puts language itself *es meson*, on display and at risk in the glare of democratic scrutiny.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

There are many technical discussions of aspects of tragic language, though few are suitable for those reading tragedy in translation (see e.g. A. A. Long, *Language and Thought in Sophocles* (Cambridge 1968); H. Friis Johansen, *General Reflection in Tragic Rhesis* (Copenhagen 1959); M. Griffith, *The Authenticity of the 'Prometheus Bound'* (Cambridge 1977)). On the development of rhetoric in the polis, see G. A. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton 1963): the standard treatment, now updated and abridged in G. A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton 1994); for a sense of what may be left out of the standard discussion, one may consult three different types of account of this history from a single year: J. Swearingen, *Rhetoric and Irony* (Oxford 1991); S. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale and Edwardsville 1991); T. Cole, *the Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore 1991). For sophistic rhetoric and tragedy, see for an overview Goldhill (1986) 222–42, and for exemplary treatments, Rose (1992) 265–330; Croally (1994). For language as a theme in tragedy, see the seminal Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988) 1–28; Buxton (1982); Knox (1979) 205–30; Goldhill (1984), (1986) 1–32; Goff (1990); Segal (1981) especially chs. 7 and 10.

7

P. E. EASTERLING

Form and performance

The story of Greek tragedy in the fifth century BC is an extraordinarily difficult one to tell. On the one side there are thirty-two well-known plays transmitted from antiquity through the medieval tradition, plays that have exerted a profound, even immeasurable, influence on Western culture, while on the other there are fragmentary scraps of evidence, often enough distorted by the preconceptions of later times, from which scholars try to reconstruct a whole history of an institution. How Dionysiac festivals were organised, what the earliest theatres, masks and costumes looked like, how the music sounded, what sort of performance-styles and dramatic conventions developed, how far the surviving plays are typical of the hundreds, or thousands, that must have been composed during the period, and what tragedy meant for the contemporary Athenian – and non-Athenian – audiences that watched it: these are the questions that need answers. What is lacking is systematic documentation, surviving from the fifth century itself, of this new and extremely successful artistic and civic phenomenon, and there is no prospect that anything of the kind will ever be recovered.

The best that modern research can hope for is new fragments of evidence – a vase-painting or an inscription, a papyrus text of part of a lost play or of a scholar's introduction (*hypothesis*) – which will fill some of the gaps in the story. The most striking example was the publication in 1952[1] of a small papyrus scrap of a *hypothesis* which proved that Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* was not the earliest surviving Greek tragedy but belonged to the 460s, and therefore to a late stage in the poet's career. This play, with its chorus of the daughters of Danaus (the myth said there were fifty of them), had previously been taken as a sample of the tragedy of the 490s and was thought to have a chorus of fifty like the dithyramb; it was read as a 'primitive' piece more akin to choral lyric poetry than to the true dialectic of drama. But once scholars recognised that the historical framework had to

[1] P.Oxy. 2256 fr. 3; for discussion see Garvie (1969) 1–28.

be dismantled they found it much easier to see how close the *Suppliant Women* is to the *Oresteia* in both form and subject-matter, and the early history of tragedy had to be re-imagined.

If so much of what we understand about Greek tragedy in its original context is a matter of construction, or reconstruction, from cryptic and elusive evidence, there is some point in looking at the process itself, trying to see how the basic data and the texts of the plays are continually being reassessed as critics try to fit them into a larger pattern (cf. Chs. 9–12 below).

RULES AND CONVENTIONS

A reader who studied only handbooks of Greek drama and made no direct contact with the plays themselves might be forgiven for being puzzled that what ought on the face of it to be a dynamic art-form was evidently so regimented. How could a genre as novel and sophisticated as tragedy have been hedged about by every kind of rule and restriction, with limits on the number of speaking actors, the showing of violent events on stage, the relation of the chorus to the stage action, the distribution of spoken and sung parts, and even, perhaps, the choice of subject-matter, which must surely have been a deterrent to creative talent?

The first questions to ask are what sort of limitations were imposed, and in what context. No set of rules for the conduct of the dramatic festivals survives, but we do know that they were overseen by presiding magistrates, that groups of plays were performed in competition with one another, and that a playwright who wished to compete had to be selected by the relevant magistrate (the Eponymous Archon in the case of the City Dionysia).[2] Because the festival entailed competitive performance at civic expense, the allocation of funds was regulated, through the direct payment of the leading actors (one protagonist for each dramatist) and through the appointment of *chorēgoi* to finance the choruses. Without regulation it would have been impossible to ensure that there was a fair basis for the competition and that expenditure was kept within reasonable bounds; even so, individual *chorēgoi* might be more or less lavish. But the rules of competition are not the same as the conventions of a genre; there is no evidence surviving from the fifth century which suggests that the dramatists were inhibited from experimentation, and plenty to indicate the opposite.

The number of speaking actors is a case in point.[3] One of the undisputed facts of Athenian dramatic history is that tragedy developed out of

[2] Pickard-Cambridge (1988) ch. 2; Cartledge (1985) 115–27 and Ch. 1 above.
[3] See Damen (1989) and Kaimio (1993).

performances by a chorus, in which one performer (the poet himself) was set apart from the rest of the group and took on a series of different roles. Aeschylus introduced a second performer to share the acting, and Sophocles later brought in a third.[4] The texts of nearly all the plays from the *Oresteia* onwards suggest that they were composed to be performed by a maximum of three speaking actors, and there is no external evidence for the regular use of more. How can this tradition be explained if not as some kind of restriction on the freedom of dramatists? In fact it makes best sense if it is understood in relation to performance in masks. The origins and symbolic significance of masked acting in the Greek tradition may be disputed, but there is no doubt that in the fifth century masks were worn by both actors and chorusmen, and vase-paintings show that they were masks with wigs attached, which covered the actors' heads completely.[5] In a theatre where such a masking convention is used, it is natural to confine the speaking in any one scene to a limited number of parts, so that audiences will not be in doubt as to where each voice is coming from; and since the masks also provide effective disguise, only a small number of virtuoso performers is needed to provide the cast of a whole play. It is easy, too, to see why a dramatist competing with a set of three tragedies and a satyr play should have used the same small team of actors throughout (cf. Ch. 2, p. 38). There must have been financial reasons for not creating large troupes, and the greater the versatility that was required the more highly trained the speaking actor needed to be. But there was plenty of scope for the dramatists to use non-speakers – attendants, bodyguards, trains of captives – and plenty of evidence that they did. Playing some of these roles may have been the first step on the theatrical ladder for young trainee actors, just as the very minor speaking or singing parts in the few plays that seem to need a fourth actor[6] may have given such beginners their first taste of making their voices heard before the assembled city.

At any rate there is nothing in the evidence as it has come down to us to suggest that the dramatists were prevented by an artificial 'three-actor rule' from doing anything they wanted; the main challenge to their freedom may indeed have come, not from any state-imposed regulations but from the emergence of leading actors as 'stars' who made their mark on the tradition in decisive ways. A prize for the best actor was instituted at the City Dionysia in *c.* 449; the surviving texts show that the leading actor, at any

[4] Ar. *Poet.* 1449a18; the ancient *Life* of Aeschylus (5) records a tradition which attributes the introduction of the third actor to him. Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 130–2.
[5] See [7] and [8]. For discussion see Frontisi-Ducroux & Vernant (1983) 56–69; Frontisi-Ducroux (1989); Calame (1995); Halliwell (1993) 195–211.
[6] *Oedipus at Colonus* is a striking example; cf. Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 142–4.

rate, was expected to be a skilled solo singer, with all the charismatic qualities that entails, and in the fourth century, when revivals of earlier plays became a regular fixture at the City Dionysia, it was actors (*tragōidoi*) who put them on. By the time Aristotle was writing, it was possible to take the view that the actors were altogether too influential.[7]

The notion that the dramatists were constricted by rules is no more helpful when we come to look at the presentation of stage action. Tragedy characteristically dealt with 'sad stories of the death of kings', but of the surviving plays only four show stage deaths: Ajax's suicide in Sophocles' play, and in Euripides the (non-violent) deaths of Alcestis and Hippolytus and the mysterious suicidal leap of Evadne in *Suppliant Women*,[8] by contrast with the many accounts of off-stage bloodshed given by messengers. Was this because dramatists were under constraint, inhibited by religious scruples or considerations of taste from showing what they would have liked to show, or aware, perhaps, that a brilliantly told (and mimed?) narrative might be more easily 'read' in a large open-air theatre than a piece of more realistic stage business? Messenger speeches are always very closely linked to what the audience are to see and hear: exits and entrances, including the return of killers and wounded victims, off-stage cries, and the display of corpses.[9] The intricacy with which the violent events are thus 'orchestrated' suggests that in avoiding direct presentation of the moment of killing or violent wounding the dramatists were making creative choices for positive reasons. Inhibitions, if any were felt, may have been related to what both actors and audiences believed to be dangerously ill-omened.

A couple of examples will illustrate the potential for innovation and experiment within a seemingly restrictive tradition. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* the murder of the king, to which all the foreboding and anxiety of the first thousand lines of the play have been directed, is 'played' three times, although never shown to the audience. First it is seen before it happens by Cassandra in her pre-visions (1100ff.); later Agamemnon's death cries are heard and the Chorus debate what they should do at the very moment of the murder (1343–72); and finally Clytemnestra displays the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, and herself acts as newsbringer, telling in (mainly) present tenses exactly how she killed her husband: 'I swathe him in an endless wrapping, like a fishnet ... and I strike him twice. With two groans his limbs went slack, and on the fallen body I strike a third blow' (1382–6). In *Hecuba* Euripides uses not the perpetrator, but the major victim, to tell his own story: the Thracian king Polymestor, who is

[7] Ar. *Rhet.* III 1403b33; cf. *Poet.* 1451b35–9.
[8] See Arnott (1962) 137–8 and Rehm (1992) 129–31 for discussion of this scene.
[9] Bremer (1976) sets out the details.

blinded by Hecuba and the Trojan women after they have treacherously killed his children. Here too there is great elaboration: Hecuba formulates her plan to punish Polymestor (870–94) and lures him into the tent (968–1023); his cries ring out, and the Chorus respond (1035–43); Hecuba taunts her victim and announces his return to the stage (1044–55); he enters crawling 'like a wild beast', singing a desperate aria (1056–82), and when Agamemnon has arrived in response to his cries for help he makes a long speech which includes a detailed account of how the women trapped him, killed his children and then blinded him (1132–82) – a most unconventional messenger speech which does duty as the first half of a set debate (*agōn*) and is triumphantly countered by Hecuba's brutal response. This is arguably more theatrical, as well as more thought-provoking, than an on-stage scuffle between Polymestor and Hecuba and the women; as in *Agamemnon*, the effect is to draw all the attention to the problematic nature of the violent deeds.

MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT

Just as the 'rule-bound' approach can obscure the scope for experiment and innovation within a genre, so there is an historical model that is still liable to exert a restrictive influence on the way the plays are read. In its simplest outline this is the old notion of development from a primitive phase, which may or may not include Aeschylus, to the perfection of Sophoclean form, followed by Euripidean decadence and fourth-century decline.[10] Aristotle contributed to the influence of this model, at least to the extent that he often treats Sophocles as the norm, sometimes at the expense of Euripides, and he sketches a history of the tragic chorus in terms that have often been echoed (and misunderstood) in modern times.[11]

It is probably in relation to the chorus that this general approach needs to be considered most carefully. There are two complicating factors. First, the texts show quite plainly that in the fifth century there was a trend towards composing plays with a smaller proportion of choral song and a higher proportion of spoken dialogue; secondly, by the end of the century some dramatists, following the lead of Agathon, used what Aristotle (*Poetics* 1456a29–30) calls *embolima*, 'things thrown in', songs which could appropriately be performed in different plays and were not designed to fit one particular place in one particular drama. This has often been taken to mean

[10] This goes back at least as far as the ancient *Life* of Aeschylus (16); see Easterling (1993a) 559–60, and Ch. 9 below.
[11] Sophocles preferred to Euripides: *Poet.* 1456a27; history of the chorus: 1449a17; 1456a25–32. For helpful comments on Aristotle cf. Halliwell (1987) 9–17.

that the chorus was in decline and beginning to be perceived as unimportant or even as an embarrassment, no longer an organic part of the action and easily reducible to the status of incidental entertainment. But this reading does not square with any of the surviving plays (including *Rhesus*; see p. 211 below), and it does not account for the continuing prestige of the tragic *chorēgia* as an institution. Choral performances evidently went on being in demand, even if their style and function altered significantly; what we should be envisaging is a rather complex process of change and development. Drama at Athens was an outstandingly popular and successful medium, widely imitated in other cities, particularly from the late fifth century onwards; naturally enough, as its prestige grew so did the scope for professionalism, and this must have been one of the factors that contributed to rapid change. For example, actors were becoming virtuosi who claimed more attention for their own musical performances, and in some plays solo lyrics by actors encroached on time which would previously have been allocated to choral odes, while in others great prominence was given to lyric exchanges between actors and chorus. At the same time the sheer volume of dramatic activity was increasing: more occasions and locations were found for performances, at the Rural Dionysia in the deme theatres in Attica, for instance, where it became common to revive plays that had won acclaim at the city festivals. Thus it must have been possible for the same theatre-goer to see old plays revived with their traditional choral parts, new plays composed in the same style or with more emphasis on solo singing by actors or on lyric exchange between actors and chorus, and new plays put on with entirely unconnected choral elements. Against this background we can easily see that in addition to the chorusmen recruited by the *chorēgoi* for the city festivals there might be a developing need for professional musical troupes with an adaptable repertoire of song and dance.[12]

The fact that choruses danced as well as sang is of enormous importance for the understanding both of tragedy as an art-form and of its relation to the festivals and the community to which it belonged. The immediate sensuous appeal of the choral performance, the *thelxis*, or enchantment, of the costumes, masks, dancing, song and its musical accompaniment, must not be overlooked when we try to trace the history of the chorus in tragedy. This must be a major reason why the musical element did not vanish from Greek tragic plays as the spoken part became more complex and elaborate. Modern directors putting on ancient plays often make their choruses speak rather than sing and dance; this would presumably have struck an ancient audience as completely pointless and perverse. In the broader context of the

[12] Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 90; this is a guess, but an attractive one.

festival the factor uniting all the Dionysiac competitions was the group of singers and dancers: fifty for the dithyramb, twenty-four for comedy, and at first twelve, later (from the mid-fifth century) fifteen, for tragedy and satyr play. Nor was this just a Dionysiac phenomenon: long before tragedy was invented at Athens in the latter part of the sixth century BC, the Greeks in general had been familiar with groups of worshippers who expressed their devotion to particular deities and celebrated festal occasions through richly varied patterns of formal song and dance. It is no accident that the Muses themselves were imagined as a divine *choros* singing and dancing in honour of their father Zeus to the accompaniment of Apollo's lyre; this was the paradigm image for performance in the Greek polis.[13]

SCRIPTS FOR PLAYERS

Given a general willingness to look at the genre of tragedy less as an organism following the pattern of birth, flowering and decay, and more as a medium of festival performance, we can discover much from studying the texts themselves as scripts to be performed. This is not a matter of considering how an individual director might choose to stage a particular play – though that has its own interest (cf. Chs. 10 and 11 below) – but rather of looking at ways in which the plays offer guidance, or cues, as to how they are to be articulated, whether by the reader in imagination or by actors and chorus in the theatre.

1. Speech, song, dance

At the most basic level, the rhythmical patterns into which every tragedy falls were designed to give manifold cues to their original audiences: lyric metres for song and dance by chorus or solo performer, other rhythms, particularly anapaests, for sections of recitative, spoken iambic lines for most dialogue scenes. The fact that every performance included a fair proportion of singing, chanting and dancing by the chorus implies that the audience's attention must be focused on the activity of the anonymous group as they respond, in whatever way, to the actions and sufferings of the named individuals on whom the plot turns. But it does not have to imply 'interlude': the chorus members are physically at the centre of the theatre space, not on the periphery, as they perform in the *orchēstra*, and in their movements they can mime past and future events, thus contributing in a radical way to the stage action. This may well have been true of such

[13] Paradoxically enough, since the dramatic *choros*, like that of the dithyramb, was exclusively male. For influential images of the Muses' *choros* see Hesiod, *Theogony* 1–8, *Hom. Hymn to Apollo* 188–93 (cf. Ch. 2 above); Henrichs (1995), and Lonsdale (1993), (1995).

passages as the recall of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia in *Agamemnon* (218–47) or the 'preview' of the suicide of Phaedra in *Hippolytus* (764–75 'She will fix a noose to hang from the beams of her bedroom, and fit it around her white neck ...'). Song and dance performed by a chorus on its own, marking a break of some kind in the action, are quite different from sung exchanges, or exchanges of alternating speech and song, between an actor and the chorus:[14] act-dividing lyrics can cover any lapse of time in the action, even a period of days, whereas songs shared with actors belong to the same time-frame as the spoken dialogue. When an individual speaker breaks into song there is a change or intensification of mood, a release of energy or emotion – an extreme example is Polymestor's aria after his blinding (above, pp. 154–5) – just as the division of single iambic lines between two or occasionally even three speakers signals some kind of climax or moment of crisis. When a scene of spoken dialogue modulates into anapaestic recitative this is often a strong signal that a play is about to end and that a shift of perspective is being made.[15]

There can be no doubt that the Greeks associated heightened delivery and rhythmic movement with the power to arouse emotion, whether in the performance of tragedy or in other kinds of communal activity – cultic, celebratory, military – and the point needs no special demonstration here. But it is important to remind ourselves, as modern readers, of the danger of interpreting *any* aspect of the formalism of Greek tragedy as emotionally 'cold'. Even long scenes of spoken dialogue, particularly scenes using stichomythia, where a couple of speakers alternate symmetrically, each uttering a line or a pair of lines in turn, may rely on the close matching of the iambic rhythms to achieve effects of great intensity, especially when the pattern is suddenly broken.[16]

One of the basic functions of these formal patterns is to mark the difference between theatrical and ordinary discourse, reminding the spectators that they are *theātai* at a special event with its own established conventions and its own kind of artifice. As in modern opera, the audience understands from the formal signals of rhythm and delivery how to 'read' what is presented. Euripides' *Medea*, for example, opens with a sequence which in terms of action is fairly simple: the old Nurse expresses concern over Jason's abandonment of Medea; the Tutor, returning with the children, brings news that Creon is planning to send them into exile with their mother; Medea cries out in desolation from inside the house; the Nurse

[14] The most comprehensive term for these exchanges is *amoibaion*; the term *kommos* is also often used by scholars, particularly for shared lamentation. See Popp (1971) 221–4.

[15] See e.g. Soph. *Ajax* 1402ff., *Phil.* 1409ff.; Eur. *Med.* 1389ff.

[16] Cf. Seidensticker (1971) and Ch. 6 above, pp. 127–8.

sends the children indoors, warning them to avoid approaching her; a group of local women arrive in response to Medea's lamentations and offer sympathy, asking the Nurse to persuade Medea to come out and see them; Medea eventually appears and tells them about her situation. All this could be enacted in a more or less homogeneous and naturalistic style of delivery – and often is, in modern productions – but the metres and dialect forms used in the Greek text make clear that the action was differentiated in a highly elaborate way.[17]

The scheme is as follows:

1–95 Spoken iambics

1–48 Formal opening speech by the Nurse in high tragic style, delivered to an empty stage.

49–95 Relatively low-key conversation between the two slaves in more naturalistic style.

96–130 Anapaests for alternating voices; song and recitative

Medea sings from inside the house, and the Nurse chants in recitative. This happens twice over, and the focus is on the Nurse's fears for what Medea may do to the children; they are sent indoors, and the Nurse expresses some general thoughts on the dangers that threaten great and powerful families.

131–213 Choral song and dance; solo song; recitative

131–47 Enter the Chorus, singing and dancing in the same anapaestic metre, but soon modulating into more varied lyrics (131–8). They ask the Nurse anxiously about Medea, and (139–43) she responds in changed anapaests.[18] (144–7) Medea, still off-stage, sings again in the same anapaestic rhythm, her sung delivery contrasting with the Nurse's recitative.

148–203 This part falls into two sections, each beginning with a metrically responding song by the Chorus (148–59, *strophē* = 173–84, *antistrophē*). The first is directly addressed to Medea, offering her words of comfort, although she is still out of sight; then (160–7) her voice is heard again, calling the gods to witness her suffering, and the

[17] The scene is discussed by Harder (1993) 62–3.

[18] If we follow Diggle's text (OCT), which gives the Nurse non-lyric dialect here as elsewhere in the exchange. Diggle is probably right to make the Nurse's utterances consistently recitative, rather than a mixture of recitative and lyric as implied in some of the manuscripts (manuscript evidence is notoriously erratic in such cases). This is not to say that there was necessarily a fixed 'rule' that characters of low social status were not given singing parts: the essential criterion seems to be dramatic prominence; see Maas (1973) 47–8; Dale (1968) 50–2. Cf. pp. 111–12 above, with n. 18

Nurse (168–72) summarises her song and comments on it. In their *antistrophē* the Chorus ask the Nurse to fetch Medea out; this time nothing is heard from Medea, and he Nurse has a longer passage of recitative: she will try to persuade Medea, but is afraid of her ferocity. Once again (as at 119–30), the Nurse ends with general reflections, this time on poetry and its inability to cure the pain of human troubles.

204–13 The Chorus round off the whole of this sung section with a summary of what they have heard Medea singing. The alternation of voices in 96–213 thus follows the pattern (M = Medea, N = Nurse, C = Chorus):

MNMN CMN CMN C

There is an effect of ring-composition in the opening and closing choral songs, and the Nurse's two passages of general reflection are symmetrically placed.

214–66 Spoken iambics

Medea comes out of the house and makes a long speech to the women in an orderly and analytical style which contrasts strikingly with the passionate emotion of her songs.

Although Medea is off stage until 214 and has the fewest lines until this point, she is at the centre of attention throughout, and everything that is heard from her and about her is at the highest pitch of intensity (all her utterances are in song, and most are exclamations, curses or despairing questions). The Nurse has most lines, but her part is confined to speaking and chanting. She also has the closest contact with Medea and the children and can act as interpreter for the audience, and to a lesser extent for the Chorus, commenting on Jason's behaviour, Medea's distress, and the threat posed for the children, as well as offering thoughts on the nature of tragic experience and the inability of poetry to deal with it. But though so authoritative, and indeed prophetic, she is a subordinate figure – an old female slave, after all – and her role is to present Medea and her tragedy, not herself.[19] The use of recitative, by contrast with the songs of the Chorus and Medea, is one way of underlining this subordination, but because the Nurse's chants are in the same metre as Medea's songs there is a strong sense, too, of an intimate link between them. The Chorus, a sympathetic group of relative outsiders, can offer some sort of model for the audience in the theatre, at least to the extent that they are sorry for Medea and want to

[19] On slaves cf. Ch. 5 above, pp. 110–18; 122–4.

know more about her situation, but they are also 'women of Corinth in the heroic age', and their dancing, singing, masks and costumes must mark them out as a distinctive part of this particular fiction. Far more is at work here, evidently, than a simple contrast of emotional register – the impassioned Medea followed by the coolly calculating Medea – on which critics have concentrated most of their attention.

What is important is that every surviving tragedy makes use in some way of such formal patterning (cf. Ch. 8 below, pp. 186–90); this needs to be remembered when claims are made for a development towards a more naturalistic style in the latter part of the fifth century.

2. Deixis

The precise effect of some of these rhythmical patterns is not easy to recapture across the centuries, particularly as our knowledge of musical traditions is so limited, but it is less difficult to recognise the many kinds of signal to audiences that are implicit in the words of the texts. Their function is simple but fundamental, to help an audience grasp what aspect of a scene or a situation is to be at the centre of their attention at any given moment.[20] In the passage of *Medea* discussed above, for example, the language of the Chorus leaves no doubt that the dramatic focus is the off-stage cries of Medea. Their first words are 'I heard the voice, I heard the cry, of the unhappy Colchian' (132–2) and a couple of lines later they repeat the idea: 'I heard the lamentation from inside the house.'[21] When Medea cries out again they respond with 'Did you hear?' (148), and after her next outburst it is the Nurse who asks the question of them: 'Do you hear?' (169).[22] Their final song, summing up the whole scene, stresses the Chorus's *hearing* and Medea's *crying out* and *calling on the gods* (205–8). There is a comparable example in *Oedipus the King* at the point when the Theban shepherd is finally forced to reveal Oedipus' identity to him, and all attention is directed to the *saying* and *hearing* of the unsayable (1169–70; cf. Ch. 8 below, pp. 200–1).

Similarly, when a character invites others to look at him or her the stage action and the words combine to direct the audience's attention to the spectacle and its meaning, as when Heracles in *The Women of Trachis*, fatally poisoned by the robe that is clinging to him, first tells his son Hyllus

[20] Cf. Segal (1996), with Easterling's response.

[21] Reading ἀμφιπύλου γὰρ ἔσω μελάθρου γόον | ἔκλυον at 135–6 with Diggle; the MSS have ἐπ' ἀμφιπύλου . . . βοὰν | ἔκλυον. For the text see Diggle (1984) 54–5.

[22] Cf. e.g. Soph. *Trach.* 863–7; Eur. *Hipp.* 565–600 for emphasis on sounds from off stage. By contrast, Eur. *Tro.* 153–8, 65–7 and 176–81 draw attention to the on-stage cries of Hecuba heard from off stage by the Chorus.

to stand close to look at his ravaged body and then invites everyone present: 'See, everyone look at my wretched body; see me in my misery, what a pitiable state I am in' (1079–80).[23] Whether or not all the spectators can see the detail of the actor's costume when he throws back the coverings (1078) is immaterial: what they can certainly see and reflect on is a group of people witnessing the horrific sight that is being displayed to them, and what matters dramatically is that it is a publicly shared disaster.

A great many, in fact, of the appeals, commands and questions expressed by one character to another or to the chorus also function as cues to the audience. 'What am I to do?', Neoptolemus' insistent question in *Philoctetes* (755, 895, 908, 974, 1393; cf. 963), gives a clear signal to the spectators that his moral perplexity is a significant dramatic issue, while in *Oedipus at Colonus* there is an important and ultimately unresolved tension between the despairing questions of Antigone and Ismene as they lament the loss of their father ('What fate now waits for you and me, dear sister, left without a father?', 1715–17; cf. 1685–8, 1734–6, 1748–50)) and the exhortations of Theseus and the Chorus ('Stop your lamentations: it is wrong to mourn', 1751–3; cf. 1720–3, 1777–9). True enough, Oedipus' mysterious passing is not to be equated with an ordinary death, but the sense of loss remains for the daughters, and the question of what will happen to them when they go back to Thebes looms over the end of the play.

There are many other more obvious signals, often relating to a play's form and structure, from entrance announcements ('Here comes Ismene, in tears ...', *Antigone* 526–30) to the marking of endings ('Enough! The time has been long drawn out already ...', *Ajax* 1402–3; 'Farewell, sea-girt land of Lemnos, send me on a safe voyage', *Philoctetes* 1464–5). When messengers arrive with news they often emphasise, after giving a 'headline' ('Jocasta is dead', *Oedipus the King* 1235), that they are in a position to tell the 'whole story', thus preparing the audience for the long speech that is to come.[24] Sometimes a scene of debate is specifically announced, as in *Ajax*, when after the unresolved dispute between Teucer and Menelaus the Chorus say 'There will be a contest (*agōn*) of great strife' (1163), which soon follows when Agamemnon himself appears and carries on the argument. Similarly in Euripidean debates speakers often discuss the kind of speech they need to make, or the way they should set out their arguments (e.g. Jason at *Medea* 522–5, 545–50).[25] Even cues as seemingly formal as these may be loaded in some way for the audience's benefit, as when the Chorus in *Antigone*, introducing Haemon, ask whether he is coming in

[23] Cf. e.g. Eur. *Hec.* 807–11.

[24] Cf. e.g. Aesch. *Pers.* 254–5; Soph. *O.T.* 1239–40, *El.* 680, 892.

[25] See Lloyd (1992) 4–6 for the regular 'markers' used in *agōnes* and Ch. 6 above.

distress at the loss of his bride (626–30), a subject studiously avoided, at least for a start, by Haemon himself. And Jason's remarks about the need for skill as an orator are devalued by the Chorus of *Medea* when they remark that he has made a handsome speech but they disapprove of his behaviour (576–8).

Choruses, too, often draw attention to what they are doing in the theatre: 'I will sing a dirge', 'Let us join the dance', 'See, the ivy sends me whirling in the dance', 'I kneel on the ground and call to the dead below', 'Hush, go on tiptoe, make no noise'. Sometimes they participate in ritual actions which seem to invite the audience's endorsement, even though embedded in the fictive action of the play, as when they make prayers to the gods for blessings on 'the city', particularly if 'the city' is, or can be identified with, Athens itself.[26]

3. Witnesses

One of the major functions of the chorus, though, is to act as a group of 'built-in' witnesses, giving collective and usually normative responses to the events of the play. Of course this is very far from being an adequate definition of their activities: quite apart from their crucial role as performers, these groups are often represented as personally involved in the events they witness, like the old men of Argos in *Agamemnon*, who are physically threatened at the end of the play, or the women of Troy who are waiting to be allocated to Greek masters (Eur. *Tro.* 292–3), and in a few plays they have a specific identity as major participants in the plot, like the daughters of Danaus in the Aeschylean *Suppliant Women*. But it is broadly true, at least, that as choruses express their hope or fear, joy or sorrow for the characters, they offer possible models for the onlookers' emotional responses, pity for Cassandra, for example, or grief for the murdered king in *Agamemnon*. But they can also be witnesses without fully revealing their response: thus the old Argives display a respectful attitude to Clytemnestra which begins to seem more and more like veiled hostility, and in *Antigone* the Theban elders are said by Antigone to be afraid to speak their mind (509), a claim which directs the audience's attention to what they might 'really' be thinking. Again, in *Bacchae*, when the mad Agave displays the head of Pentheus as her hunting trophy, the women ask her questions which seem to imply mixed reactions on their part: revulsion at the same time as exultation (1169–201).

Thus the emotional range is immense, and the guidance offered by a

[26] Aesch. *Pers.* 947, *Eum.* 307; Soph. *Trach.* 218–20; Eur. *Tro.* 1305–9, *Or.* 140–1. Cf. Easterling (1993b) 17–18; Henrichs (1995); Ch. 2 above.

chorus may be quite elusive. The very fact that the tragic chorus is a group of twelve or fifteen people and not a single figure gives its behaviour more scope to fluctuate with fluctuating circumstances: it does not have to be as consistent as a single individual, and it speaks of itself in the plural just as freely as in the singular.[27] Its job is to help the audience *become involved in the process of responding*, which may be a matter of dealing with profoundly contradictory issues and impulses.

Often, indeed, the chorus combines witnessing with trying to understand, and its guidance is intellectual or even philosophical as well as emotional. *Agamemnon* illustrates this very well: the old men claim authority to speak of what happened when the Greeks were setting off on their expedition to Troy, but they repeatedly express their perplexity and the difficulty of making judgements, and in their struggle to decode what is happening to Agamemnon and his family they turn to the imagery of mantic interpretation (681–5, 975–83, 1112–13, 1130–5, 1366–7). Their language thus directs the audience to the problems of interpretation presented by the action, and paradoxically, despite the depth of some of their meditations, they are less able to 'see' than the audience itself. In the scene with Cassandra, for example, they fail to follow her reading of her visions, saying they have 'strayed from the track' (1245). This provokes Cassandra to spell out her message unambiguously: 'I say you will see the death of Agamemnon', a message which must by now have been plain to most of the spectators. Even then the old men cannot guess who the killer will be, and the language of their conversation with Cassandra makes ironic play with the difficulty of understanding prophecy (1251–5).

This kind of contradiction is the norm rather than the exception in tragedy: choruses typically fail to see what is clear to the audience, but at the same time they have the power to speak with authoritative wisdom, 'more truly than they know', and thus to offer guidance at the deepest level of understanding. In *Agamemnon*, for instance, the simple-seeming tale (717–36) of the lion cub, the lovable little creature that grows into a hideously destructive beast, encapsulates in a couple of brief stanzas the whole history of Helen and Troy and the House of Atreus.[28] Even in plays where the chorus is a group of inexperienced young girls rather than meditative elders, there are passages where they guide the audience's understanding in the same way, as at *Women of Trachis* 132–5: 'Neither glimmering night, nor misfortunes, nor prosperity stay with human beings, but suddenly they are gone, and it is someone else's turn to be happy and to be deprived of happiness.' The idea of alternating joy and sorrow, a

[27] Kaimio (1970) sets out the evidence.

[28] See Knox (1952).

traditional one in Greek thought, gives this play its basic structural pattern; here as often the Chorus's reflection is expressed in language hallowed by long proverbial use and makes an appeal to shared traditions of thought and feeling.

Sometimes a chorus draws explicit attention to its role as witness or spectator, as a model for the audience itself. In *Oedipus the King*, for example, the Chorus are caused to reflect on the fragility of all human success and happiness by their witnessing of Oedipus' discovery of the truth about himself:

> Ah generations of mortals! I count your life as nothing. What man is there, what man, who achieves more of happiness than seeming to be happy, and after the seeming, failure? With your destiny as my example, yours, unhappy Oedipus, I call nothing that is mortal blessed. (1186–96)

Or the prospect of witnessing a horrific situation may be so painful that the chorus wish they could avoid it altogether by flying away ('O for the wings of a dove!') or by being blown away by the wind; just occasionally they wish they could be transported elsewhere to see something desirable, like Theseus' hoped-for rescue of Antigone and Ismene in *Oedipus at Colonus*.[29] And there are times when the off-stage action becomes so absorbing that they threaten to desert their role as witness in the *orchēstra* and enter the stage-building, where choruses are not normally expected to go. In *Agamemnon* when the king cries out in his death agony the old men debate whether or not to enter the palace (1343–71), and there are similar scenes in *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, all of them pointedly referring to established theatrical convention and thus reminding the spectators that they are watching a play. This kind of subtle contact with the audience, through the reminder of the 'here and now' in the theatre, has often been achieved in drama from Elizabethan times onwards through the device of the stage audience and the play-within-the-play, but Greek tragedy with its ready-made group of witnesses within the dramatic action could operate more flexibly, a point that now needs to be put in a wider context.

'THE PLAY'S THE THING'

Until recently, critics used to resist the idea that Greek tragedies were designed in such a way as to remind their audiences of the theatrical event itself. Unlike comedy, which regularly addresses the spectators and refers to dramatic forms and stage business, tragedy does not openly refer to the

[29] O.C. 1081–4. For the wish to fly away from distress cf. e.g. Soph. *Trach.* 953–8; Eur. *Hipp.* 732–4, 1290–3 with Barrett's notes.

theatre, largely no doubt because in the heroic past in which the plays are set theatres did not exist – there are no theatres or plays in Homer, and the tragedians plainly took trouble to avoid introducing 'modern' detail that might lower the tragic tone.[30] But work in different areas of criticism – on the semiotics of drama, on intertextuality, irony and self-reflexiveness – has helped to bring about a shift in attitudes.[31] Given that drama in general depends on the paradox that everything presented to an audience is *both* real, in the sense that flesh-and-blood people are taking part in the enacting and witnessing of the event, *and* make-believe, in that the characters and situations presented to the audience are feigned, and given that audiences are generally capable of dealing with this paradox, we are forced to conclude that there is no such thing as a 'dramatic illusion' secure enough to be 'broken'. (Greek audiences evidently found no difficulty in weeping with Hecuba and Oedipus and at the same time taking an intense sporting interest in the outcome of the dramatic competition.) If 'dramatic illusion' is not an absolute the question becomes one of degree, whether a particular dramatic tradition actually seeks to remind audiences of the fictiveness of what they are seeing on stage or strives to draw their attention away from the medium itself.

An example often quoted of a major difference between Greek tragedy and comedy is direct address to the audience.[32] Tragedy has nothing to compare with the very common 'O Spectators' or 'Gentlemen' of comedy, even less with such extravagant outbursts as Strepsiades' in Aristophanes' *Clouds*: 'You poor things, why are you just sitting there stupidly for us clever people to exploit, you stones, mere numbers, useless sheep, rows and rows of jars?' (1201–3). But suppose we think away the conventions of naturalistic acting (as makes sense, since naturalistic acting is a development of the late nineteenth century), and imagine a tradition in which actors act with more overt acknowledgement of the audience: then the question of whether audiences are specifically addressed becomes less significant. There is nothing naturalistic about such play-openings as those of the Euripidean *Electra* or *Phoenician Women*, where a lone character talks in an expository way on an empty stage, or of Aeschylus' *Persians*, where the Chorus, as they march into the *orchēstra*, identify themselves as faithful guardians left behind by Xerxes and his army, and passages like these were surely designed to be played by actors and chorusmen who face out to the audience to give them necessary information. The tone is arguably more dignified – as befits tragedy – because the audience are not openly acknowledged, but this does

[30] Cf. Bain (1977) 209–10; Easterling (1985) 6.
[31] See e.g. Segal (1982); Goldhill (1986); Zeitlin (1989); Bierl (1991); Ch. 8 below, pp. 195–6.
[32] Cf. Bain (1987) for a recent discussion of the problem.

not mean that they are not to be reminded of their role as spectators. The opening line of *Persians*, for example, is quite closely modelled on the opening line of Phrynichus' *Phoenician Women*, in a scene evidently designed to recall that play and to appeal to their recent theatrical experience. In *Agamemnon*, too, when the Watchman says (39) 'I speak to those who understand', after making dark remarks about the state of the royal house, there is no one present to 'understand' except those members of the audience who can guess from their knowledge of earlier poetry what he is talking about.

Perhaps the main difference between tragedy and comedy lies not in their contact with the audience but in the tone of that contact. For the tragedian there is a paramount question of decorum, that is, of what is appropriate to the seriousness and dignity of the genre and to its setting in the time of the Homeric heroes (which could easily turn into burlesque). What is crucial is the mixture of past and present: the setting in heroic times in no way precludes reference to the contemporary world, and indeed depends on a multitude of ironic reminders to the audience that *they are in the present*, watching events that purport to be happening in another time and place. The more this tension can be exploited, the more powerfully should the play be able to enthrall its audience. A passage in *Eumenides* illustrates this point well. At 681 Athena begins the foundation-speech for the Areopagus with an appeal to the 'Attic people' to hear her ordinance. The next line makes it clear that her addressees are the citizens selected to be jurors at the trial of Orestes; there is thus no explicit address to the theatre audience as such. But if we take 'Attic people' as reminding the spectators of their own identity and prompting them to link themselves imaginatively with the citizens who long ago participated in that significant trial, we can see the force of J. L. Styan's description of spectators as 'self-conscious participants in the act of play making' and find the idea of *collaboration* or even *collusion* between play and audience more persuasive than that of 'breaking the illusion' or 'breaking the spell'.[33]

The placing of Athena's words to the 'Attic people' is important. The speech in which she announces the foundation of the Court of the Areopagus is an aetiological one, linking the events of the play with an institution known to the audience from their contemporary experience and recently the focus of violent political discord. Aetiology in drama must always function as a device for making the audience aware of more than one plane of reality – since the future predicted by a prophet or laid down by divine ordinance,

[33] Styan (1975) 158, cf. 153. For 'breaking the illusion' see Bain (1987) 10–14 and for 'breaking the spell' Taplin (1986) 164–5, 171.

as here, is guaranteed to be fulfilled because it is already the audience's past and present history. Such patterns are often established with great solemnity; they are certainly not to be seen as antiquarian oddities or signs of passing playfulness. Indeed, the 'collusion' between play and audience discussed so far is too pervasive to be seen as a matter of a little teasing of a rather marginal, even trivial, kind for the benefit of the *cognoscenti* among the spectators.[34] Nor is it confined to Euripides, the dramatist generally thought to be the most overt and witty in his use of 'metatheatrical' effects.

As an example of how one play might be designed to recall another through what was shown on stage and therefore make a reference that would be readily 'readable' by a large proportion of the spectators, one might choose the *Electra* plays by Sophocles and Euripides and their relation to Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers*. In that play there is a scene which made a great impression on later vase-painters, and therefore, we may guess, on audiences: the scene in which Electra pours offerings and prays for vengeance at Agamemnon's tomb, before she sees the lock of hair and the footprints and is eventually reunited with her brother (84–263).[35] The visual focus is first on the urn carried by Electra and on the pouring of offerings, then on her discoveries at the tomb, the signs of Orestes' presence, which have to be interpreted before the recognition can take place. Electra with the urn – a memorable theatrical image – recurs in the Sophoclean play when Orestes gives her the bronze funerary vessel that he says contains the ashes of her dead brother. She holds it in her arms, making it the object of her most intense speech in the play (1125–70), and so long as she holds it she cannot be convinced that Orestes is alive after all: he has to force her to put it down before the truth can be understood (1205–29). Here the urn both represents the focus of Electra's affection and in its emptiness functions as the sign of deception. In the Euripidean play[36] the urn becomes the water-pot which is the emblem of Electra's humble life-style: as she enters the acting area (54) she is seen carrying it on her head like a slave; it is prominent, too, at the beginning of what 'ought' to be the recognition scene (107–9).[37] Each of the later dramatists seems to exploit the power of the stage picture to recall another play, and to suggest to those of the spectators

[34] Bain (1987) 13–14 with n. 64.

[35] For the vases see *LIMC* III.1, 709–14 (I. McPhee); Taplin (1993) 24 and n. 7 thinks that 'any recollection of *Choephoroi* must have been, at most, sporadic'; cf. p. 72 above.

[36] I deliberately refrain from attempting a relative dating of the two plays; for discussion see the bibliography cited by Zimmermann (1991) 138–9.

[37] Both Sophocles and Euripides postpone the recognition: cf. Soph. *El.* 80–5, 871–937; Eur. *El.* 107–11, 487–546.

who recall the famous scene in *Libation-Bearers* that what they are seeing now has a new kind of message to offer.

Sophocles' version of the story of Philoctetes is the only one to have survived; if we had those of Aeschylus and Euripides as well it might be possible to trace some scenic interconnexions like the ones with Electra's urn. As it is, there are interesting textual links in this exuberantly allusive and 'collusive' play both with what is known of the other plays and with earlier poetry, and there is strong theatrical self-consciousness in the use of a deception scene within a deception scene. This scene with the False Merchant (539–627) makes complex contact with the audience and in doing so raises some of the play's most fundamental issues.

At 539 the Chorus announce the approach of a member of Neoptolemus' crew along with a 'stranger', whom the audience must suspect to be Odysseus' scout in the disguise of a trader. In the prologue Odysseus promised to send this man to help Neoptolemus if he seemed to be taking a long time to trick Philoctetes into leaving the island, and he added the warning that the man would speak *poikilōs*, 'artfully', 'elaborately', 'speciously' (130–1) – a clear signal to the audience that the language would demand special attention. When he arrives the 'trader' (whose part, incidentally, must be played by the actor who plays Odysseus) explains that he has just happened to put in at Lemnos and by chance has come upon Neoptolemus' ship. He is sailing back from Troy to his home Peparethos, a good place for vines (548–9). For any member of the audience who recalls the passage at the end of *Iliad* 7 (467–75) describing the shipping of wine to the Greeks at Troy, this must imply that the 'trader' has been delivering a cargo of wine; what is particularly engaging is that the Iliadic passage makes the wine come from Lemnos, which in this play is a desert island. This is a Sophoclean innovation; Aeschylus and Euripides had each had a chorus of Lemnians, naturally enough, since Lemnos had plenty of epic associations as an inhabited place, but the Sophoclean Philoctetes must be totally isolated from humankind, and the delicate allusion to the play's own inventiveness has something of the flavour of the Paedagogus' lying tale in *Electra* (680–765), which draws on the story of the chariot race in *Iliad* 23.

The 'trader' now (553ff.) warns Neoptolemus that he is in danger from the Greeks, who want to fetch him back to Troy: Phoenix and the sons of Theseus are on his track. 'Why not Odysseus?' asks Neoptolemus, 'Why did he not come to be his own messenger? Surely he wasn't *afraid* ...?' (The audience might wonder how far Neoptolemus was playing his deceptive role, how far expressing doubts about Odysseus' behaviour in the present mission.) In the Cyclic epic version of his story Neoptolemus was fetched

from his home on Scyros by Odysseus, while Diomedes went to Lemnos for Philoctetes, but in Euripides' play Diomedes accompanied Odysseus to Lemnos[38] – and this is the scenario suggested here by the False Merchant (570–2): 'Oh, when I left he and Diomedes were going off in pursuit of *someone else*.' Then in an elaborate aside he pretends to be anxious not to let Philoctetes overhear this little scene that is being played for his benefit.

There are other ways in which the scene refers to its own deceptiveness. At 575, in response to the 'trader', who asks 'Who is this man?' Neoptolemus, addressing his confederate as 'Stranger', makes a ceremonious introduction: 'This is the famous Philoctetes', which recalls the painful exchange earlier when Neoptolemus pretended never to have heard of him (248–53). Philoctetes' next words (578–9) offer a moral commentary on the whole passage: 'Why does he bargain with you about me in dark whispers?' *Diempolai*, 'treat as merchandise', is a good metaphor for both the False Merchant and for Odysseus his promoter.[39] Neoptolemus' answer to Philoctetes, 'I don't yet know what he is saying' suggests both that he is taking part in 'play-acting', because he goes on to tell the Merchant to speak openly for everyone to hear, and that he is not yet clear about what Odysseus' covert message might be. 'Speaking openly', too, is precisely what he has not been doing himself; similarly when he declares that Philoctetes is his 'greatest friend' the Merchant's reply (589, taking only half a line and breaking the run of stichomythia) is 'Watch what you are doing, boy' (ὅρα τί ποιεῖς, παῖ), which conveys at least three different signals at once. For Philoctetes as onlooker in the pretended situation it strengthens the sense of danger and of Neoptolemus' willingness to run risks on his behalf; for Neoptolemus it is a warning message from Odysseus to play his part in the deception carefully; for the audience, a suggestion that the young man must 'watch what he is doing' morally, and an invitation to savour the dramatic fiction itself. Neoptolemus completes the line with 'I have been doing that [sc. watching what I am doing] for a long time', which the audience may take, if they wish, as a hint that Neoptolemus has been feeling qualms about the propriety of deceiving the trusting Philoctetes. On the other hand, it could 'simply' mean 'Don't worry; I am carrying out Odysseus' orders and playing my part well.'

What is important here is that the ironic play with the dramatic medium is intimately related to the central issues of *Philoctetes*: truth and lies, loyalty and treachery, honour and self-interest, the conflicting needs, and the conflicting rhetoric, of individuals and groups. The collusion in which

[38] Proclus' summary of *Little Iliad* gives Philoctetes' story; cf. Dio Chrys. 52.14.
[39] Østerud (1973) 21–5.

the spectators are invited to participate has nothing in the least frivolous or trivial about it, but it may well contribute to the creation of that pleasure proper to tragedy on which Aristotle insists in the *Poetics* (1425b33; 1453a36).[40] One of the paradoxical features of the genre is precisely the fact that it gives pleasure while presenting material that is always sombre, often horrifying and frightening. It disturbs the audience's feelings, and forces them to confront problems that typically have no solutions. But people enjoy tragedy, and at the root of this enjoyment must be awareness of the medium itself, which through the distancing devices of form and convention is able to prevent the terror or despair or horror in the story from threatening the audience's capacity to remain an audience – or the reader's willingness to read on.

It remains true, however, that tragedy deals with extremely dangerous material. How, we might wonder, did a medium which attracted so much public notice and acquired so much prestige contrive to challenge its audiences in such radical ways about the nature and values of their community and their own sense of themselves? Or we could reverse the question and ask how drama of a specifically tragic kind came to acquire so central a position, exposed to the scrutiny, and inviting the empathetic response, of the assembled polis. Either way tragedy at Athens is almost unimaginable without the traditions of epic and lyric poetry as its context, traditions of story-telling and performance which had shaped a particular view of what was authentic in Greek life. From these, tragedy could take the habit of telling and enacting myths that dealt with threats to rationality and order, to the integrity of a family, or to the survival of a whole community, in language and artistic forms of extraordinary glamour (cf. Ch. 6, pp. 129–30).

Tragedy's high style, not only in the formally more elevated sections of song and recitative, but also in scenes of spoken dialogue and debate, is a crucial aspect of its meaning. Though very far from being Homeric pastiche, this style uses many words and forms that do not belong to the everyday spoken language of contemporary Athens, and even passages that use very little poetic colouring, like the passage from *Philoctetes* discussed above (pp. 169–70; cf. Ch. 6, pp. 141–5), are marked off from ordinary speech by the formality of their metrical patterns. All this implies a tacit understanding on the part of the community – the community that constitutes the audience, contributes to the funding, supplies the performers and controls the competition in which they compete – that heroic images of behaviour are appropriate to contemporary society as well as to an idealised past. The high language and noble persons of the plays belong not to 'period drama'

[40] Cf. Belfiore (1992) 44–82.

but to a form which offers images of behaviour such as contemporary society would like to see in its 'best' citizens, at the same time as finding ways of dramatising the danger to which they are always exposed: the transgressive desires of individuals, familial and civil discord, and existential factors like time and mortality.[41]

It is interesting that the essentially aristocratic bias of the Homeric poems and of much choral lyric poetry could so easily be reinterpreted to suit a democratic society. The notion of the 'best people' (as Louis Gernet pointed out)[42] could be transferred from one kind of elite, an aristocracy, to another, the citizen body, and whenever a *choros* performed on a ritual occasion, even if it was composed of some select group, it could always in some sense represent the wider community. Tragedy could therefore use these traditional elements – the hero and the chorus – to serve the needs of contemporary democratic society; the fact that both had a poetic pedigree, recognisable in their language and performance, may have served, like their masks and dignified costumes, to maintain the necessary distance between the audience and the events represented in the play. This notional distance is not, however, easily measured, particularly if it is true that the 'meta-theatrical' or ironic effects discussed above actually reinforce contact between play and audience through reminders of the play's fictionality. We must also remember that the same group of actors and chorusmen, after putting on three tragedies in succession, rounded off the day's events with a satyr play (cf. Ch. 2). The modulation, or constant renegotiation, of 'distance' is clearly something that needs to be taken into account.

In the end the most important point must be that the plays were about real issues,[43] however much the theatrical event involved displacement[44] – to another *time*, the heroic age, when gods might appear and make themselves known to mortals, to other *places*, whether Attic or foreign, but certainly not the Theatre of Dionysus on the Athenian Acropolis, to *persons* whose fictional status was emphasised by the fact that a single actor might play several of them, male or female, young or old, god or mortal, in one afternoon. The reason why all this elaboration was necessary and desirable was that the contradictions and problems explored in action in the theatre were fundamental to Greek religious and political thinking, and explosive enough to provoke violent reactions if audiences were not kept aware of the essentially metaphorical status of everything enacted before them. It is only because in some texts this metaphorical quality was so sustained that they

[41] See Griffith (1995).
[42] Gernet (1968) 333–43 (reprint of an article first published in 1938).
[43] For a fresh examination of some examples see Williams (1993).
[44] Cf. Zeitlin (1990) 65.

have survived as part of a living literary tradition inviting constant re-interpretation.

A SAMPLE: EURIPIDES' *TROJAN WOMEN*

This play deals with the worst that can happen to a city; Adrian Poole aptly called it 'Euripides' *Endgame*'.[45] It uses the events of the Trojan War, particularly the last hours before the ultimate firing of the ruins, when the men are already dead, the women waiting to be allocated to their new masters, and the victors preparing to sail home. The play was put on in 415 BC, when the possibility that a Greek city might be annihilated was not at all a remote one for the audience. Plataea, an allied city, hardly more than forty miles from Athens, had been utterly destroyed the year after it capitulated to the Peloponnesians in 427, and at Scione in Chalcidice in 421 and at Melos in 416 the Athenians themselves had put to death all the males of military age and enslaved the rest of the community. Euripides' play, the third in a group on related Trojan themes, must surely have been perceived as suggesting meanings relevant to its own times,[46] but the story of the fall of Troy had special advantages as a myth for all times. Troy was both the most 'real' of all ancient cities because of its vivid presence in the *Iliad* and, being non-Greek, the least obviously paradigmatic of a contemporary Greek polis. Even if there had been no risk of its being considered too painful or inflammatory, a play on the fall of a *Greek* city might have seemed intolerably ill-omened, whereas the whole point about Troy was that it fell. The distance in time and space and the cast of appropriate heroic characters in no way reduce the power of the text to challenge and disturb. It is worth looking at some ways in which the play prompts the audience's reactions.

The prologue at once suggests a strong sense of the desolation of the ruined city: Poseidon, the god who was its protector, is on the point of abandoning it: 'I am leaving famous Ilion and my altars, for when evil desolation takes hold of a city the things of the gods are sick and not given honour' (25–7). When gods appear on stage in Greek tragedy they always have a quasi-'directorial' role, establishing contact with the audience on a different level from that on which the human characters function, and thus offering ironic perspectives, often on the shape of the action to come, as in *Hippolytus* when Aphrodite, announcing to the audience the arrival of the doomed hero, says, 'He does not know that the gates of Hades have been opened for him, and that he looks on the daylight for the last time today' (56–7). Here the directorial role is divided between a pair of deities.

[45] Poole (1967) 257.
[46] Cf. Ch. 1 above, p. 31–2.

Poseidon first explains what has happened to Troy and the Trojan royal family, and introduces the stage picture: the figure of Hecuba, already in view of the audience, lying prostrate, overwhelmed by the extremity of her grief. 'And this unhappy woman, Hecuba, *if anyone wishes to see her*, here she is [lit. it is easy] lying in front of the gates, weeping many tears for many causes' (36–8). Then Athena extends the time reference to the future by asking Poseidon to help her take vengeance on the victorious Greeks. She was their champion in the past, but now they have insulted her by failing to punish the violence done to Cassandra by Ajax, son of Oileus. Zeus has promised to send a storm and lend her his thunderbolt; Poseidon is to help by stirring the sea and causing shipwrecks, 'so that the Greeks may know in future to respect my shrines and to honour the other gods' (85–6). Poseidon agrees at once; for the audience there ought to be no doubt that he means what he says. In the epic story (the Cyclic *Nostoi*, *Returns*) the Greek ships did get wrecked on their way back from Troy; a quite brief sketch of the horrors to come is enough to give the scene intertextual resonance. Thus the prologue creates an ironic framework within which the last hours of Troy are to be viewed.

Poseidon's parting words open out, as lines at ends of scenes often do, beyond the immediate situation: 'The man who destroys cities is a fool, and through making desolate temples and tombs, the sacred places of the dead, he himself later meets his ruin' (94–6). These lines give a clear signal that the coming action should be 'read' as a cautionary tale, an example for all times and places. But the message is not a simple one: the idea 'the winners are also to be losers' is given more weight than any detached assessment of the rights and wrongs of what the two sides have done, and at the end of the play no divine figure offers further explanation. This strongly suggests that no divine explanation exists for the suffering that constitutes the action of the rest of the play.

The role of Hecuba, the archetypal sufferer, is a magnificent one in theatrical terms.[47] From the prologue, where her prostrate figure is pointed out by Poseidon, to the last moment of the play, she is visible to the audience; after the gods' departure she is at the centre of the action, whether as prime singer or speaker or as the character most closely affected by all the other events – by what is happening to Cassandra, Andromache, Astyanax, the city itself. She speaks, chants or sings almost a quarter of the lines of the play; as well as solo song and recitative she takes part in lyric exchanges with the Chorus and Andromache, sings in response to Talthybius' spoken

[47] For comparable 'star' parts cf. Medea, Hecuba in her name-play, the Sophoclean Electra, and Oedipus in both *O.T.* and *O.C.*

lines, dominates the dialogue scenes and makes four big 'set-piece' speeches. She is also at the centre of the stage action: she begins her first chant as she lies on the ground and tries to raise herself (98–121); her first long speech is made from the ground after her collapse at 462; at the end of the play when she is being led off into captivity she tries to throw herself into the fire of the burning city (1282–3). But most often she is seen taking part in ritual: initiating lamentation (143–52), decorating the corpse of Astyanax (1209–34), beating the ground to make contact with the dead Trojans as she leaves the city (1305–7).[48]

The dramatic figure of Hecuba is thus one of power although she typifies weakness; this sense of authority is confirmed in her long speeches, each of which contributes something new to the audience's understanding. The first (466–510) is the most direct. Its theme is her change of fortune from regal state to bereavement and degradation; but it is not only her experience, or the Trojan experience: 'Call no successful person fortunate before he dies' (509–10). The second speech (686–708) is shorter and less climactic, placed between Andromache's two much longer ones. It is a brief attempt at consolation, ending with hopes for Troy's recovery through Astyanax, and it is immediately followed by the news that the child is to be thrown from the walls of the city. The whole scene charts the destruction of hope, but Hecuba's speech marks the need felt by sufferers to try to give strength to others. The third and longest of her speeches (969–1032) is her triumphant reply to Helen's self-defence. The second speaker in an *agōn* normally had the favoured position;[49] Hecuba seems to succeed in persuading Menelaus that Helen deserves a public stoning, but perhaps the triumph is hollow, as the references to future punishment with which the scene ends are contradicted by familiar scenes in the *Odyssey* of Menelaus and Helen happily settled back at home.[50] As in the prologue, there is an invitation to the audience to fill the gaps left by the text; even a spectator ignorant of the *Odyssey* could not feel certain that Menelaus would be able to resist his desire for Helen. The last speech (1156–206) shows Hecuba at her most authoritative as she pronounces a funeral oration over her grandson, concluding with lines that closely echo Poseidon's in the prologue, but this time the 'fool' is not the sacker of cities, but the person who feels complacent and secure in good fortune. Once more the equation between winners and losers is what comes out most strongly.

The most intense of all Hecuba's moments of understanding comes at the end of her obsequies for Astyanax: she suddenly stops her antiphonal

[48] Cf. Easterling (1993b) 19–20.
[49] But see Lloyd (1992) 17.
[50] *Od.* 4.1–305. Cf. Ch. 6 above, pp. 147–8 and Croally (1994).

singing with the Chorus, and prompted by their surprised questions she reflects on the meaning of her sorrows, the sorrows of Troy, 'of all cities the most hated by the gods', and the futility of the Trojans' piety, and concludes that without these disasters they would have perished without trace, without 'giving subjects of song to the poetry of future generations' (1240–5). These words raise questions about the function of poetry, and indeed of the play itself, all the more so as they are closely modelled on lines spoken by Helen in the *Iliad* (6.357–8).[51] As used by Helen the idea is a bitter one; she and Paris will be sung about to their shame; Hecuba's tone is less unambiguous, but there is no hint of easy consolation in her words, as she goes on to cast doubt on the meaning for the dead of the ritual she has just performed (1246–50).

The importance of the Chorus in this play is marked by Poseidon in the prologue: he explains that some of the Trojan women have already been allocated to Greek masters, but those who have not are 'in this building here, chosen for the leaders of the army' (32–5). So they are a significant group, although unlike the royal family they have no names, and it is never made clear what will happen to each of them individually. Their role is to provide a context for Hecuba's grief and to share in ritual with her; above all it is they who bring Troy into the play. The difference between actors and chorus is brought out very clearly right at the beginning of the play. Much is made in the first lyric exchange between Hecuba and the women about their anxieties for their own future: they are terrified at the sound of the queen's laments, fearing deportation or death, waiting for news from the herald, dreading being parted from their children, speculating about the Greek cities they may go to (153–229). But when Talthybius arrives with the news that each is to go to a separate master and tells Hecuba to ask for details one by one, the list is exhausted with the royal family: Cassandra, Polyxena, Andromache, Hecuba herself. At 292–93 the Chorus ask 'What about me?', but the herald has no reply; all that concerns him now is to have Cassandra fetched out, as Agamemnon's prize, so that he can then take the rest to their masters. No more is heard about the women's destinations until their song at 1089–99, and even then they know nothing further, but this is no marginal group of bystanders, and their presence is a constant reminder of the communal disaster.[52] When they sing about the Wooden Horse and the Greeks coming out of ambush (511–76), or about the sound of the lamentations at Troy (826–32), or about the neglect of worship at the old sacred sites (1059–80), they create for the audience a

[51] See Segal (1993b) 29–33.

[52] Cf. the function of the citizen chorus in *O.T.*, or that of the Elders in *Persians*.

more tangible sense of the city that has been destroyed than anything in any of the characters' speeches.

The song about the Wooden Horse begins, most unusually for a choral ode in tragedy, with an appeal to the Muse to sing them a new kind of song, a 'dirge accompanied by tears'. The newness, presumably, is not in the idea of lamentation itself, but in the idea of a dirge for a city.[53] The phrasing also draws attention to the text's own 'newness', another reminder of the play as performance, just as the extraordinary parody of a marriage song performed by the 'maenad' Cassandra turns into an invitation to Hecuba and the women to join the dance (308–40). For the Chorus and Hecuba her performance generates only horror; Hecuba tells the women to 'answer her wedding songs with tears' (350–1).

Finding the right kind of song to suit the terrible events at Troy is evidently a major issue. A similar question of perspectives is raised by the mad Cassandra, whose interpretation both of events in the Trojan War and of the future is closer to the vantage point of the prologue than anyone else's; but neither Hecuba nor the Chorus nor Talthybius can take the measure of what she says (cf. Ch. 6, pp. 134–5). The old proverbial sayings about the mutability of fortune take on new grimness when they are seen in the context of the destruction of a whole community and its culture, but Hecuba's words at 1240–5 have to be taken into account at the very end of the play, when she leads the women in a farewell ritual for the Trojan dead, beating the ground and calling out to children and husbands. The emphasis is all on loss and annihilation, but at least one statement can be understood differently by an audience brought up on epic poetry. When the Chorus sing that the 'name of the land will vanish' and 'Troy no longer exists' (1322–24) they are singing for an audience for whom Troy's name has survived.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

See Bibliographical Note to Chapter 8.

[53] Cf. Barlow (1986) *ad loc.*

CAMBRIDGE COMPANIONS TO LITERATURE

The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature
edited by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge

The Cambridge Companion to Dante
edited by Rachel Jacoff

The Cambridge Chaucer Companion
edited by Piero Boitani and Jill Mann

The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre
edited by Richard Beadle

The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies
edited by Stanley Wells

The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama
edited by A. R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway

The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry, Donne to Marvell
edited by Thomas N. Corns

The Cambridge Companion to Milton
edited by Dennis Danielson

The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism
edited by Stuart Curran

The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce
edited by Derek Attridge

The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen
edited by James McFarlane

The Cambridge Companion to Brecht
edited by Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks

The Cambridge Companion to Beckett
edited by John Pilling

The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot
edited by A. David Moody

The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism
edited by Jill Kraye

The Cambridge Companion to Conrad
edited by J. H. Stape

The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel
edited by John Richetti

The Cambridge Companion to Faulkner
edited by Philip M. Weinstein

The Cambridge Companion to Thoreau
edited by Joel Myerson

The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton
edited by Millicent Bell

The Cambridge Companion to Realism and Naturalism
edited by Donald Pizer

The Cambridge Companion to Twain
edited by Forrest G. Robinson

The Cambridge Companion to Whitman
edited by Ezra Greenspan

The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway
edited by Scott Donaldson

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO GREEK TRAGEDY

EDITED BY
P. E. EASTERLING
Regius Professor of Greek in the University of Cambridge

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS