men 'as they ought to be'; but in what sense can idealized characters exemplify the realities of human experience? If we compare the Electra plays of Sophocles and Euripides we find Euripides forcing us to see the implications that such a situation would have in real life; the social embarrassments and the jealousy of his Electra compel us to believe in the continuing and urgent reality of the old heroic tale. But the Sophoclean heroine, though more elevated, has no less power to convince; and particularly in her total commitment to the mother-murder and her absence of regret at the end of the play she is a more frightening example of man's capacity for self-destruction in the cause of preserving moral integrity. In Euripides the horror is to some extent mitigated by Orestes' hesitation before he does the deed and by the remorse of brother and sister after it. In Sophocles there is no irresolution; no regret; Electra from the stage calls out to the unseen Orestes as he kills their mother: 'Strike again if you have the strength!' (1415). After the tender scene of her reunion with Orestes the starkness and cruelty of the end of the play are almost unbearable, but they grow out of the earlier action of the play in a way which forces the audience to accept them as real.

This impression of reality is achieved because Sophocles presents the action with extreme psychological nicety and sureness of touch. It is only in a very limited and individual way that he can be said to idealize: he is quite ready to portray evil characters when the plot demands them, like the villainous Creon in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and he certainly does not sentimentalize his heroes (though many critics have written as if he did). Antigone's harshness towards Ismene, the brutal way Ajax treats Tecmessa, the virulence of Philoctetes' hatred of Odysseus, are all uncomfortable features which ought to warn us
SOPHOCLES

against taking a romantic view of Sophoclean heroism. And yet his characters do make a distinctively different impression from those of Euripides. It is partly a matter of style. Sophocles prefers to maintain the distance of the world of the epic stories, whereas Euripides is more insistent in his reminders of contemporary humdrum reality. But there is also a difference in the way they appeal to the audience's sympathy. In Sophocles' extant plays we are not asked to transfer our sympathies or make a fundamental reappraisal of a character in mid-action: there is nothing comparable to the shifts in response that we are required to make in Medea or Bacchae. Sophocles seems often to have been interested in exploring the limits of human endurance: man's capacity for asserting his belief in himself against all external pressures, including the promptings of good sense and the pull of ordinary emotional ties. The conversion or moral collapse of one of these intransigent heroes would profoundly alter the character of his drama.

But the term 'hero' must be used with caution, in case it leads us to adopt a formula too rigid for the fluidity of Sophoclean drama. The intransigent, isolated, suffering figure is clearly the most important of his symbols of mankind, but it is not the only one. Neither Deianira nor Heracles can be forced into such a mould, but this does not reduce their claim to be regarded as tragic characters; Creon in Antigone, too, who finally changes his mind, and Neoptolemus in Philoctetes, who undergoes a process of moral transformation, are also central figures who demand as much attention in their respective plays as Antigone and Philoctetes themselves. We should be rash to call Trachiniae an 'odd' play because it does not have the more familiar kind of hero: we have no reason for thinking that the limits of the poet's range coincide with what is offered in seven plays out of 123. Who would have thought that he made bold use of changes of scene if Ajax had not happened to survive?

There is another respect, too, in which the image of the isolated hero is liable to mislead. This is in its associations with specifically modern, post-romantic ideas of the outsider, the individual who rejects society or is permanently and profoundly alienated from it. Sophocles' men and women, it is true, reject the norms of ordinary behaviour, the safe compromises, the comfortable or corrupt evasions familiar in everyday life, which the dramatist illustrates in vividly contemporary detail, but they do not reject society as such, and they define themselves in relation to society.

Ajax cannot be truly Ajax without his philoi — his kin and dependants — to defend and his enemies to fight; Antigone dies as much for her brother as for her principles; Electra, who cuts herself off from all the normal life of the household, still values that life as the only meaningful context in which to exist. This is what gives pathos to the picture she draws for Chrysothemis of the rewards they will win if they murder Aegisthus singlehanded:
TRAGEDY

‘Do you not see what fame you will win for yourself and me if you do as I say? Everyone who sees us – citizen or stranger – will greet us with praises like these: “See these two sisters, friends, who saved their father’s house... all must love them, all must reverence them; at festivals and wherever the people are gathered all must honour them for their bravery.”’ (973 ff.)

Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, first an outcast from his own city, then himself rejecting it, comes to find new citizenship in Athens; most of all Philoctetes, who to the modern reader seems so clearly an archetypal outsider, set apart by his wound and his bow from the rest of the world, in Sophocles is only truly fulfilled when he consents to go to Troy as the comrade of Neoptolemus, to be healed and win glory. Sophocles has not made his story sentimental by suggesting that the world Philoctetes will rejoin is perfect, or glory something worth having at any price: much of the play is concerned precisely with the evaluation of ends and means; but it is so designed that although the world (represented by the Greeks at Troy) is decadent, Philoctetes’ going to Troy is also the reintegration of the wild man into society and something which the audience must endorse.

Sophocles’ greatest strength is his mastery of the dramatic medium. Everything in his plays, plot structure, character drawing, language, spectacle, is fully exploited to achieve that ‘imitation of action and life’ which Aristotle sees as the essence of tragedy. The intense aesthetic pleasure given by Sophocles’ plays has been well compared to the effect of Mozart’s music, the exhilaration felt by an audience when the artist is superbly in control of his material. This aesthetic impression demands to be taken into account when we try to grasp the poet’s meaning: it makes a significant difference to the way we respond to his terrifying stories.

A major principle of Sophoclean composition is the use of contrast. This is seen at all levels: contrasting themes, as in *Oedipus at Colonus* where the behaviour of Oedipus’ sons is repeatedly set against that of his daughters; contrasting moods, as when a song of joy and hope is at once followed by the climactic revelation of disaster (e.g. Ajax 693ff.); juxtaposition of contrasting characters, as in *Antigone* and *Trachiniae*, where the central pairs are both opposed and intimately interconnected. It is relevant to mention the use of irony here, for irony draws attention to the fundamental contrast between appearance and reality, to the distance between what the characters think and what we the audience know to be true, and between what they intend and what actually happens: *peripeteia* itself is dependent on the principle of contrast. Thus Sophocles finds essentially dramatic means of expressing his sense of the ambiguity of all experience, the two sides of the human picture and the corresponding antinomies in nature.
SOPHOCLES

His language is less exuberant than Aeschylus', his imagery comparatively 'ordinary' and unobtrusive. This however is art that conceals art. His seemingly effortless verse depends on bold extensions of syntax and meaning and on great metrical virtuosity, and his imagery is often all the more effective for being understated. Stylistic reserve does not imply lack of inventiveness or complexity: themes are developed and interwoven, and the language shades from literal to metaphorical, with an intricacy which belongs only to the very greatest poets. At one of the high points in Trachiniae, when the Nurse has just burst in to tell the Chorus of Deianira's suicide (893ff.), they cry out ἐτέκ' ἐτέκ' μεγάλαν & | νέορτος δὲ νύμφα | δύσμοις τοιοῦ' 'Ερινύν 'This new bride has given birth, given birth to a great Erinys for the house', meaning Iole, the girl for whom Heracles sacked Oechalia, the girl who is now ruining his family. It is natural to think of the bride bearing a child — Heracles' child — and the image gains weight from its literal appropriateness in the context. More than this, it specifically recalls the ironic scene where Deianira asks of Iole whether she is 'unmarried, or a mother' (308), and concludes that she must be 'without experience of all these things'. But the child is no human child; it is a 'great Erinys', a great avenging spirit: the Chorus recognize that the death of Deianira is the inevitable consequence of Heracles' bringing home Iole. The image thus advances one of the play's dominant themes, the inescapable power of sexual passion, and in representing a death in terms of giving birth it restates a connexion made twice before in the play.

In the Parodos (94f.) night is said both to give birth to the Sun and to put him to death (imagery which is related in complex ways to Deianira and Heracles) and in the Third Stasimon (834) the poison of the Hydra, with which Heracles killed Nessus and which Deianira used as a love charm, is said to have been 'generated by death' (the Greek uses the same verb ΤΙΚΣΕΙ each time).

Because Sophocles (particularly by contrast with Euripides) is neither a theoretician nor an apologist, the intellectual content of his plays has often been minimized. But it is hard to see how he could have used language of such finesse, variety and sophistication if he had not been in touch with the important movements of thought of his time as well as deeply read in the poetry of his predecessors. As A. A. Long has emphasized, we find evidence in his plays of interest in Presocratic thought and sophistic argument, of medical knowledge, of concern with politics and political ideology, all exemplifying 'a mind which was completely involved in the intellectual life of fifth-century Athens'. The terminology of the ethical debates in Electra, the sophistic attitudes of Odysseus in Philoctetes, the political programme of Menelaus in Ajax or of Creon in Antigone all have precise relevance to contemporary ways

1 Long (1968) 167.
of thought, suggesting that 'remote' and 'detached' are not terms too readily to be used of Sophocles.

Boldness, intelligence, resourcefulness are all characteristics of his dramatic technique as much as of his use of language. He is daring in his manipulation of inconsistency, which gives him some marvellously concentrated and dramatic moments, though its purpose is subtler than just the creation of isolated brilliant effects. In *Philoctetes*, for example, there is notorious inconsistency in the treatment of Neoptolemus’ knowledge of the prophecy that he and Philoctetes are destined together to take Troy: in the Prologue he knows hardly anything about it, but by the end of the play he can give Philoctetes a circumstantially detailed account. There is no satisfactory way of explaining this logically, as if we were dealing with the facts of history, but there are good dramatic reasons for releasing the crucial information piecemeal and for presenting Neoptolemus at the outset as wholly dependent on Odysseus, while the deeper significance of the inconsistency seems to be that it enables the audience to share with Neoptolemus a growing awareness of the true meaning of the prophecy.

Sophocles pays more attention than Aeschylus to the interaction of his characters. This is particularly a feature of his latest plays and may have been what he had in mind when he used the term ἥφισσαμαι ‘most expressive of character’ to describe his mature manner (see p. 298). The effect of one person’s words or actions on another’s feelings is brought out in all kinds of ways: in *Trachiniae* the enigmatic Iole stands in silence while Lichas lies to Deianira about her and the Messenger challenges his lies; in *Electra* the false messenger speech on the death of Orestes, which was designed to disarm Clytemnestra, has a devastating effect on Electra, who is also there to listen; in *Philoctetes* the silences and ambiguous language of Neoptolemus make the audience suspect that he is under increasing strain as he comes to know and pity Philoctetes. Often the use of visual effects deepens this study of the relations between characters, as when Electra cannot be convinced that Orestes is alive and standing before her until she has been forced to put down the urn in which she thought she held his ashes (*El. 1205ff.*), or when Neoptolemus’ action in supporting Philoctetes physically is at once followed by his own emotional breakdown (*Phil.* 889ff.).

It is easy to overlook the visual side of Sophocles’ dramaturgy because we have only the text on the page without explicit stage directions; but readers who attempt to act the plays or imagine them in performance soon become aware of the unerring theatrical instinct that created them. His use of props—the sword of Ajax, the casket in *Trachiniae* that carried the poisoned robe, Philoctetes’ bow—is both simple and sophisticated: each represents a fundamental theme in its play and is closely related to the verbal imagery, but there is
SOPHOCLES

nothing contrived in the prominence given to it. The stage action, too, often makes a strong visual impact, as in *Ajax* when the door of the stage building is opened and the hero is seen surrounded by the butchered animals (346ff.), or later in the searching scene (866ff.) when the Chorus agitatedly look for the missing Ajax, and Tecmessa finds him where he fell on his sword. In *Oedipus at Colonus* there is a remarkably violent scene (818ff.) when Creon seizes Antigone and very nearly comes to blows with the Chorus. Even more gripping is the final scene of *Electra* (1466ff.): Aegisthus lifts the cover from the corpse he believes to be the dead Orestes, sees with horror that it is Clytemnestra, and at once finds himself in a trap, facing the drawn swords of Orestes and Pylades. The same sense of theatre is evident in Sophocles' use of entrances and exits, such as the unexpected reappearances of Odysseus (*Phil.* 974, 1293), or the slow silent departure of Deianira after Hyllus has denounced her (*Trach.* 813ff.), or the great moment in *Oedipus at Colonus* (1540ff.) when the blind Oedipus leaves the stage, leading the way to the place where he is to die. Many scenes show how resourcefully he made use of the third actor, scenes like *El.* 660ff. when Electra and Clytemnestra listen to the story of Orestes' death, or *Phil.* 642ff. when the False Merchant purports to talk to Neoptolemus without letting Philoctetes overhear, or *O.T.* 1110ff., the brilliant scene in which Oedipus and the messenger from Corinth cross-question the Theban herdsman and elicit the truth he is trying to hide.

These effects ought not, of course, to be considered in isolation from their contexts, as if they were mere virtuoso displays: in each play they are part of the distinctive shape and emotional movement of the whole, a complex unity which can hardly be described without oversimplification. How, for example, can the critic, particularly the modern critic, who has no knowledge of Sophocles' music, do justice to the effects created by his handling of the different modes of delivery—speech, lyric dialogue and choral song? Some of the most exciting and intense sequences are formally very elaborate, with a symmetry which can more easily be paralleled in opera than in modern spoken drama. So Ajax' first appearance after the killing of the animals is marked by an elaborate exchange (348ff.) between him, the Chorus and Tecmessa. Ajax sings three pairs of agitated lyrics, each pair metrically different and each punctuated by responses, now by the Chorus, now by Tecmessa, in the iambic trimeters of spoken dialogue. The contrast strongly emphasizes their different emotional states: Ajax in a wild frenzy of despair, Tecmessa and the sailors begging him to be calm. Much of the power of this *kommos* comes from the words, but the formal patterning plays a significant and subtle part in conveying the emotional quality of the scene.

The plays of Sophocles strikingly confirm the truth of Eliot's claim that 'in genuine drama the form is determined by the point on the line at which a
tension between liturgy and realism takes place'. In the search to understand Sophocles we need to be sensitive not only to his realism—both in universal terms and in the context of fifth-century Greek life—but also to the 'liturgical' aspect of his language, rhythms and structures, for it is this in combination with his realism that gives his plays their particular distinction.

5. EURIPIDES

The relative abundance of surviving Euripidean drama (we have eighteen tragedies which have come down to us as his work) is not wholly a result of his continuing popularity in antiquity; like the other great dramatists, Euripides survived the early centuries of Byzantium in a selected edition, in his case one of ten plays. By some fortunate accident, however, part of what seems to have been a complete edition arranged in alphabetical order by title survived the later centuries in which so many classical texts vanished; it was available for reproduction in the revival of classical learning which marked the Byzantine recovery from the disaster of the Fourth Crusade. In addition, the papyrological finds of the last hundred years have given us extensive fragments of lost plays, which, combined with quotations found in ancient authors, often enable us to form a clear idea of the play as a whole.

Not only do we possess a large body of material, we also have a fair idea of the chronology of Euripidean production. Many of the plays are dated in ancient records; for many of them we have a terminus ante quem in the shape of an Aristophanic parody. For others an approximate date (or rather period) is suggested by the frequency of metrical resolution in the trimeter, since this phenomenon shows a steady progression from the earliest dated plays to the latest. Of the extant plays, the earliest we possess is Alcestis (438). M.idea is securely dated in 431; Hippolytus in 428. The decade 427–417 probably saw the staging of Heraclidae, Hecuba, Electra, Andromache and Supplices. Troades, with Alexander, is firmly dated in 415, and Helen in 412; Phoenissae, Antiope, Heracles, Ion and Iphigenia in Tauris belong to the next six years. Orestes was staged in 408 and Bacchae and Iphigenia in Aulide were produced at Athens after the poet's death in Macedon in 406 B.C.

When news of Euripides' death reached Athens, Sophocles had still some months to live, but Euripides was by far the younger man. His first production (which earned him a third prize) took place in 455 B.C., three years after the staging of Aeschylus' Oresteia; Sophocles' debut (a first prize) had preceded the Oresteia by ten years. This disparity in age was of great importance for the intellectual formation of the younger poet, for during the middle decades of the century sophistic teaching explored new critical attitudes towards politics and
EURIPIDES

morality, expressed in new rhetorical forms. Sophoclean drama shows familiarity with the rhetoric and a sharply critical awareness of the ideas; but they are viewed from a distance, as it were — the reaction of an older man whose vision of the world is already formed. Euripides, though his critique of the ideas may be just as incisive, is very much a man of the sophistic age; the language and techniques of the new rhetoric come naturally to him and his plays fully reflect the intellectual controversies of the time.

He is an intellectual dramatist and his career has a curiously modern look. His unpopularity during his lifetime is clear from the rarity of his victories at the Dionysia, the frequency of jibes at his tragedies and travesties of his person on the comic stage, and his eventual withdrawal from Athens to Macedonia; it was followed by overwhelming popularity with succeeding generations. In the fourth and later centuries his plays, both in reading and performance, eclipsed and almost extinguished the reputations of his competitor and predecessor. The late tradition that he composed his plays in a cave on Salamis is certainly apocryphal but the story does symbolize a real situation — the isolation which we have come to recognize as the usual fate of the intellectually advanced artist in democratic society. And there are passages in his dramas which seem to derive from consciousness of such a situation. Medea, for example, in her attempt to reassure Creon sounds a contemporary, possibly a personal note.

‘This is not the first time... that my great reputation has injured me... No man of intelligence and judgement should ever have his sons educated so that they become excessively clever... If you introduce new, intelligent ideas to fools, you will be thought frivolous, not intelligent. On the other hand, if you do get a reputation for surpassing those who are supposed to be intellectually sophisticated, you will seem to be a thorn in the city's flesh. This is what has happened to me. I am a clever woman, and some feel envious spite toward me, others count me their adversary...’ (292–305)

The dramatist's engagement with the intellectual, political and moral controversies of the day did not however result in a clear position on one side or the other. Dramatists, who speak through the masks of their creations, are notoriously difficult to pin down, and Euripides more so than most. He was a problem to his contemporaries and he is one still; over the course of centuries since his plays were first produced he has been hailed or indicted under a bewildering variety of labels. He has been described as 'the poet of the Greek enlightenment’¹ and also as 'Euripides the irrationalist';² as a religious sceptic if not an atheist, but on the other hand, as a believer in divine providence and the ultimate justice of divine dispensation. He has been seen as a profound explorer of human psychology and also a rhetorical poet who subordinated

¹ Nestle (1901). ² Dodds (1929).
consistency of character to verbal effect; as a misogynist and a feminist; as a realist who brought tragic action down to the level of everyday life and as a romantic poet who chose unusual myths and exotic settings. He wrote plays which have been widely understood as patriotic pieces supporting Athens' war against Sparta and others which many have taken as the work of the anti-war dramatist par excellence, even as attacks on Athenian imperialism. He has been recognized as the precursor of New Comedy and also as what Aristotle called him – 'the most tragic of the poets' (Poetics 1453a30). And not one of these descriptions is entirely false.

There have been attempts to frame these contradictions in schemes of artistic and intellectual development. A persuasive spiritual biography has been drafted along the following lines: an early period of what might be called high tragedy (Medea, Hippolytus), followed by the patriotic plays of the opening years of the Peloponnesian War (Heraclidae, Supplices); plays expressing disgust with the war as the fighting went on and became more senseless (Hecuba, Troades); a turning away from tragedy to romantic intrigue plays (Ion, Iphigenia in Tauris, Helen) and a final return to the tragic mood, more despairing and violent than before (Orestes, Phoenissae, Bacchae). But of course the procedure is hazardous if only because so many plays are missing and, although sometimes we can guess at their contents, we have no idea of their mood. And the last set of his plays included both Bacchae and Iphigenia in Aulide – one of the most violently tragic and one which contains scenes whose tone and technique seem to foreshadow New Comedy.

That there was development in Euripidean technique is undeniable, but if there was a similar development in his thought we do not have sufficient evidence to chart its course. And in any case some basic themes and attitudes are common to the latest and the earliest plays. The merciless Dionysus of Bacchae is cast in the same mould as the vindictive Aphrodite of Hippolytus and the revengeful Athena of Troades: all three gods wreak havoc to punish human disrespect for their divinity. Medea's ferocious revenge is very like that of Hecuba and Electra, not to mention the vicious reprisals planned by Orestes, Electra and Pylades in Orestes. The disturbance of the heroic atmosphere by realistic scenes which may even verge on the comic is constant throughout, from the degrading quarrel of father and son in Alcestis, through the burlesque arming of Iolaus in Heraclidae, all the way to the spectacle of two old men, one of them blind, dressed in fawn skins and trying to dance like Maenads, in Bacchae. Even the most harrowing of the tragic plays, Troades, has an incongruously comic line (Menelaus is advised not to take Helen home aboard his own ship and asks: 'Why? Has she got any heavier?' 1050) and the play which is the closest Euripidean approach to Menandrian comedy, Ion, contains Creusa's lament for her lost child (859f.), one of Euripides' most poignant
EURIPIDES

and bitter solo arias. The pattern of the extant work suggests not so much changing views as variation on persistent themes.

The characterization of Euripides as a spokesman for the new ideas and his responsibility for what were thought of as their destructive effects were first given pungent and exaggerated expression in his own lifetime by Aristophanes, the comic poet who was both fascinated and repelled by his work. A recurrent tactic of his assault is to identify Euripides with many of the subversive ideas which were felt to be typical of sophistic teaching, prominent among them a destructive scepticism about the Olympian gods. The widow of Thesmophoraiusae whose husband was killed on Cyprus and who feeds her five children by making wreaths for worshippers, complains that her business has been cut by more than half since Euripides 'in his tragedies, has persuaded men that the gods do not exist' (450–1) and in Frogs, while Aeschylus prays to Demeter, Euripides addresses his prayer to 'other gods' (889) among them 'upper air, my nourishment' and 'intelligence' (892–3). The result of such teaching, the comic poet claimed, was moral degeneration. Euripidean drama is blamed by 'Aeschylus' in the Frogs for converting noble, warlike Athenians into 'marketplace loungers, tricksters and scoundrels' (1015), for teaching 'ranting and blather which has emptied the wrestling schools' (1069—70). In modern times the case has been put seriously: Nestle's Euripides, the poet of the Greek enlightenment attempts to construct a Euripidean philosophical outlook — the poet's message 'of enlightenment about the real state of things as against the traditional belief, blindly accepted by the mass of mankind'.1 Quite apart from the fact that Euripides is a dramatist, not a philosopher, the argument is insecurely based, for the passages used to support it are cited with little regard to context (many of the most important, in fact, are isolated quotations from lost plays). But in drama, context can modify or even contradict the surface meaning of a particular passage. Hippolytus' line ('My tongue has sworn an oath but my mind is free', 612) was often used against Euripides by his comic critic, and if the play had not survived we would never have known that in fact Hippolytus goes to his death precisely because he will not break his oath. Nevertheless Nestle's title can serve as a reminder that Euripidean drama gives us the clearest reflection of the intellectual ferment of fifth-century Athens, and unlike the Platonic retrospective (and partisan) reconstruction it is the reaction of a contemporary.

The plays reflect, more literally than those of Sophocles, the intellectual controversies of the time, sometimes in a manner incongruous with the mythical setting. One recurrent theme is the problem of education for civic life, the problem to which the sophists proposed a solution. In Antiope, a play with a

1 Nestle (1901) 50.

319
TRAGEDY

violent revenge action, two sons, Amphion and Zethus, stage a celebrated debate about the value of the active as opposed to the artistic life. Amphion champions the intellectual and artistic life, Zethus the military, agricultural and political. It is remarkable that Zethus’ speech echoes many of the criticisms levelled at Euripides himself by the comic poets. Zethus reproaches his brother for his lack of manliness and inability to stand by his friends in war and council.

‘Where is the cleverness in this, an art which receives a noble nature and makes it inferior? ... A man who ... lets his household affairs go to waste and pursues delight in song, will become remiss in both private and public duty ... Put an end to your singing, practise the fair art of practical affairs. Sing its praises and you will be thought a sensible man, digging, ploughing the earth, watching the flocks. Leave to others these elegant, intellectual pursuits...’ (frs. 186, 187, 188)

Amphion’s reply rejects the active life.

‘The quiet man is a source of safety for his friends and of great benefit to the city. Do not sing the praise of dangerous action. I have no love for excessive boldness in a ship’s captain, nor in a statesman either ... Your contempt for my lack of physical strength is misplaced. If I can think straight, that is better than a powerful right arm ... It is by a man’s brains that cities are well governed and households too, and therein lies great strength for war ...’ (frs. 194, 199, 200)

Education is not the only controversial issue of the day reflected in the plays; political theory, another speciality of the sophistic teachers, also bulks large. In a long scene early in Phoenissae, the brothers Eteocles and Polynices dispute their rights to the throne of Thebes; their mother Jocasta tries to mediate between them. To Polynices’ reasonable offer of a return to the status quo Eteocles replies with an unashamed proclamation of his will to rule — words which are echoed in the Athenian speeches of the Melian dialogue and the arguments of Thrasyvamus and Callicles in Plato.

‘Mother, I will speak out ... I would go to the place where the stars rise or below the earth, if that were possible, so as to hold Absolute Power, greatest of the gods. This is a prized possession I have no wish to let pass to another; I will keep it for myself.’ (503–8)

Jocasta rebukes them both equally but counters Eteocles’ argument with democratic theory.

‘Why do you pursue, my son, the most evil of divinities, Ambition? She is an unjust goddess. She comes into prosperous homes and cities and when she goes out leaves destruction for those who entertained her ... It is better to honour Equality, who firmly links friends to friends, city to city, ally to ally ... For it is

1 Cf. Plato, Gorgias 485eff.
2 Thuc. 5.101, Plato, Rep. 343bff., Gorg. 482eff.

320
EURIPIDES

Equality which has fixed for mankind its divisions of measures and weights, has
defined number. The rayless eye of night shares the cycle of the year equally
with the blaze of the sun and neither one feels hateful envy for the other as it gives
way...'(531–45)

But Euripides reflects the negative as well as the positive aspects of sophistic
thought; in particular the plays cast scorn on those prophecies which played
so important a part in Greek life and which in Sophoclean drama are always,
in the end, vindicated. The most explicit condemnation of prophecy is put in
the mouth of the messenger in Helen; he has just learned that the woman the
Greeks fought and died for at Troy was merely an image made of cloud –
the real Helen was in Egypt all the time.

'I realize how contemptible...are all the words of the prophets. So there was
nothing sound in the voices of the fire oracle or the birds. Birds indeed – it was
simple-minded to think that they were any use to men. For Calchas gave no
word or sign to the army as he saw his friends dying for a cloud, nor Helenus
either – but his city was sacked, and all for nothing.' (744–51)

This is not the only radical opinion on religious matters to surface in Euripi-
dean drama. Tiresias in Bacchae explains that the goddess Demeter is the earth
– ‘call her by either name’ (276) – and similarly Dionysus, besides being the
inventor of wine, is the wine, ‘a god poured out in libation to the gods’ (284).
Similar theories of the nature of divinities are attributed to the sophist Prodicus.
But Euripidean characters propose even more unusual religious formulas, such
as those of Hecuba in Troades. ‘O You who are the earth’s support and have
your throne upon it, whoever you may be, beyond our knowledge or conjec-
ture, Zeus, whether you are natural necessity or human intelligence, hear my
plea...’ (884–7). It is no wonder that Menelaus remarks on her ‘innovative
prayers’ (889).

Some Euripidean characters go beyond philosophical reformulations of
religious belief, they indulge in harsh criticism of the Olympian gods. Am-
phitrion in Heracles condemns Zeus for abandoning the family of Heracles,
his own son, in scathing terms.

‘So you were not the friend you seemed to be. You are a great god but I, a mortal
man, surpass you in excellence: I did not betray the sons of Heracles. But you,
you knew how to steal secretly into women’s beds, to take another’s bride... what you do not know is how to save your children. You are a callous, ignorant
god (ἐφισσὴς τις ἠθεῖς) – or else there is no justice in your nature.’ (341–7)

A common motif in Euripidean plays is an appeal to a god for mercy, coupled
with a reminder that gods should have higher standards of morality than men.
So Cadmus in Bacchae appeals to Dionysus for forgiveness: ‘Gods should not
be like mortals in their passions' (1348). And the old servant of Hippolytus
addresses Aphrodite in almost the same words. Both prayers are rejected; both gods merciless. These passages seem to suggest that gods are no better than men; in the case of Hippolytus, who does forgive the father who unjustly engineered his death, that they are perhaps worse. Such criticism may culminate in rejection of the whole mythological tradition. In *Heracles*, the hero is urged by Theseus to reject suicide and live with the consequences of his murderous action, just as the gods live on Olympus, though they have committed adultery and violence against each other. But he replies (1341-6): 'For my part I do not believe the gods have forbidden loves; that one of them could chain the other's hands I never accepted and will never believe. For a god, if he is rightly a god, needs nothing. These are the wretched tales of poets' (δοιδένοι οἶδε δύσηνοι λόγοι). This comes close to denying the existence of the Olympian gods altogether, for the adulteries of Zeus, to take only one example, were the genesis of Dionysus, Perseus, Helen and many another. It is true that Euripides seems never to neglect an opportunity to bring the gods on stage, but modern critics have found it easy to dismiss the divine appearances at the end of so many of the plays as a device to reassure the pious or a merely technical solution for the problems raised by the radical treatment of the myth. The juxtaposition of amoral gods and human beings who vainly expect justice or mercy is taken as an ironic denial of the existence of such gods; Euripides was 'attempting to show citizens bred on traditional views ... that such conceptions of the gods should offend them'.¹ Such gods cannot exist: they must be 'the wretched tales of poets'.

Yet such dramatic statements must be seen in context. Heracles' famous repudiation of divine wrongdoing, for example, refers specifically to adultery as unthinkable for a god. Yet he is himself the offspring of divine adultery, and the madness which has ruined his life is the vindictive reaction of Hera, the divine jealous wife. The audience has seen Iris and Madness, the ministers of Hera, at work, experienced the shock of their sudden appearance and sensed in the rhythm of the racing trochaics the pulse of the insane fit which before their eyes descends into the house to seize its innocent victim. Heracles can talk in the way he does because he has not seen Iris and Madness at work; but the audience has. And since in the theatre everyone who appears on stage is equally real, Heracles is quite surely wrong.

This qualification by context obtains for all manifestations of the new intellectual views in Euripides: they are the words of dramatic fictional characters and parts of an overall design. It is usually thought (and may very well be true) that in the argument between the brothers in *Antiope*, the case put by Amphion must have been dearer to Euripides' heart, but Amphion seems to have conceded defeat in the argument, and it is certainly Amphion who at the

¹ Conacher (1967) 51.
end of the play is about to kill the tyrant Lycus when Hermes arrives to stop him.\footnote{Cf. Page (1942) 66-8.} In \textit{Phoenissae} Jocasta’s eloquent praise of Equality falls on deaf ears; before the play is over the mother and the two sons lie together in the equality of death. In one play after another the ‘rationalist’ point of view is repudiated by the outcome of events.

On the other hand, Euripides shows concern with and knowledge of religious phenomena which many would regard as ‘irrational’. His presentation of Hippolytus, for example, is an understanding and sympathetic picture of a religious abstention from the sexual life which must have been extremely rare in the ancient world. An almost monastic obsession with purity can be sensed in Hippolytus’ first speech, his dedication of a crown of flowers to Artemis. It came from ‘a meadow undefiled ... where no shepherd dares to pasture his flocks, no blade of iron ever came; only the bee in springtime haunts this untouched meadow, and Modesty tends its garden with the river waters’ (73-8). A similarly moving picture of piety in a young man appears in \textit{Ion}; the monody with which the acolyte greets the dawn (82ff.) suggests what the religious atmosphere of Delphi must have been in its great days. In fact it is remarkable how often Euripides chooses a religious, ritual background for his great scenes: the death of Neoptolemus in the shrine at Delphi (\textit{Andromache}), the temple of Artemis among the Taurians (\textit{Iphigenia in Tauris}), the sacrifice Aegisthus offers in the grove of the nymphs (\textit{Electra}), the sacrifice of Polyxena on the tomb of Achilles (\textit{Hecuba}). And of course \textit{Bacchae}, in its ferocious action and in the ecstasies of its choral odes, is the greatest portrayal of the Dionysiac spirit in all literature.

Whether this play is a celebration of the blessings of Dionysiac religion or a condemnation of its violence, one thing is sure: the poet who created this passion play was no ‘rationalist’. It is the only Attic tragedy we know of which features a god as the protagonist; Dionysus, who in the prologue announces his assumption of human form as a votary of his own worship, dominates the central scenes and appears at the end in divine majesty. The play presents us with different reactions to his divinity: the mockery of Pentheus, the cynical adhesion of Cadmus, the political conversion of Tiresias; the ecstatic visions of the chorus alternating with their vengeful imprecations against the king who resists the new cult; the total possession of the women of Thebes, their paradisal peace and communion with nature, their ferocious reaction to interference and finally their frenzied dismemberment of Pentheus.

The dramatic centre of the play consists of three scenes in which man and god confront each other. In the first, the god, in the person of his votary, is bound, jeered at for his effeminate appearance, told he will be shorn of his hair, and imprisoned; he defends Dionysus with mock humility (the actor wore a...
smiling mask in this scene). In the central scene, after an earthquake that wrecks the palace and releases Dionysus, the god begins to dominate the mind of Pentheus, persuading him to go and spy on the Maenads at what he imagines are their obscene revels. In the last scene the reversal is complete: Pentheus, his senses deranged, appears dressed as a woman, a Maenad with long hair. Now it is the god's turn to mock his victim; he congratulates him on his appearance, rearranges his wig, readjusts his waistline and skirt length before he sends him off to his hideous death. These scenes have a bizarre, deadly magic which has never been surpassed; Euripides here drew on some deep vein of primitive feeling which made his play unique in the annals of the theatre.

To the objection that the gods who end so many of the plays seem mechanical and lifeless, a dramatic convenience or a bow to convention rather than a religious epiphany, the obvious answer is that Euripides did not have to end his plays in this way, that, in fact, as far as our evidence goes, he is the inventor of this particular kind of ending. And not all of these gods are unimpressive figures; Dionysus at the end is the same terrifying relentless deity he has been all through the play, and Artemis at the end of *Hippolytus* is as credible in her pride and anger as her opposite number Aphrodite, who spoke the prologue. Further, these divine figures usually have specifically religious functions: instructions for the founding of a cult or a city, for the burial of the dead, for the administration of an oath and the attendant sacrifices. They also regularly predict the future, and these prophecies are evidently meant to be taken seriously; they range from confirmation of the further development of the legend through legitimization of contemporary dynasties to fully-fledged panegyrics of Athenian expansion or promises of protection for Athenian soil.

The passages which demand a higher standard of morality from gods than from men, and the portrayal of the Olympian gods as jealous, vindictive, merciless, unjust, do not necessarily imply a rationalistic viewpoint. These are Homeric gods; it is hard to imagine gods more unforgiving than Athena and Hera in the *Iliad*, Poseidon in the *Odyssey*. The centuries since Homer had seen incessant questioning of this pessimistic view, even attempts to reshape it along more moral lines, but Euripides recreates in all their fierce passions the gods of Homer's poems. The gods who rule the Euripidean universe are not like the Zeus of the *Oresteia*, who imposes suffering that is a step to wisdom, nor are they like the Sophoclean gods who seem to represent an assurance of divine order though it is one which can only be accepted not understood. Euripides' gods, Aphrodite, Artemis, Athena, Hera, Dionysus, are just like Homer's — which is to say, just like us. Torn by the same passions, pride and the vindictiveness of pride insulted, revengeful anger, jealousy and desire, they

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1 Dodds (1960) on l. 439.
are huge and awesome images of everything that is violent and uncontrollable in man, and they order the universe according to their conflicting and changing wills, bargaining for the fates of human beings as Athena does in Troades or promising to take a life for a life as Artemis does in Hippolytus.

These are the gods to whom mortals, despairing of human nature, appeal as representatives of something higher and better. 'You should be wiser than mortals, you are gods', says the old servant in Hippolytus (σοφωτέρους γὰρ χρή βροτῶν είναι θεοὺς, 120). The goddess he is addressing is Aphrodite, the personification of Eros, the personification of the most capricious and irrational of all human emotions. The Euripidean gods are naked passion unrestrained by any sense of moderation. Aphrodite engineers the deaths of two mortals to pay for Hippolytus' neglect of her worship (and cynically admits that one of them is innocent); Athena in Troades organizes the destruction of the Greek fleet because one Greek hero insulted her divinity; Hera, acting from jealousy, sends the spirit of Madness to wreck Heracles' life the moment he has finished his great labours for mankind; Dionysus demands as payment for the denial of his divinity not only the dismemberment of Pentheus but the exile of Cadmus and Agave as well. The gods, in Euripidean tragedy, project on to the enormous scale of the divine those passions which human beings struggle vainly to control in themselves; these passions, in the shape of Olympian gods, self-absorbed, unrelenting, rule the life of men and women.

It is not likely that Euripides believed in these gods with the literal acceptance and religious awe of the archaic time which gave them their shape. They served him as dramatic incarnations of the capricious, irrational forces which his tragic vision saw as the determinants of the fate of mankind. They may sometimes be replaced in the prayers of his characters by abstractions such as those formulas of Hecuba which so surprised Menelaus, or by the all-embracing concept of Tyche, blind chance. Yet they are more than symbolic figures; they have a terrifying vitality which betrays a religious imagination at work under the sophisticated surface. Whatever else they are, they are not the creation of a 'rationalist'; rather, they are the dramatic expression of that bewilderment the poet puts in the mouth of the chorus in Hippolytus.

When I think of the care the gods have for men, my heart is greatly relieved of its sorrow. But though deep within me I hope to attain understanding, I fail to reach it, as my eyes see what happens to men and what they do.

This haunted vision of irrational forces at work in the universe has its counterpart in Euripides' exploration of the irrational in individual human
beings; he is the first of the dramatists for whose work the modern term ‘psychology’ does not seem out of place. This is not to deny (as some have done) consistency of character and subtlety of motivation to the dramaturgy of Aeschylus,\(^1\) still less to that of Sophocles; it is merely to assert that Euripidean characters are less linear and monumental, more complicated, more changeable. They run the gamut of human emotions, change direction suddenly, reveal what seem to be contradictions which, though they violate the canons of Sophoclean classic art, make them more recognizably and compellingly human.

Such psychological reversals are a Euripidean trade-mark from the earliest plays on. In the *Alcestis*, Admetus, who has never for a moment questioned the propriety of accepting his wife’s sacrifice, who over her dead body has abused his father Pheres for not taking his place and angrily rejected the old man’s cruel (but justified) reply, mourns her death in terms which still emphasize nothing but his own loss and then suddenly realizes how he will appear to others. His wife’s death is glorious ‘while I, who was supposed to die, but eluded my fate, will live out a sorry life. δερτή μανθάνω. Now I realize the truth’ (939–40). The realization is not prepared by any hint in the speeches of Admetus or the chorus, and yet it is not unexpected. For the home truths his ignoble father told him in the earlier scene are so forcibly expressed (‘You enjoy living: do you think your father doesn’t?’ 691), so scandalous but irrefutable, that even Admetus must eventually look them in the face and see his real situation — from which however he is rescued by the fairy-tale restoration of Alcestis from the kingdom of death.

The action of *Iphigenia in Aulide* turns on a change of mind so sudden that Aristotle cites it as an example of failure to maintain consistency of character; it is Iphigenia’s decision to offer herself as a sacrifice to ensure the Greek departure for Troy after previously begging her father to spare her life. Aristotle’s criticism — ‘the girl who makes the speech of supplication here bears no resemblance to the later one . . .’ (*Poetics* 1454a32) — overlooks the fact that the audience has been subliminally prepared for this volte-face by the whole of the play’s action so far; a series of swift and sudden changes of decision which is unparalleled in ancient drama. Agamemnon opens the play by sending a letter to Clytemnestra countermanding the instructions previously sent her to bring Iphigenia to the camp in Aulis. Menelaus intercepts this letter and taunts Agamemnon with his instability; but when Agamemnon expresses despair at the news that Iphigenia has arrived, Menelaus changes his mind and urges Agamemnon to disband the army and abandon the expedition rather than sacrifice his daughter. ‘You will say I have changed, my words no longer fierce. This is true. But what has happened to me is natural. I have changed

\(^1\) Easterling (1973).

326
over to feel love for my brother. And such shifts are by no means the mark of an evil man' (500–3). But Agamemnon has changed his mind again: he now sees no way out; the army will demand his daughter’s sacrifice.

An even more striking change, which is in fact something of a psychological puzzle, is the eerie process by which Dionysus, in *Bacchae*, transforms the menacing tyrant Pentheus into a crazed victim. It is of course a presentation of Dionysiac possession but it is also rooted in a Euripidean perception of the obscure depths in the human soul. Dionysus persuades Pentheus not to lead his troops against the wild women on the hills; he appeals to Pentheus’ fevered vision of their orgies, and Pentheus reveals the strength of his obsessive desire to see them with his own eyes. There is only one way to fulfil it, Dionysus tells him: disguised as a maenad. Pentheus goes into the palace to decide what to do, but he is now the prey of dark forces in motion in his own soul. The god-priest on stage calls on Dionysus to ‘derange his wits, set loose a giddy madness’ (850–1) and the god’s full power, exerted from outside, now combines with the forces released inside Pentheus’ mind by his surrender to temptation, to produce the macabre figure who comes on stage, ‘a giggling, leering creature, more helpless than a child, nastier than an idiot ...’.

This scene is unique, but everywhere in Euripides a preoccupation with individual psychology and its irrational aspects is evident: Hermione’s emotional breakdown and suicidal mood after the failure of her attempt to kill Andromache’s child; Medea’s soliloquy in which, after deciding to kill her sons, she alternately yields to and masters her maternal instincts; Electra’s exultant speech over the corpse of Aegisthus, shot through with perverted sexual jealousy; Phaedra’s delirium as she tries to conceal her guilty love and the account she later gives of the stages of her struggle to conceal her passion – these situations and reactions are characteristically Euripidean. In his hands tragedy for the first time probed the inner recesses of the human soul and let ‘passions spin the plot’.

The originality of Euripidean psychological characterization has in recent years been given less than its due in the justified reaction against interpretations which, in nineteenth-century style, tried to reach behind the surfaces of the characters displayed by the action and construct a fully rounded personality, its past as well as its present. Against such probing below the surface, other critics urged consideration of the action and its demands and also of the rhetorical possibilities open to exploitation. We may get much nearer to Euripides’ thinking, it has been suggested, if instead of asking ourselves in any dramatic situation ‘What would ... such a man be likely to say ...?’ we asked ourselves: ‘How should he ... best acquit himself? How gain his point? Move his hearers? Prove his thesis? ...’

1 Dodds (1960) 192.  2 Dale (1954) xxviii.
TRAGEDY

There is much truth in this observation; rhetoric was the principal offering of the sophistic teachers and Athenian audiences were expert judges of the oratorical skills demanded by assembly and law-court.\(^1\) Aristophanes was not slow to seize on this aspect of Euripidean style; his Euripides in the *Frogs* claims that he taught the Athenians to ‘chatter’ by means of ‘introductions of subtle regulations and angle measurements of verses’ (956). And it is true that Euripides’ characters all seem to have had at least an elementary course in public speaking; their speeches are sometimes self-consciously rhetorical. Electra, for instance, begins her arraignment of the dead Aegisthus with what sounds like textbook language:

\[\text{ἐλευ. τίν' ἄρξῃν πρῶτο σ' ἔξειπω κακῶν,}
\text{ποίεις τελευτᾶς; τίνα μέσον τάξιο λόγον;}\]

(907–8)

‘Let me see. What shall I express first as the beginning of the wrongs you have done, what as the end? And what discourse shall I arrange in the middle?’

Other Euripidean characters are less naively technical but they are just as anxious to put their case well; the characteristic Euripidean dialogue is a debate, with long speeches of more or less equal length, one on each side, followed by the cut and thrust of one-line exchanges. And they can make out a case for anything. In a fragment of the lost *Cretans* (Page (1942)), Pasiphae, hailed before an outraged Minos after she has given birth to the Minotaur, pleads her case with virtuoso skill. Denial, she says, would be useless. But she is no adulteress, giving her body to a man in secret lust. It was madness sent from heaven; what else could explain her action? ‘What could I see in a bull to sting my heart with shameful passion? Was he handsome? Well dressed? Was it the gleam from his tawny hair, his flashing eyes . . . ?’ (11–15). She goes on to put the blame on her husband: he had sworn to sacrifice the bull to Poseidon but failed to do so. ‘The fault is yours, you are the cause of my sickness . . . ’ (34–5). It is no wonder Minos begins his reply by asking his guards: ‘Has she been muzzled yet?’ (44).

Pasiphae is pleading for her life before a judge, and this courtroom atmosphere, so familiar to the Athenian audience, is typically Euripidean. Hecuba and Polyestor plead their case in contrasted speeches before Agamemnon in *Hecuba*, as Hecuba and Helen do before Menelaus in *Troades*, Orestes and Tyndareus before Menelaus in *Orestes*; so Hippolytus defends himself against Phaedra’s accusation before Theseus.

Yet though they use rhetorical techniques in formal debate the effect is not monotonous; the speeches are fully expressive of individual character and also designed for dramatic effect. Hippolytus, for example, proves the truth of his earlier assertion that he is not at home in a public assembly (986) by using

\(^1\) Cf. Thuc. 3.38.7.
EURIPIDES

arguments which infuriate the father he is trying to convince; he even tries to
prove lack of motive (a standard sophistic approach) by asking: ‘Was her
body pre-eminent in beauty over all other women?’ (1009–10). It was not
exactly the best thing to say to a sorrowing husband in the presence of his
wife’s body; it is, however, very much ‘in character’, for Hippolytus’ almost
pathological distaste for women (revealed in his speech to the Nurse) has now
been concentrated on Phaedra who has falsely accused him of attempted rape.

Euripides’ characters present their cases in the organized framework of
rhetoric but they are driven by irrational forces working below the surface.
His drama cherishes no illusion that mankind is capable of choosing the good;
Phaedra sums up the human dilemma in a short but chilling sentence: ‘We
know what is right, we recognize it clearly, but we don’t achieve it’ (τὸ χρῆστ’
ἐπιστάμεθα καὶ γιγνώσκομεν | οὐκ ἐκπνοοῦμεν 8’ . . . , 380–1). The mind is not
strong enough to combat the weakness and violence of our nature. Phaedra
is talking about her love for Hippolytus, and this, the most irrational of human
passions, is a theme predominant in Euripidean drama – a point pressed home
by Aristophanes’ Aeschylus, who claims that he never brought ‘whores like
Phaedra’ on stage nor for that matter ‘any woman in love’ (Frogs 1043–4).
‘Eros’, sings the chorus of Hippolytus, ‘you that make desire flow from the
eyes . . . may you never . . . come to me beyond due measure . . . Eros, tyrant
over men, who comes upon mortals with destruction and every shape of
disaster’ (525–42). It was this aspect of Eros, the destructive, which fascinated
Euripides: the delirium of Phaedra and, later, her love turned to hate, the jealous
rage of the barren wife Hermione, the unforeseen violence of Medea’s revenge,
the love of brother and sister in the lost Aeolus, the Potiphar’s wife plot of the
lost Sthenboea. Euripides in fact is the creator of that three-walled room in
which the imprisoned men and women destroy each other by the intensity of
their loves and hates, of that cage which is the theatre of Shakespeare’s
Othello, Racine’s Phèdre, of Ibsen and Strindberg.

It was this preoccupation with women’s loves and hates which won Euripides
his reputation, widespread in antiquity, as a misogynist; a whole play of
Aristophanes is devoted to the hilarious results of the decision taken by the
women of Athens to punish him for his sins against them. This is of course
comic exaggeration, but it may well reflect the feelings (at least the public
feelings) of Athenian wives, for Euripides’ characters shattered the polite
fictions about female docility which both men and women paid lip service to.
‘A wife’s honour’ Pericles is supposed to have said ‘is – to be least talked about
by men, for good or bad’ (Thuc. 2.45.2); but Phaedra, to protect her honour,
contrives the death of Hippolytus, and Medea, invoking the male code of
honour, revenges herself by the murder of her sons. Yet, though it is not likely
Athenian wives would have defended such extreme measures, the Euripidean

329
TRAGEDY

plays are sympathetic rather than critical. Phaedra is the victim of Aphrodite and her account of her struggle to overcome her passion puts her in a noble light. And in the case of Medea, Euripides chose to emphasize the issue of women's social subordination; it is the argument Medea uses in her famous speech. 'Of all creatures that have life and intelligence, we women are the most afflicted stock' (πάντων δ' ὁι' ἔτη' ἐμφασα καὶ γνώμην ἔχει | γυναικὲς έσομεν ἀθλιώτατον φυτόν, 230-1). She touches on one sore point after another in what must have been the grievances of many an Athenian wife: the dowry with which women 'buy an owner of their body'; the risk involved (for if the husband turns out badly 'divorce does a woman's reputation harm'); their lack of preparation for marriage and a new household; the man's freedom to leave the house for distraction, the wife's obligation 'to keep her eyes fixed on a single human being'. The routine male justification of their privileges - that they fight the wars - is rejected: 'I'd rather stand in the battle lines spear in hand three times than give birth once' (230-51).

Medea is of course an extraordinary figure, an eastern princess, granddaughter of Helios, but this speech cannot be discounted on the grounds that she is a barbarian and witch — it comes too close to home. The chorus of Corinthian women are won over; they welcome Medea's announcement that she plans revenge with an ode which rejects the male literary tradition on the subject of women. It was not to women that Apollo gave the gift of song, for if he had 'I would have sung a hymn to counter the male sex' (426-7). It is significant that this remarkable critique of the tradition occurs in a play which presents the revenge of a wronged wife in the heroic terms usually reserved for men and, in what must have been a very disturbing ending for the audience, shows her victorious over her enemies and, aided by Helios, escaping unpunished to Athens. 'In my plays' says the comic Euripides in the Frogs 'the woman spoke ... and the young girl and the old woman ...' (949-50). It is in fact remarkable how important female roles are in Euripidean drama compared with that of his fellow dramatists. In play after play it is a woman who plays the principal part or, in a secondary role, makes an indelible impression.

It is typical of Euripides that he could take a figure as exotic as the princess from Colchis, the awesome priestess, prophet and magician of Pindar's fourth Pythian Ode, and present her in a context of domestic strife which is painfully realistic. 'One word will floor you' says Medea, countering Jason's claim that he is marrying the princess only to advance the family interest. 'If you were an honest man, you would have tried to persuade me and then married the girl, instead of concealing it ...' (585-7). The retort is quick and to the point. 'And you, of course, would be giving me a helping hand in the project — all I had to do was mention the word “marriage”'. Why, even now you can't

EURIPIDES

bring yourself to renounce the huge rage in your heart' (588–90). It is all too human, it verges in fact on the sordid. And it is not a solitary example; Euripides' treatment of the mythical figures is often realistic in the extreme. Once again Aristophanes knew his man; his Euripides boasts that he introduced into tragedy 'domestic affairs, the kind we deal and live with' (οὐκεῖα πράγματ’ εἶσάγων, οἷς χρώμεθ’ οἷς ξύνεομεν . . ., 959).

Euripides' treatment of some of the most prestigious myths suggests that he must have asked himself the question: 'How would these people act and speak if they were our contemporaries?' The results are often disconcerting, nowhere more so than in his handling of the figures of Electra and Orestes. His Electra is from start to finish a clear challenge to the canonical Aeschylean version; in fact it contains, among its many surprises, what can only be regarded as a parodic critique of Aeschylus' recognition scene (509ff.). The setting of the play is the house of a farmer in the countryside; he delivers the prologue and gives us the unexpected news that he is Electra's husband. The heroine herself carries a pot balanced on her head as she goes to draw water. Orestes acts like a fifth-century exile returning home in secret to conspire; instead of going to the palace, he comes just over the border to this remote farm, ready to run for safety if there is no local support for his plans. When the farmer invites Orestes and Pylades (their identity still cautiously concealed) into the house for a meal, Electra scolds him shrewishly for not realizing that his poor house is no place to entertain what are obviously high-class visitors. The effect of this domestic tone is to strip Electra and Orestes of the heroic stature conferred on them by the legends, so that we see the treacherous murder of Aegisthus and the cold-blooded killing of their mother not as the working of destiny or a curse, not even the fulfilment of a divine command, but rather as crimes committed by 'men as they are' - Sophocles' description of Euripidean characters.1 In Orestes the realistic presentation is even more extreme. The hero, after the murder of Clytemnestra, is afflicted not by the Erinyes (in his delirium he takes Electra for one of them) but by sickness - and we are spared no detail. 'Take hold of me' he says to his sister 'and wipe the caked foam from my miserable lips and eyes' (219–20). Helen has put on mourning for her sister but 'she cut her hair just at the ends' Electra tells us 'so as not to spoil her beauty. She's the same old Helen still' (127–8). Menelaus is a cautious trimmer who according to Aristotle (Poetics 1454a) is 'an example of unnecessary baseness of character'. Tyndareus is a vindictive and violent old man, while Orestes, Electra and Pylades, as they enthusiastically discuss their plans to murder Helen and hold Hermione hostage, emerge as juvenile delinquents of a startlingly modern depravity. The great moral and legal dilemma posed by the myth, Orestes' conflict of duties, is dismissed in cavalier fashion by Clytem-

1 Aristotle, Poetics 1460b33.
nestra's father, Tyndareus, who condemns Orestes' killing of his mother in surprising terms. 'He took no account of justice, had no recourse to the universal Hellenic law ... Orestes should have charged his mother with murder ...' (494-500). To this reversal of the canonical order of events (in Aeschylus the law court was convened for the first time in history precisely to deal with Orestes' killing of his mother) no one in the play takes objection; Orestes answers Tyndareus on other grounds. Its effect, for the moral context of Orestes' action, is devastating; he is stripped of all justification except the command of Apollo, the god whom he accuses of deserting him.

These two plays are widely criticized as artistic failures in their unconvincing endings; in each case the god from the machine announces, in what seems to be a deliberately banal fashion, a bundle of future marriages, apotheoses, etc. which seem incongruous with the desperation portrayed in the body of the play. But it is hard to see what else Euripides could have done. His realistic treatment has destroyed the heroic and moral values underlying the myth and no ending which could re-identify the Orestes and Electra of these plays with their heroic prototypes is conceivable; perhaps he thought it best to underline, by the deliberate artificiality of the form of his ending, the irrelevance of its content.

In contrast to this realistic remodelling of central myths stands Euripides' exploitation of the romantic and exotic material offered by others which deal with the adventures and ordeals of heroes in far-off lands. The Andromeda was such a play; it opened (as we know from the hilarious parody in Aristophanes' Thesmophoriazusae) with the heroine bound to the rock awaiting the sea-monster and the arrival of Perseus, her rescuer. Two extant plays of this type suggest that Euripides is the inventor of a genre of romantic melodrama which turns on the rescue of the heroine from the clutches of backward foreigners by adventurers who take advantage of the natives' superstitions. Both Iphigenia in Tauris and Helen are built on this formula: Iphigenia, spirited away from the sacrificer's knife at Aulis by Artemis, now serves the goddess as a priestess presiding over the human sacrifices offered by the barbarians, while the real Helen (as opposed to the image of her which went to Troy) is in Egypt, resisting the demands for her hand made by the local king Theoclymenus. In both plays the recognition scenes are models of skilful dramaturgy; the Iphigenia scene, in the technical brilliance of its prolongation of suspense (it was singled out as exemplary by Aristotle, Poetics 1455a) and the Helen scene in its sophisticated wit. Both plays end with the appearance of gods from the machine: Athena in Iphigenia prevents the recapture of the fugitives, whose ship has been thrown back on the shore, and the Dioscuri in Helen prevent Theoclymenus from killing his sister Theone, who helped Helen and Menelaus escape. But these interventions are not a mere dramatic convenience. In
EURIPIDES

Iphigenia the failure of the attempt to escape is not necessary; it seems to have been deliberately contrived to motivate the divine intervention, which has the important mythical-religious function of linking the action with the foundation of the Artemis-cult at Brauron in Attica. In Helen, the assurance brought by the Dioscuri that Helen and Menelaus will be immortal is less urgent a motive, but their intervention does make possible the dramatic final scene of the action proper: Theoclymenus’ attempt to vent his frustrated rage on Theonte; in any case she is a fully developed and sympathetic character who cannot be left to suffer for the help she has given the heroine.

These ‘romantic’ plays come comparatively late in Euripides’ career; the plays (Heraclidae, Supplices) which have been described as ‘patriotic’ (more recently and accurately as ‘political’)1 date from the years of the Archidamian War. They deal with topics which recur in Athenian patriotic orations: the rescue of Heracles’ children from their persecutor Eurystheus by Theseus’ son Demophon, the intervention of Theseus himself to force the Thebans to allow burial of the seven fallen champions. In the Heraclidae a daughter volunteers herself for sacrifice to save her family; Supplices has no such sacrifice scene (though the widow of one of the Theban champions throws herself on to his funeral pyre) but its main theme is the same: the celebration of Athenian martial valour not in self-defence but to protect the rights of the helpless and oppressed elsewhere. Such plays were standard fare; Aeschylus had already in his Eleusinii dramatized Theseus’ intervention on behalf of the Theban widows and had also produced a Heraclidae. But the two extant Euripidean examples of this genre are not simple-minded patriotic propaganda. In both cases the principal character representing the persecuted victims rescued by Athens is an ambivalent figure. Adrastus in Supplices, who asks for aid to get the bodies of his champions buried, is reproached by Theseus in harsh terms which must have made some in the audience think of their own involvement in the Archidamian War.

‘You ruined your city, your wits disturbed by young men, who in their desire for glory promote the cause of war unjustly and bring ruin on their fellow citizens – one because he wants command, another to get his hands on power and use it harshly, another for profit – and not one of them considers what harm war brings to the masses of the people.’ (231–7)

In fact Theseus refuses to risk a war on behalf of a man who acted so unwisely and consents to help the Argives only when his mother Aethra reminds him that Athens is the traditional champion of the weak and oppressed. And in Heraclidae Alcmena, the children’s grandmother, ends the play by ordering the execution of a captured Eurystheus who had been promised his life by the

1 Zuntz (1955).
TRAGEDY

Athenian victors: worse still, she orders his dead body to be thrown to the dogs (1045ff.).

This emphasis on the ugliness and waste of war becomes a major theme in other plays which however lack the patriotic appeal; in Hecuba and especially in Troades the sack of Troy serves as a general symbol of war’s destructiveness. In both plays the chorus consists of enslaved Trojan women, and in Hecuba, as they contemplate the sorrows of their queen, they recreate for us the terror of Troy’s fall.

‘My end came at midnight... The dances and sacrifices over, my husband lay at rest, his spear hung on the wall... I was arranging my hair... gazing into the fathomless light of the golden mirror... preparing to fall into bed, when a shout rang out in the city, a war-cry... I left my familiar bed, dressed in one robe like a Dorian girl... I saw my husband killed, was taken away over the sea, looking back at Troy...’ (914–38)

But it is in Troades that the most vivid tableau of war’s terror and cruelty is staged. Greek literature from the Iliad on had been much concerned with war, but war had been seen always from the point of view of the men who fought it—the Achaeans heroes, the soldier of fortune Archilochus, the aristocratic partisan Alcaeus, the Spartan regular Tyrtaeus. This play presents it from the standpoint of the captured women; the characters are a royal grandmother Hecuba, who in the play learns of the death of a daughter and a grandson; an unmarried princess, Cassandra, who is taken as his mistress by the Greek commander; a mother, Andromache, who is assigned as concubine to the son of the man who killed her husband and whose infant son is thrown to his death from the walls. The chorus who brood desperately on what their individual fates will be, represent a whole female population sold into slavery after the slaughter of their men (a punishment which Athens had inflicted on the city of Scione six years earlier and on the island of Melos in the preceding winter).

That the play stems from concern over the plight of war-torn Greece there can be little doubt, but the position that it is specifically an attack on Athenian imperialism can be maintained only with difficulty. For one thing, the chorus, speculating on their eventual destination in Greece, pray that they may come to the ‘blessed land of Theseus’ (209) and not ‘to the eddies of the Eurotas’ (210), the river of Sparta. And, for another, the fundamental question raised by the debate between Hecuba and Helen, that of responsibility for the war, is left unanswered. Helen’s case is that Troy was responsible since Hecuba bore Paris; Priam, though the gods warned that Paris would be a firebrand to burn Troy, failed to kill him. This case looks weak in the context of the suffering we see in the Troades; but the audience had seen, as the first of the sequence of plays in which this play came last, the Alexander, which was
concerned with precisely this question and seems to have suggested that Helen was not entirely wrong. Like the 'patriotic' plays, the 'anti-war' plays of Euripides are complex and ambiguous.

No less ambiguous is the treatment of war in *Iphigenia in Aulide*. The action gives a picture of the moral cowardice and personal ambition of Agamemnon so vivid that many have taken Iphigenia's speech accepting self-sacrifice for the Panhellenic cause as Euripides' ironic symbol of the insanity of war - an innocent girl who gives her life for tawdry slogans in which no one but she can believe. Yet this theme, Panhellenic unity against the barbarians, is not only a leitmotiv of the play but was also a policy urged by many voices in the last years of the war which saw Athens and Sparta competing for Persian help.

The play is a sombre tragedy of war, but it contains one scene which shows an entirely different side of Euripides' genius, a scene which in its lightness of touch and its exploitation of the nuances of a social situation foreshadows the atmosphere of Menandrian comedy. It is the meeting of Clytemnestra and Achilles. The queen has brought her daughter to Aulis believing that Achilles is going to marry her. But Achilles has never heard of this proposed marriage; Agamemnon lied to Clytemnestra to get her to bring her daughter to be sacrificed. Clytemnestra and Achilles have never met, but, inside the royal tent, she hears him announce his name as he calls for Agamemnon; she comes out to make the acquaintance of her future son-in-law. He professes embarrassment in the presence of a beautiful woman (he does manage to pay her that compliment) and with the manners of a *grande dame* she puts him at his ease:

CLYT. No wonder you don't know who I am; we have never met. And my compliments on your modesty.

ACH. Who are you? Why have you come to the camp, a woman among men at arms?

CLYT. I am Leda's daughter, my name is Clytemnestra, my husband lord Agamemnon.

ACH. Thank you for telling me the facts in such compact form. But I am ashamed to be exchanging words with a lady... [He moves off.]

CLYT. [Detains him] Wait! Don't run away! Put your right hand in mine - a happy first step to a wedding.

ACH. My hand in yours? How could I face Agamemnon if I took hold of what I should not?

CLYT. But you should - since you are going to marry my daughter...

ACH. Marry? Marry whom? I am speechless, lady. But - perhaps this strange statement comes from a disturbed mind...

CLYT. It's a natural reaction in everyone to be embarrassed when they set eyes on new family connexions and discuss marriage. (823–40)

They finally realize that they are both under a misapprehension and the play resumes its prevailing mood of grim foreboding. But this scene alone would be
TRAGEDY

enough to suggest that Euripides was a forerunner of Menander, a claim which is in fact made in a headless sentence from an Alexandrian Life of Euripides: '... towards wife, and father towards son and servant towards master, or the business of reversals — virgins raped, babies substituted, recognitions by means of rings and necklaces. For these are the sinews of New Comedy, and Euripides brought these dramatic means to perfection.'

The forceful wooing of a maid by a god, the complications involved in bringing up (usually in secret) the resultant offspring, and the ultimate recognition of the child's high lineage — these were all commonplaces of heroic genealogy; Euripides seems to have used them as an intrigue formula for a series of plays (now lost) which exploited the possibilities with virtuoso skill. But there is one surviving play which is based on this formula and does in fact suggest, in clear outline, the shape of the New Comedy to come. The Ion presents us with a virgin princess overcome by a god (Creusa, in fear of her father, exposes Apollo's child), and on a lower level, a girl seduced by a human suitor (Xuthus remembers his affair with a local girl at Dionysiac revels in Delphi). The whole plot turns on substitution of children (Apollo foists his son by Creusa on Xuthus, persuading him, from his oracular shrine, that Ion is his own illegitimate child) and one of the signs by which Creusa recognizes Ion's identity is a golden snake collar. And though much of Ion is played on a serious note, there is one scene at least which is undeniably high comedy: the false recognition scene in which Xuthus, misled by the oracle, takes Ion for his son and Ion, appalled, takes Xuthus for a would-be seducer or perhaps insane. Like the Clytemnestra—Achilles scene, this depends on agnoia, ignorance of identity, the mainspring of New Comedy; in fact in Menander's Girl who has her hair cut off the goddess Agnoia delivers the Prologue. The poets of the New Comedy recognized their indebtedness; a character in Menander's Arbitrants proposes to recite a speech from the Auge, a Euripidean play which, like that in which the speaker is appearing, turned on identifications through tokens left with a child. And a character in a play of Philemon is given the line: 'If I were sure of life beyond the grave, I'd hang myself — to see Euripides.'

But it is not only in the ingenuity of his intrigue-plots and the sophistication of his tone that Euripides foreshadows the drama of Menander and Philemon; he also developed a conversational style for his characters which was closer to normal speech than anything so far heard on the Attic stage. The dialogue of the Euripidean characters, though still subject to the demands of metre and the decorum of the tragic genre, creates an illusion of everyday speech, perfectly suited to the unheroic figures and situations of his drama. In fact in its avoidance of sustained metaphor, its striving for clarity, precision and point, the style sometimes verges on the prosaic. Yet this plain surface is cleverly contrived,
as Aristotle pointed out: 'the best concealment of art is to compose selecting words from everyday speech, as Euripides does, who was the first to show the way' (Rhetoric 1404b5).

One effective instrument for Euripides’ purposes was his gradual loosening of the iambic trimeter which (as we saw above, p. 316) provides a rough guide for dating the plays. In the strict metre of the Aeschylean trimeter the appearance of two short syllables in succession (and *a fortiori* of three) was avoided as much as possible; in Euripides it is admitted more frequently as his style develops. Not only did this give his dialogue a much more natural sound (for in Greek conversation, as is clear from early Platonic dialogues where natural speech is the effect aimed at, runs of short syllables are frequent), it also allowed him to employ new syntactical combinations and to make extensive additions to the vocabulary of spoken dialogue. The list of such additions is long; two types predominate. The first consists of compound verbs made with prepositions, most of which, in Greek, consist of two short syllables – *apo, dia, meta* etc. The prepositional prefixes of these words limit and direct the action expressed by the main verb to a particular attitude or context; their precision allows Euripides to make logical distinctions, and also subtle psychological differentiations. The second type consists of nouns and adjectives which bring into tragic dialogue the new intellectual dialogue of sophistic debate on the one hand and on the other everyday words for household objects and situations of domestic life.1 In the *Frogs*, ‘Euripides’ jeers at the heroic, metaphorical style of Aeschylus and claims that the poet should ‘express himself in human terms’ (*anthropeios* 1058); this is exactly what Euripides did.

It is characteristic of this paradoxical figure that he is also a great lyric poet. Plutarch tells us that some of the survivors of the Athenian disaster at Syracuse, wandering about the countryside after the battle, were given food and drink in exchange for singing some of his lyrics (Life of Nicias 29). And his Life of Lysander contains the story (immortalized by Milton) that in 404, when the fate of defeated Athens hung in the balance, the Peloponnesian generals were diverted from their projects of enslavement and destruction by the performance, at a banquet, of the Parodos of the *Electra* (167ff.): ‘They felt’ says Plutarch ‘that it would be a barbarous act to annihilate a city which produced such men.’ These stories may not be true but they are eloquent testimony to the strength of Euripides’ reputation as a lyric poet.

In this area, too, he was an innovator. We can no longer assess the new-fangled musical style which he adopted from the dithyrambic poet Timotheus

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(cf. p. 243); all we can say is that in a few passages of late Euripidean lyric, repetitions and syntactical vagueness suggest that the music has become more important than the words (the same impression emerges from the merciless parody in the Frogs 130ff.). But two other innovations are perfectly clear: the transference of much of the musical performance of the chorus (stasimon) to individual actors (monody) and the comparative detachment of the choral odes proper from dramatic context.

Lyrical exchange between actor and chorus (kommos) had been a feature of tragic style from the beginning (cf. the great kommos of the Choephoroi, p. 287) and appears regularly in Euripides (often in the Parodos, e.g. Troades 121ff., Orestes 140ff., Ion 219ff.). But just as frequent are lyric arias of a single actor and lyric dialogues between two – both rarities in Sophocles and existent only in rudimentary form in Aeschylus. The lyric dialogue is frequently used for highly emotional moments such as recognition scenes (Iphigenia–Orestes in I.T. 827ff., Ion–Creusa in Ion 1445ff., Helen–Menelaus in Helen 625ff. – this last the target of a devastating parody in Aristophanes’ Thesmophoriazusae 911ff.). The monodies display a rich variety of passions and dramatic reactions: Cassandra’s mock marriage-hymn with its undertone of baleful prophecy (Troades 308ff.); the blinded Polyestor’s curses and revengeful threats (Hecuba 1056ff.); Ion’s ‘work-song’ as he performs his duties as a Delphian acolyte (Ion 112ff.) and, in the same play, Creusa’s confession and her accusation of Apollo (859ff.); most innovative of all, the Phrygian slave’s elaborate, ornate account of the attempt on Helen’s life in Orestes (1369ff.).

The choral stasima are less firmly bound to their dramatic context than those of Sophocles and Aeschylus (though there is always an exception to any statement about Euripides – in this case it is the Bacchae). Sometimes, in fact, especially in the ‘romantic’ plays, the connexion seems tenuous and becomes a matter of scholarly debate; but the view that late Euripidean odes are musical interludes entirely unrelated to context goes too far. The connexion is usually one of mood rather than thought; in the Troades the choral odes are not linked directly with preceding or succeeding stage action but they are variations on a fundamental theme – the tragedy of Troy’s fall. Similarly, the stasimon in Electra which celebrates the glories of Achilles’ shield (432ff.) throws into sharp relief the unheroic nature of Orestes’ return to Argos. Often the choral poems recreate a religious atmosphere and background which, missing in the action, is needed to give the final divine appearance authority (this is perhaps the function of the ode to the Great Mother in Helen 1301ff. and the celebration of the birth of Apollo in I.T. 1234ff.). The content of many of the choral poems is, like so much else in Euripides, a hint of the future. They are insistently pictorial: the evocation of the temple at Delphi (Ion 184ff.) as of the landscape traversed by the mourning Demeter (Helen 1801ff.), the account of
EURIPIDES

the golden-fleeced lamb of Atreus in Electra (699ff.). All these passages, with their fullness of sensuous detail and colour, point the way to the genre pictures so dear to the hearts of the Alexandrian poets, especially Theocritus.

But it is as a tragedian that Euripides made his real mark on Greece and the world. In spite of his faults in other respects, Aristotle says, he is ‘the most tragic of the poets’; the context suggests that this judgement refers specifically to a preference for unhappy endings, but it is valid in a wider sense. For in his representation of human suffering Euripides pushes to the limits of what an audience can stand; some of his scenes are almost unbearable. The macabre details of the death of Pentheus in Bacchae, of the princess in Medea, of Aegisthus in Electra, are typical of the Euripidean assault on the audience’s feelings. And Hecuba’s funeral lament over the shattered corpse of Astyanax is the work of a poet determined to spare us nothing. ‘Poor child, how dreadfully your head was sheared by the walls your fathers built ... the locks your mother tended and kissed; from them now comes the bright gleam of smashed bone and blood ...’ (Troades 117ff.). In Euripidean drama man’s situation is more helpless than in the tragic vision of the other poets; his plays give no hint of a divine purpose in human suffering and his characters are not so much heroes who in their defiance of time and change rival the gods, as victims of passion and circumstance, of a world they cannot hope to understand. The only useful virtue in such a world is silent endurance, and this is what Talthybius recommends to Andromache as he takes her child away. ‘Let it happen this way ... take your pain and sorrow with nobility (eugenos) ... be silent, adjust yourself to your fate ...’ (Troades 726–7, 737).

This despairing tragic vision was prophetic; the world became Euripidean as the chaos of fourth-century Greece paved the way for Macedonian conquest and the great Hellenistic kingdoms. In that new world, where the disappearance of the free city-state reduced the stature of the individual, where the huge Hellenistic kingdoms waged their dynastic wars, locked, like Euripidean gods, in seemingly endless conflict, in that age of uncertainty, doubt and anxiety, Euripides won at last the applause and veneration which had eluded him during his life. And thanks to his adaptation by the Roman dramatist Seneca, who carried over into Latin in exaggerated form his psychological insight, his rhetorical manner, his exploitation of the shocking and the macabre and above all, his brooding sense of man as victim, it was Euripides, not Aeschylus or Sophocles, whose tragic muse presided over the rebirth of tragedy in Renaissance Europe.

6. MINOR TRAGEDIANS

For us, Greek tragedy begins with the Persae of Aeschylus (472 B.C.) and ends with the posthumous performances of Sophocles’ Oedipus at Colonus and
Euripides’ *Bacchae*, both just before the turn of the century; we have inherited from late antiquity and Byzantium a selection from the work of three tragic poets which represents, all too inadequately, the splendid flowering of this native Athenian art in the great period of imperial democracy. But of course there were other tragic poets, who competed with the canonical three in their lifetime. Most of them are known to us mainly or solely as targets of Aristophanic abuse; Morychus, whose passion was for the good life (βίον γεννάτων, *Wasp* 506) and especially eels (*Ach.* 887); Theognis, whose frigid verses are compared with the snows and frozen rivers of Thrace (*Ach.* 138ff.); and Morismus, whose set pieces earned those unwise enough to have them copied out exemplary punishment in the next world — to lie in excrement together with the perjurers and father-beaters (*Frogs* 151ff.). But three fifth-century tragic poets, Ion, Critias and Agathon, achieved a certain eminence in their day and, though only fragments of their work survive, they stand out as distinct literary personalities.

Ion of Chios first competed at the Dionysia in the 82nd Olympiad (451—448 B.C.); he won third prize the year Euripides came first with the *Hippolytus* (428). On one occasion, when he was awarded first prize, he is said to have supplied the entire Athenian population with wine from his native island. He wrote prose memoirs, the *Epidemiae* (*Visits*); one fragment (*FGrH* 392 F 6) tells a delightful story of Sophocles at a banquet he attended on Chios while on his way, as one of the ten generals, to the Athenian fleet blockading Lesbos (441). The fragments of Ion’s tragedies (which include an *Agamemnon*) are unfortunately all short; no extended passage gives us an idea of his style. But we do have an estimate of his poetic achievement by a much later critic — the author of the treatise *On the sublime* (‘Longinus’).

Take lyric poetry: would you rather be Bacchylides or Pindar? Take tragedy: would you rather be Ion of Chios or Sophocles? Ion and Bacchylides are impeccable, uniformly beautiful writers in the polished manner, but it is Pindar and Sophocles who sometimes set the world on fire with their vehemence, for all that their flame often goes out without reason and they collapse dismally. Indeed, no one in his senses would reckon all Ion’s works put together as the equivalent of the one play, *Oedipus*.

An uncle of Plato, Critias, who, as the leading figure among the Thirty Tyrants, clamped a reign of terror on Athens after the surrender to Sparta in 404 and died fighting the resurgent democracy in 403, is credited in our sources with three plays which were also thought by some to be Euripidean. One other play, *Sisyphus*, is specifically cited as his; an important speech from it survives. His skill as a poet is clear from the impressive fragments of his elegiac poetry (*IEG* II 52–6) and since Plato, once in an early dialogue (*Charmides* 33.5 tr. D. A. Russell in Russell and Winterbottom (1972) 493.)
MINOR TRAGEDIANS

and once in a late (Critias 108b), seems to hint at a career as a tragic poet, he may well be the author of the disputed plays: Tennes, Rhadamanthys and Pirithous. Some thirty fragments of the Pirithous remain. It dealt with Heracles’ rescue of Pirithous and Theseus from Hades; Pirithous was punished with imprisonment in a stone chair for his attempt to kidnap Persephone, and Theseus loyally stayed with him. We have what seem to be the first sixteen lines of the play, a vigorous dramatic opening in which Aeacus, guardian of the gate of Hades, challenges Heracles, who proudly identifies himself and reveals that he has been sent on another impossible mission, the capture of Cerberus. From the Sisyphus comes the famous speech which caused Critias to be ranked by the later doxographical tradition among the atheists. Sisyphus himself, the trickster who cheated even death, describes the origin of religion. Man’s life was at first anarchic (στοιχεῖον) until laws and punishments were prescribed. But when wrongdoers began to break the law not violently but stealthily, then some wise man ‘invented for mortals the fear of the gods... introduced divinity... a spirit everlasting... that would hear every word spoken and see every deed done... the most pleasant of doctrines... concealing the truth with a false story...’ (fr. 19 Snell).

Agathon, whose victory-celebration in 416 B.C. was used, many years later, as the setting for Plato’s Symposium, seems to have been a much more innovative poet than would appear from the surviving fragments of his works, which are, for the most part, rhetorical jeux d’esprit or cleverly turned moral clichés. According to Aristotle (Poet. 1451b19) he was the first poet to abandon mythical (and historical) subjects for wholly invented plots and characters and he was also (ibid. 1456a) the first to introduce choral lyrics which had nothing to do with the plot and could in fact fit into any tragedy – embolima, Aristotle calls them – ‘interpolations’. Like Euripides, he left Athens for Macedonia in the last years of the long war, as the city, torn by internal faction and facing the prospect of defeat, resorted to ever more desperate measures. And in Aristophanes’ Frogs, produced in 406, the god Dionysus delivers, with a pun on the poet’s name, the city’s regretful farewell: ‘He has gone off and left me – an excellent (agathos) poet, and one much missed by his friends’ (Frogs 84).

These lines come from a scene which, in spite of the comic situation – the effeminate Dionysus, dressed in the garb of Heracles, confronting his all-too-masculine model – sounds a serious note; it is a sort of comic requiem for fifth-century tragedy. Dionysus is going to Hades to bring Euripides back to life; he needs, he says, a ‘clever poet’. Heracles asks him what is wrong with the living – with Iophon, Sophocles’ son, for example? Dionysus admits some merit there, but suspects Iophon is still using his father’s work – a reason for waiting a while and also for not bringing Sophocles, rather than Euripides, back to life. Agathon has gone, Xenocles (who won first prize in
TRAGEDY

415 against Euripides’ Troades) is dismissed with a curse, Pythangelus is ignored and the host of ‘young effeminates’ who turn out talkative Euripidean-style tragedies by the ten thousand, are rejected in a characteristically salty Aristophanic metaphor: ‘barbarous chatterbags, who, once they are awarded a chorus, just take a leak on tragedy and disappear – search as you may, you won’t find a seminal (γόνυμον) poet any more . . .’ (Frogs 93ff.).

This lugubrious estimate by the god of the tragic festival seems to have been prophetic. For the whole of the fourth century, new tragic poets competed at the Dionysia and Lenaea but, though they were extraordinarily productive (Astydamas, we are told, wrote 240 plays, the younger Carcinus 160), they did not make enough of an impression on later ages to ensure the survival of their work. Many of them are cited and some of them praised by Aristotle and in their own time they were generally admired; in fact, Astydamas (whose first victory was in 372) was honoured with a bronze statue in the theatre ten years before the Athenian statesman Lycurgus paid similar honours to Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Invited to compose the inscription for the statue, Astydamas produced something so boastful that his name became a proverb: ‘you praise yourself, as Astydamas once did’. The meagre fragments do little to explain his great popularity. Plutarch singles out his Hector for mention but the one certain quotation from this play is far from reassuring. It clearly comes from a dramatic version of one of Homer’s greatest scenes, the meeting of Hector and Andromache; Hector tells a servant ‘Take my helmet so that the boy won’t be frightened’ (fr. 2 Snell) and this choice of subject, though it speaks volumes for Astydamas’ self-confidence, raises doubts about his judgement.

Such a direct challenge to Homer on his own ground is something the great tragic poets of the fifth century seem to have been wary of; though they drew heavily on the epic poems of the cycle, tragic adaptations of material from the Iliad and Odyssey are rare. But one play which has come down to us in the Euripidean corpus, the Rhesus, presents a dramatic version of the events of Book 10 of the Iliad: the capture of the Trojan spy Dolon by Odysseus and Diomedes and their successful raid on the Trojan camp to kill Rhesus, the newly-arrived Thracian ally of Troy. The ascription of this play to Euripides was questioned in antiquity and the debate continues into modern times. If it is Euripidean, the infrequency of resolution in the trimeter demands an early date (before the Alcestis). On the other hand many features of the style and stage action suggest that if it is indeed by Euripides it belongs to much later in his career. But it is more likely to be a product of the fourth century. The large number of speaking roles (eleven, cf. Phoenissae) in what is the shortest tragedy extant (996 lines), the rapid succession of short scenes, the complete

1 The lost Ransom of Hector (Aeschylus) and Nausicaa (Sophocles) are among the exceptions.
MINOR TRAGEDIANS

absence of gnomic pronouncements, the complicated entrances and exits of ll. 565–681, the goddess Athena’s assumption of the role of Aphrodite in order to deceive Paris, the fact that the whole of the action is supposed to take place at night – all this, and more besides, seems to bear witness to a post-classical phase of tragedy, one which has abandoned fifth-century ideals of artistic economy for a lavish, varied display of individually exciting scenes. The *Rhesus* seems to be striving for that ideal of ‘variety’ (*ποικιλία*) held up as the standard for the tragic poet in a fragment from a satyr play of Astydamas: ‘the clever poet must offer the complicated bounty, as it were, of a luxurious dinner...’.

Aristotle’s pupil and friend Theodectas was an orator as well as a tragic poet, the author of fifty plays: it is perhaps significant that three of the passages where Aristotle quotes him are in the *Rhetoric* and one in the *Politics*. About 65 lines have survived; since, unfortunately, most of them come from Stobaeus’ collection of moral maxims, the overall impression is one of glib sentiment and skilful versification. Athenaeus, however, preserves a reworking of a Euripidean tour de force, which had already been imitated by Agathon – the description by an illiterate peasant of the letters spelling the name of Theseus (fr. 6 Snell); and Strabo quotes a passage in which Theodectas attributes the black skin and woolly hair of the Ethiopians to the action of the sun (fr. 17 Snell).

Carcinus, too, is cited in the *Poetics* (1455a26), but for writing at least one of his plays without visualizing the action; he seems to have written a scene which would have passed scrutiny if heard or read, but, seen on stage, contained a glaring contradiction. Aristotle also refers to his use of recognition tokens in his *Thyestes* (1454b23) and from the *Rhetoric* (1400b9) we learn that his Medea was tried for the murder of her children and put up a sophistic defence. Not much more than a score of his verses remain, but a recent papyrus discovery bears witness to his almost classical stature in the eyes of his contemporaries. In the *Aspis* of Menander, the slave Daos acts the part of a man overcome by despair at news of his master’s mortal sickness; he rattles off a series of tragic clichés, in which a citation from Aeschylus is followed by ‘Carcinus says: “For in one day a god makes the happy man unhappy”’ (417ff.).

Daos quotes a line from another contemporary tragic poet, who is mentioned by Aristotle – Chaeremon (411). Aristotle cites him as one of the ἀναγωγωστικοί, which has been taken to mean that his plays were written for reading or recitation rather than performance. The context, however (Rhet. 1413b8ff.), suggests that Aristotle means merely that Chaeremon, unlike some of his more rhetorical competitors, is as effective when read (ἐν ταῖς χερσίν)

1 Fr. 4 Snell. The Eupolidean metre however seems to indicate a comic provenance.
TRAGEDY

as on the stage.¹ His style is characterized as ἀκριβῆς ‘accurate, precise’, and the fragments (some 75 lines) exhibit a richness of descriptive detail and a special emphasis on colour which seem almost Alexandrian. A celebrated description (fr. 14 from the Oeneus) of girls resting after Dionysiac dance (inspired by Euripides’ Bacchae 678ff.) gives some idea of his pictorial, sensual quality:

One lay down, her shoulder-strap undone, revealing a white breast to the moonlight. Another had exposed her left flank in the dancing - naked to the gazes of the air she made a living painting... Another bared the beauty of her forearm as she embraced a companion’s tender neck. Still another, her robes ripped open, showed her thigh beneath the folds...

A note of comic relief is sounded by the tragic offerings of Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse (not mentioned by Aristotle), who, we are told, won a victory at Athens in 367. Judging by the universal contempt expressed for his poetry by later writers, this award must have been a conciliatory political gesture on the part of the Athenians. Even though he purchased what purported to be the writing tablets of Aeschylus, he could get no better inspiration from them than whatever it was that inspired the pathetic line: ‘Alas, alas, I’ve lost a useful wife’ (οὐ μὴν ἐντομὴν ἔχεις ἄνδρον, fr. 10 Snell). And one wonders what the audience thought when one of his characters announced: ‘For tyranny is the mother of injustice’ (fr. 4 Snell).

Also not mentioned by Aristotle (his debut may in fact have occurred after the philosopher’s death) is a tragic poet called Moschion, about whom we would like to know more. He revived an old fashion - historical drama (see pp. 262 f.): we have a three-line fragment of his Themistocles and one of his plays, the Pheraioi, dealt with the death of Jason, the cruel tyrant of Pherae in Thessaly. The most interesting fragment (6) is a speech, 33 lines long, which is the latest variation on a theme often exploited by Attic playwrights - the history of human progress; the speech of Prometheus (P.V. 436ff.), the famous first stasimon of the Antigone, Theseus’ speech in the Supplices of Euripides (201ff.), even Critias’ speech about the invention of religion, belong to this tradition. Moschion’s Kulturgeschichte follows the usual patterns at first: men lived like beasts, in caves, without benefit of grain, wine or metals; but a new, sensational detail is added to his description of the primitive state - cannibalism. ‘The weak was the food of the strong.’ Finally, time brought the age of discoveries which transformed human life, whether this was due to the thought of Prometheus, to necessity or to ‘long experience, with nature as instructor’. Among the marks of civilization is the custom of burying the dead; this is presumably the point of the speech in the dramatic situation exploited by this play (for which we have no title). The trimeters are regular, extremely so, for

¹ IG² v 2118 records a third-century performance of Chaeremon’s Achilles Thersitoktonos by an athlete-actor.
MINOR TRAGEDIANS

the Euripidean innovations have been abandoned; in the 33 lines there are no resolutions.

Though tragedy lived on in Athens and elsewhere through the third century B.C. and even beyond (our latest inscription recording a victory with a 'new tragedy' belongs to the twenties of the first century B.C.),¹ we know nothing of it but names. From the whole of this period, from Athens and the theatres built all over the Greek world in the fourth and succeeding centuries, from the widespread activities of the guilds of 'the artists of Dionysus' in the Hellenistic world, even from Alexandria where the so-called Pleiad produced tragedies on a lavish scale (Lycophron is credited with 46 or 64, Philieus with 42) we have less than fifty lines that were thought worth preserving. 'Nothing in the history of the transmission of Greek drama', to quote Sir Denys Page, 'is much more remarkable than the earliness, totality and permanence of the eclipse of Hellenistic Tragedy.'²

¹ Fouilles de Delphes III 3, 67. 'Thrasycles the Athenian . . . competed in his own country with a new tragedy and was victorious . . .' (177 Snell).
² Page (1931c) 37.