

The sociology of Athenian tragedy

INTRODUCTION

In the modern sense of the word 'democracy' it is the tragic treatment of the *un*-democratic aspects of Athenian society which has been the focus of much recent scholarship. The Athenian democracy was a xenophobic, patriarchal, and imperialist community, economically dependent on slavery and imperial tribute, and tragedy has proved susceptible to interpretations disclosing its expression of ideas necessary to the system's perpetuation, ideas implying the inferiority of foreigners, women and slaves. This scholarly perspective is inseparable from its own social context, which has since the early 1960s been characterised by the unprecedented success of feminism and anti-racism.

This chapter suggests that through some recurrent types of plot-pattern tragedy affirmed in its citizen spectators' imaginations the social world in which they lived. The focus is on three types of pattern – plays in which male Athenian performers represented (i) mythical Athenians interacting with outsiders, (ii) women, (iii) significant slaves. Non-Athenians, women, and slaves were in reality excluded from the assembly and normally had to be represented by a citizen in the lawcourts (cf. Chs. 1 and 3 above, pp. 26–31; 61–6). Yet, paradoxically, the fictional representatives of these groups, silenced in the public discourse of the city, are permitted by the multivocal form of tragedy to address the public in the theatre as they never could in reality. Aristophanes seems prefiguratively to have sensed tragedy's claim to be 'democratic' in the more modern sense of the term: in an important passage of *Frogs* to be discussed below, the comic poet Euripides asserts that his tragedy is 'democratic' (*dēmokratikon*), on the precise ground that it gives voice to female and servile characters (949–52). The chapter therefore concludes that the ideological content dominant in Athenian tragic drama is simultaneously challenged by the inclusion through its multivocal form of otherwise excluded viewpoints.

The greatest innovation in the study of Greek tragedy over the last thirty years has been the excavation of its historical and topographical specificity. Classical Greek tragedy is now more usually and more accurately called fifth-century Athenian tragedy. For the notion of 'the Hellenic spirit', which informed criticism until the middle of this century, sprang from an anachronistic and idealist position. It emphasised the supposedly 'universal' significance of tragedy postulated by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (1451a36-1451b7), resuscitated by the Romantics, and perhaps given its definitive expression by Kierkegaard,¹ it presupposed an immutable human condition whose teleological imperative was suffering, and which somehow transcended transhistorical changes, and differences in culture and language. The 'eternal verities' contingent upon it were assumed to have been mysteriously encoded, by the 'genius' of the playwrights, in the tragic drama of the Greeks.

A scholarly project of the last three decades has been to undermine such universalising readings and to locate the plays within the historical conditions of their production. It is not that such attempts had not been made before.² But most earlier historicist readings of tragedy suffered from methodological crudity. Intentionalist and biographical interpretations tried to extract the playwrights' own political opinions from texts with no internal authorial voice and little external biographical evidence.³ Others imposed reductive allegories, identifying characters in tragedy with contemporary politicians (e.g. Agamemnon in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* with Cimon), or spotting direct references to contemporary events.⁴ The difference between these and modern readings engaging with the socio-political background of tragedy, what Vernant calls its *under-text*,⁵ is twofold. First, it is now stressed that tragedy offers no simple 'reflection' of the social processes of Athens: it transformed them while assimilating them into its own medium. Secondly, the focus is now less on the particularities of Athenian history than on the broader social tensions underpinning Athenian life.

While it is important to stress the plurality of plot-types in Athenian tragedy, a loose description could run along similar lines to Greenblatt's New Historicist formulation of Shakespearean drama, which he sees as 'centrally and repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder'.⁶ For the Athenian tragedies all enact the outbreak

¹ Kierkegaard (1987) 139-64.

² There are excellent insights in, for example, Flickinger (1918).

³ On the unreliability of the ancient biographies of the tragedians see Lefkowitz (1981)

67-104.

⁴ E.g. Delebecque (1951).

⁵ Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988) 31.

⁶ Greenblatt (1985) 18-47, 29.

and resolution of a crisis caused by imminent or actual death, adultery, exile, pleas for asylum, war, or the infringement of what Antigone calls the 'unwritten and unshakable laws' of the gods (*Ant.* 454-5); these were traditional taboos proscribing kin-killing, incest, violation of oaths or the host-guest relationship, and disrespect towards parents, suppliants, and the dead.⁷ Within this framework crises caused by the Athenian male's 'others', especially women and non-Athenian agents, insistently recur.

Indeed, the world represented in the tragic theatre of Athens is marked by extreme social heterogeneity and conflict. Some scholars now argue that it is the encounter with difference, with 'otherness', which constituted the Dionysiac dimension of the genre.⁸ Tragedy offers a range of characters of all statuses from gods and kings to citizens and to slaves, all ethnicities from Athenian, Theban, and Argive Greeks to 'barbarians' (the generic term for non-Greeks) such as Persians and Egyptians, all age groups from babies to the very old, and an overwhelming insistence on the troubled relationships between women and men.

Any sociological reading of an artwork must address the relationship between its maker and its consumers. The relationship between the Athenian tragic poet and his audience was, formally, that of political equals. Tragedy is not the production of a hired poet for social superiors, like the songs of the bard Demodocus in the Homeric *Odyssey*; nor, however, is it the composition of an aristocratic leader talking down to his populace, like Solon's Athenian elegies. The three great Athenian tragedians were all Athenian citizens, albeit well-born ones (and in Sophocles' case prominent in political life); they composed their plays for an audience largely consisting of citizens, and the plays were performed at festivals defined by their nature as celebrations of Athenian citizenship (see Ch. 1). The texts were mediated through performance by agents likewise sharing Athenian citizenship: the chorus-members, actors, and sponsors.⁹ Tragedy consequently defines the male citizen self,¹⁰ and both produces and reproduces the ideology of the civic community.¹¹

Aristophanes' *Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria* features an instructive central relationship between a maker and a consumer of tragedy. The heroes, both citizens, are Euripides and his kinsman by marriage. During their burlesques of Euripides' own tragedies they outwit both the women of

⁷ See Ehrenberg (1954) 22-50, 167-72.

⁸ Bibliography in Zeitlin (1993) 147-82, 152. Cf. Ch. 2 above.

⁹ Metics, alien non-citizens resident in Athens, could act as sponsors (*chorēgoi*) at the smaller, almost exclusively Athenian, Lenaea festival, but not at the more international Dionysia when Athens was on display to the outside world (see Ch. 1, pp. 18-19).

¹⁰ Zeitlin (1990) 63-96. Cf. Ch. 1 above. ¹¹ Citti (1978) 269-71.

Athens and a male, barbarian slave. These citizen heroes can participate together in the fantastic world of tragic parody ('paratragedy'), subjecting the texts to extended quotation, travesty, and interpolation, while the woman and the slave entrusted with guarding them cannot understand what they are doing. When the kinsman announces during the parody of Euripides' *Helen* that he is in Egypt, the female guard insists, quite rightly, that he is actually in the Athenian Thesmophorion (87-8-80); the barbarian slave similarly fails to be drawn into the paratragic experience of Euripides' Ethiopian *Andromeda*. The imaginative world of tragedy is therefore formulated by this comedy as an intellectual property, plaything and privilege of the citizen males, to the absolute exclusion of women and slaves.¹²

Social identity is a fluid phenomenon. Every individual partakes simultaneously in many distinct (though often overlapping) groups. Which particular group membership is temporarily predominant depends on immediate social context. At drama festivals the group identity depending on citizen status was paramount. Yet in democratic Athens group identity for the citizen male was complicated; within the post-Cleisthenic organisation of the polis the citizen was a member of a household, deme, tribe, phratry, and possibly an aristocratic *genos*, as well as a participant in the assembly and intermittently in other bodies such as juries and the council. Comedy is interested in the competing identities to which this internal civic organisation gave rise, but tragedy's examination of identity is more generalised. Human/divine, male/female, adult/child, free/slave, citizen/non-citizen, Athenian Greek/non-Athenian Greek, and Greek/barbarian are the most significant social boundaries negotiated by tragedy.

The answer to the sphinx's riddle, solved by Oedipus, is 'man'. A crucial frontier defined by tragedy is that between man and god. The Athenian was mortal, inhabiting a plane on earth below Olympus but above the underworld; although Aristotle briefly identifies a subspecies of tragedy 'set in the underworld' (*Poet.* 1456a2), all the extant tragedies – even the *Prometheus Bound*, whose cast is largely divine – are set in the terrestrial domain: Old Comedy made comparatively easy forays into Hades (Aristophanes' *Frogs*), into the upper air (*Birds*), or Olympus (*Peace*). But the earthly setting of surviving tragedy can nevertheless receive epiphanies from beyond. Gods from Olympus or the underworld mingle with mortals, as Apollo, Hermes, Athena, and the Erinyes do in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, and the technical capacities of the theatre permitted ghosts to be seen to emerge from Hades, like Darius in Aeschylus' *Persians*.

¹² Hall (1989b) 38–54.

The Athenian citizen distinguished himself by his earthly habitat and mortality from the immortals (and death is omnipresent in tragedy, in contrast with the utopian tendency of the para-reality of Athenian comedy where it is hardly acknowledged as even a possibility). But the citizen also emphatically distinguished himself, as an inhabitant of a polis, from the primitive peoples and wild beasts without thought or language who lived in the untamed countryside beyond the boundaries of civilisation and the laws of the civic community. The barbarous Scythians are considered remarkable in *Prometheus Bound* because they do not live in settled communities, but are nomads, taking their caravans with them (709–10). The standard setting of tragedy came to be a house within a polis, or a house-surrogate within a polis-surrogate such as a tent in a military encampment (*Hecuba*, *Ajax*);¹³ this contrasted with the wilder habitat of the semi-bestial satyrs of satyr drama, set on mountains (e.g. Sophocles' *Trachis*), or remote seashores (Aeschylus' *Net-Fishers*). The vision of the linear evolution of the human community from savagery to the city-state, formulated by the great fifth-century political theorist Protagoras, finds numerous expressions in tragedy. It informs Prometheus' speeches on the technologies he has given to humankind (*Prometheus Bound* 447–68, 476–506), the ode on human inventiveness in Sophocles' *Antigone* (322–75), Theseus' exposition of man's acquisition of intelligence, language, agriculture, navigation, and trade in Euripides' *Suppliant Women* (201–10), and certainly the means of survival to which the isolated cave-dwelling hero of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* has had to resort on the uninhabited island of Lemnos.

Philoctetes says that being without a polis is equivalent to being dead (1018). Tragedy's civic dimension is revealed in its repeated exploration of the theme of exile from the polis. The tragedy of the heroes' situations is consistently compounded by the hazard of being rendered, like Philoctetes, totally *apolis* – without a polis at all. It is a condition of the tragic Orcstes' life, whether in the *Oresteia*, Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra*-tragedies, or Euripides' *Iphigeneia among the Taurians* and *Orestes*, that he becomes an exile from his homeland; so are Jason and Medea in Euripides' *Medea*, Heracles and Deianeira in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, Oedipus, Antigone, and Polyneices in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and many others.

Tragic characters are forced to seek asylum or suffer captivity in alien cities for a variety of reasons: Danaus and his daughters in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, Heracles' children in *Heracleidae*, Iphigeneia by the Black Sea in Euripides' *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, and Helen in the Egypt of his *Helen*. War, the almost omnipresent background of tragedy as

¹³ See Taplin (1977) 438–59.

it was a nearly continuous fact of Athenian life, displaces numerous females from their communities; this is feared by the chorus of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, and suffered by Cassandra in his *Agamemnon*, by the chorus of *Libation-Bearers*, by Euripides' Trojan Women in *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women* and his Andromache in her name-play. The Athenians' desperate dependence on recognised membership of the polis was expressed in the cultural production of these 'displacement' plots, in plots involving contested ethnicity and contested rights to citizenship,¹⁴ and in the recurrence in tragic rhetoric of the themes of exile and loss of civic rights.

Since the civic consciousness central to the theatre defined an identity shared by only a small Athenian elite with the mass of ordinary citizens, it is an intriguing aspect of this democratic art-form that the crises it enacts afflict aristocrats. Minor roles could be taken by extraordinarily exotic characters of diverse status: a barbarian eunuch, Crimean cow-herds, a muse, a semi-bovine maiden, and a god disguised as a dark-skinned Egyptian,¹⁵ yet the democratic polis chose to represent itself through tragedies whose primary focus was on human royalty. Although in one experimental play, Agathon's *Anthus*, the characters were all 'invented' rather than familiar mythical figures (Aristotle, *Poet.* 1451b21), no tragedian seems to have attempted a tragedy in which the central figures were ordinary citizens. This was a privilege, apparently, of comedy, where none-too-wealthy Athenians can be heroes (Strepsiades in *Clouds*, Trygaeus in *Peace*, and Praxagora, a citizen's wife, in *Women in Assembly*).

The mythical legacy which the tragedians inherited from the poets of archaic epic and lyric, the 'forests of myths' as Herington, paraphrasing Baudelaire, calls it,¹⁶ centred on the sufferings of kings. The tragedians' project was to reinterpret such myths for contemporary purposes, to use the authority of the past to dignify and legitimise the present. But another perspective can see the royalty of classical tragedy as operating at a high degree of abstraction from social reality, encoding the newly discovered political freedoms and aspirations of ordinary men in the symbolic language of pre-democratic political hierarchies. Frye observed in relation to Shakespeare, 'princes and princesses may be wish-fulfilment dreams as well as social facts'.¹⁷ Every citizen, free and autonomous, subject to no individual and self-sufficient (Thuc. 2.41), saw himself in some sense as a 'monarch'.

¹⁴ Hall (1989a) 172–81. Cf. also Ch. 8, pp. 188–9.

¹⁵ In the Euripidean *Orestes*, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, and *Rhesus*, the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound*, and Sophocles' lost *Inachus* respectively.

¹⁶ Herington (1985) 64. ¹⁷ Frye (1965) 146.

Aeschylus describes every citizen-sailor who rowed at Salamis, in defence of Athens' liberty and his own, as the 'king of his own oar' (*Pers.* 378).¹⁸

Real aristocrats in Athens had seen their rights considerably challenged, at least from the 480s onwards. Yet they remained disproportionately influential, maintaining their prominence not least through the regular enactment of their private dramas on the public stages of the lawcourts.¹⁹ There lingered a belief that high birth was synonymous with virtue and intelligence, and the old and wealthy families who still held a near-monopoly on the higher offices of state continued to use the claim of *eugeneia*, or 'superior pedigree', to justify their pre-eminence: in fifth-century legal and political discourse, *eugeneia* appears as 'the wellspring of those qualities of mind and spirit that made a nobleman a superior person. Intellectual and moral proclivities are traced back to character, which, in the final analysis, is determined genetically'.²⁰ The contradiction between democratic ideals and the continuing respect for nobility produces frequent tragic discussions of the inheritability of virtue, but on balance the statements on nature versus nurture are surprisingly reactionary; in Euripides' *Children of Heracles*, for example, Iolaus compliments Demophon by saying that 'children have no finer endowment than to have been begotten by a noble and brave father' (287–8).²¹

Yet tragedy cannot be used as a document of the realities of life in Athens. It is essential to acknowledge the processes of artistic mediation: Athenian institutions and social relations are distorted by the genre. The tragic universe, an imaginative reconstruction of the mythical past, simultaneously idealised and dysfunctional, attempts to archaize but is often anachronistic.²² Things could happen in the real life of Athens which were virtually unthinkable in tragedy, and vice versa. Thus, for example, in reality people could rise socially beyond birth-status (which is almost impossible in tragedy), and Athens was riven by factional in-fighting (but the idealised tragic Athens is virtually free from *stasis*). On the other hand, there is no historical record of any young woman flouting the authority of her male 'guardian' (*kurios*) in the 'real' life of Athens, in the manner of the challenges made by Antigone and Electra to the authority of Creon and Aegisthus. Yet *Antigone* and *Electra* are indisputably documents of the Athenian *imagination*. Sentiments expressed by tragic characters, even those apparently at odds with the dominant ideology (see pp. 118–24 below), are

¹⁸ This is taking *Pers.* 374–83, as referring to the Greeks, rather than, with most editors, the Persians: see Hall (1996), note ad loc.

¹⁹ Osborne (1985) 40–58; Hall (1995). ²⁰ Donlan (1980) 139.

²¹ On this issue see Rose (1992), especially 266–30; Dover (1974) 88–95. ²² Easterling (1985) 1–10.

clearly *imaginable* in the democratic polis. And the very plot-patterns of the genre itself, shaped by and shaping the Athenians' collective thought-world, testify to their social and emotional preoccupations.

ATHENS

The form of tragedy is Panhellenic. An inclusive genre, it absorbed multifarious metrical forms originating in places across the Greek-speaking world, such as Doric choral lyric and Aegean monody. This form has an equivalent in the casts of tragedy, which are almost always of mixed ethnicity. Every single tragic performance of which we know offered its audience the ethnically other, the non-Athenian, in the theatre.²³ A very few plays offer a cast confined to a single ethnic group if it is non-Athenian (in *Persians* everyone is Persian, and in *Antigone* everyone is Theban). But all the others represent interaction between characters of more than one provenance.

Yet despite tragedy's ethnic plurality, and its interest in heroes and communities spread over vast distances across the known world,²⁴ the Athenian focus, the 'Athenocentrism' of tragedy, is manifested in several ways. Many plays include explicit panegyrics of Athens, for example in Aeschylus' *Persians* (231-45) and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (668-719),²⁵ the women of Troy, about to be sent off to slavery in Greece, hope that their destination is Athens (e.g. *Tro.* 208-9). Secondly, even plays with no obvious Athenian focus often include an *aition*, an explanation through myth, of the origins of an Athenian custom: Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, which portrays the escape of an Argive sister and brother from a barbarian community by the Black Sea, startlingly concludes with Athena ordering them to establish rituals at a cult-centre on Athenian territory, the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron (1459-69). Thirdly, the tragedians used communities other than Athens as sites for ethnic self-definition; the barbarian world often functions in the tragic imagination as the home of vices (for example, Persian despotism, Thracian lawlessness, eastern effeminacy and cowardice) conceived as correlatives to the idealised Athenian democratic virtues of freedom of speech, equality before the law, and masculine courage.²⁶ Nearer home it can also be helpful to see other

²³ Hall (1989a); Vidal-Naquet (1992) 297-311.

²⁴ Easterling (1994) 73-80 has recently urged that scholarly attention to tragedy's undoubted Athenocentrism should not be allowed to obscure its interest in other places, and relevance to non-Athenian audiences elsewhere in the fifth century, for example in Italy.

²⁵ For others see Barts (1942).

²⁶ Hall (1989a) 121-33; on Asiatics in tragedy see also Hall (1993a) 108-33.

Greek cities, especially Thebes, as imagined communities whose negative characteristics are partly determined by their deviation from the Athenians' own positive *self*-representations. Democratic Athens was proud of its openness (Thuc. 2.39), while Thebes in tragedy is often closed in on itself, and its royalty susceptible to intermedic conflict, incest, and tyrannical conduct.²⁷

Fourthly, a subspecies of tragedy emerged enacting transparently 'patriotic' myths, concerned with the early mythical history of Athens and Attica, and stressing such vital components of the Athenians' identity as their claim to autochthony.²⁸ The repertoire included Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, *Ion*, and his *Erechtheus*, of which considerable fragments survive: *Erechtheus* was a patriotic piece dealing with the struggle over Athens between Athena and Poseidon. It also portrayed the self-immolation of Athenian princesses, and the death of King Erechtheus, during a patriotic war caused by the military aggression of Poseidon-worshipping Thracian barbarians (see fr. 50.46-9 Austin). The play, produced between 423 and 421 BC, celebrated the building of the Erechtheion on the Acropolis.

Even in plays set in Athenian territory, the Athenian characters always interact with representatives of other city-states. Some plots seek to display the superiority of Athenian democratic culture over other cities, especially Thebes or Argos, and imply that Athens is entitled to the imperial role of 'moral policeman' in Greece. In Euripides' *Suppliant Women* (almost certainly modelled on Aeschylus' lost *Eleusinians*) Theseus, the mythical founder of the Athenian democracy, is portrayed as a pious and egalitarian constitutional monarch of a democracy: he says, 'When I first assumed leadership, I gave my people freedom and an equal vote, and on this basis instituted monarchy' (352-3). He takes action against the despotic Thebans to impose the 'common law of Hellas' protecting the rights of the dead.

The Athenocentrism of tragedy is revealed when myths involving heroes from other cities are manipulated to serve Athenian interests. Until the sixth century Athens had enshrined little of its own local mythology in poetry and art; it had no hero equal in status to Heracles, Achilles, Orestes, Agamemnon, or Oedipus. There was an attempt in the late sixth and fifth centuries to develop a nexus of myths around the Athenian king Theseus, who appears in several tragedies; but the Argive, Theban, and other non-Athenian heroes from the old epic cycle, while remaining central to tragedy, are often appropriated to the *Athenian* past, in each case conferring on the city some special advantage.

²⁷ Zeitlin (1986); but see Easterling (1989) 1-17, who cautions against over-polarising Athens and Thebes.

²⁸ See Loraux (1993), especially 37-71. Cf. Ch. 1, pp. 30-1.

Orestes, for example, is brought to trial at Athens by Aeschylus in his *Eumenides*, and the myth is altered to make him, rather than Ares, the first figure to be tried for murder at the court of the Areopagus. Aeschylus has therefore to offer a reason why the Areopagus was named the 'hill' (*pagos*) of Ares' rather than the 'Oresteopagus' (685–90). Orestes not only causes the foundation of the Athenians' court: he also benefits them by promising an eternal friendship between Argos and Athens (762–4), almost certainly an *aition* for the thirty-year alliance with Argos pledged by the Athenians in 460 BC (Thuc. 1.102.4). The play also provides an instance of Athens' fair treatment of suppliant strangers. It is a remarkable feature of *Eumenides* that the poet portrayed an Athens without a king, even in a play set only shortly after the Trojan war. As if to emphasise the democratic nature of the Athens of the heroic age, silent male characters appear on stage representing citizens, the first ever jurors at a trial for homicide at the court of the Areopagus. So the audience's direct forefathers mingled before their eyes with gods and heroes.

In Euripides' *Heracles* the greatest hero of Greek legend is similarly 'myth-napped' by the playwright and brought to spend the rest of his life at Athens. An ancient friendship between Theseus and Heracles, resting on the debt Theseus owes the great hero for rescuing him from the underworld (1169–70), is confirmed when Theseus dissuades Heracles from suicide and pledges to take him to Athens. There he will purify him, grant him land, and honour him after death with sacrifices and stone memorials (1322–33); these may offer an *aition* for the sculptures commemorating the famous deeds of both Theseus and Heracles on the 'Hephaesteion' in the Athenian agora, datable to between 450 and 440 BC.²⁹ The appropriation of Heracles to Athens was no small coup: as Theseus says, his citizens will win a fair crown of honour in the eyes of Greece for helping a man of such quality (1334–5). But friendship is one of the dominant themes in this fascinating play, and the mythical celebration of the friendship between Theseus and Heracles also acts as a moral or behavioural *aition* for the social institution of friendships between male citizens which were a central feature of Athenian democracy, and could even be used as a justificatory argument in Athenian law.³⁰

In his *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles provides a mythical explanation for the near-permanent hostility between the 'real' city-states of Athens and Thebes in historical times; this is in the course of 'myth-napping' the Theban hero to a mystical death at the Athenian deme of Colonus (Sophocles' own birthplace). Oedipus is welcomed kindly, and formally

granted full citizen status by Theseus (636–7). Oedipus promises that if he is granted burial there, he will confer a great benefit on the city (576–8, 626–8). He explains that his body will always provide for the Athenians 'a defence, a bulwark stronger than many shields, than spears of massed allies' (1524–5). Theseus witnesses his death, and he is to communicate its secrets only to his heir (1530–2). Sophocles' tragedy thus not only attracts Oedipus into the Athenian mythical orbit: it actually transfers his allegiance from the city of his birth to the city of the play's production. Oedipus will lend posthumous assistance to the Athenians against the citizens of the much-hated city of Thebes.

This play offers as a speaking character a nameless Athenian citizen of the deme of Colonus. The mythical forefather of the citizens in the audience, he is the first speaking character after the exiles Oedipus and Antigone arrive at the grove of the Eumenides. He is distinguished by his pious regard for the sanctity of the grove, his fear lest it be defiled, and his exemplary respect for the processes of the Athenian democracy. He announces that he would never eject Oedipus from his seat without reporting his arrival to the other citizens, and taking his instructions from them (47–8).

Other Athenians in tragedy usually display virtue, piety, and respect for suppliants and the democratic principle of freedom of speech: this is a particularly revealing aspect of what might be called the Athenians' self-regarding use of tragedy as 'moral actiology'. On the rare occasions when Athenians do misbehave or act foolishly in tragedy it is conspicuous that they are removed from their city for the duration of their misadventure. In Euripides' *Medea* the Athenian king Aegeus is no culprit but he is faintly ridiculous – credulous, and upset about his infertility. One of the reasons why *Medea* was so unsuccessful in the dramatic competition of 431 BC may have been that the audience did not appreciate hearing one of their own ancestral kings discussing his infertility on stage. But the play is set at Corinth. Likewise, it is at Delphi that Creusa, the daughter of Erechtheus in Euripides' *Ion*, plots the murder of the young man whom she believes to be her husband's illegitimate offspring. Even Theseus in *Hippolytus*, who although no bad man is precipitate in judgement and unfair to his son, is a resident of Troezen in the Peloponnese for the duration and purposes of the play.

GENDER

Although profoundly concerned with the Athenian's public, collective, identity as a citizen, tragedy came to be set not in the male arenas of civic discourse – the council, assembly or lawcourts – but in the marginal space

²⁹ Bond (1988) 396. ³⁰ Golden (1990) 52.

immediately outside the door of the private home. The action takes place at the exact physical point where the veil is torn from the face of domestic crises, revealing them to public view, and disclosing their ramifications not only for the central figures but also for the wider community.

This domestic focus becomes less surprising if the relationship between the household and the city-state, no simple antithesis, is considered in its full complexity. The polis consisted of a multiplicity of households, and it was in the household that the citizen body reproduced itself; the Athenian's claim to the privileges of citizenship depended upon his ability to prove that he emanated from a legitimate union of two Athenians, at least after 451 BC (cf. Ch. 1 above, pp. 28-9). Any public man who wanted the confidence of the people or a generalship was certainly expected, and perhaps legally required, to father legitimate children.³¹ In writings on political theory 'public' catastrophes – *stasis* and revolutions – are often traced to 'private' issues affecting eminent individuals, such as love affairs, marriages, and domestic lawsuits. Aristotle, who catalogues 'private' causes of public crisis in his *Politics*, says that 'even the smallest disputes are important when they occur at the centres of power', and 'conflicts between well-known people generally affect the whole community' (V 1303b19-20, 31-2).

A citizen's family life was a component of his political identity. It was important to be seen in the lawcourts as the responsible head of a well-ordered household; it was customary for a citizen involved in a trial to introduce his decorous children onto the rostrum in a public display. His 'private' conduct was seen as indicative of the manner in which he would exert political power: Demosthenes was criticised in court for dressing in white and performing public ceremonies only a week after his daughter's death (Aeschines 3.77). The speaker warns, 'The man who hates his child and is a bad father could never become a safe guide to the people ... the man who is wicked in his private relations would never be found trustworthy in public affairs.' Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* fails both as a father and as civic leader, and the two failures are interdependent.

The tragic household is obsessed with its own perpetuation through legitimate male heirs. The institution of marriage necessary for the production of such heirs is a constant question for rhetorical examination, and it is a constant theme of tragic lamentation that the crises enacted will result in the extirpation of a family line. Childlessness itself is a concern of men in tragedy, leading both Aegeus in *Medea* and Xuthus in *Ion* to seek the advice of oracles. In reality one of the worst punishments which could be visited on

a convicted criminal – usually for political crimes – was the overthrow, the physical razing to the ground of the house (*kataskaphē*), which was symbolically charged as the concrete manifestation of the whole kinship line through time. *Kataskaphē* involved the denial of burial, destruction of family altars and tombs, removal of ancestors' bones, confiscation of property, exile, and a curse applying even to offspring and descendants.³² Heracles in his name-play by Euripides threatens to raze the house of the usurping tyrant Lycus to the ground in just this way (565-8).

The destruction of the kinship line is a major theme in tragedy. It provides the climax of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, where Astyanax, Priam's only surviving male descendant, is murdered: it is a reason why Medea chooses for Jason not his own death but the death of his new wife (on whom he could beget new heirs) and the deaths of his sons; it is the cause of Peleus' tragedy in Euripides' *Andromache*, when he hears the news of the death of his only son's only son: 'my family line (*genos*) is no more; no children remain to my household' (1177-8).

It was the reputation of his family which was the public man's greatest liability; political enemies might attack him by targeting his dependants, especially his wife, for litigation or ridicule. The convention that respectable women were not even to be named in public stems from the same ideal which led Thucydides' Pericles to proclaim that a woman's greatest glory was to be spoken of as little as possible, either in praise or blame (2.46). Eurydice, Creon's wife in Sophocles' *Antigone*, nearly conforms with this Periclean template of perfection, since she is never even mentioned, either in praise or blame, until nine-tenths of the way through the play. But most tragic women, by emerging from the door of the household into public view, run risks which Athenian citizens would have preferred their own womenfolk to avoid; idealised female characters, especially virgins, often apologise for their 'forwardness' when they appear (e.g. Eur. *Children of Heracles* 474-7).

In the second century AD the satirist Lucian remarked that 'there are more females than males' in these plays (*De Saltatione* 28); a character in a novel of similar date also comments on the large number of plots which women have contributed to the stage (Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 1.8). Only one extant tragedy, Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, contains no women, and female tragic choruses in the surviving plays outnumber male by twenty-one to ten. Since women were almost excluded from Athenian public life, their prominence in this most public of Athenian art-forms therefore constitutes a problematic paradox.

³² Connor (1985) 79-102.

³¹ παιδοποιεῖσθαι κατὰ τοὺς νόμους, Dinarchus 1.71; see also [Aristot.] *Ath. Pol.* 4.2. I am very grateful to Helene Foley for drawing my attention to these references.

Death and killing are central to tragedy: women's role in religion, especially in funerary lamentation and in sacrifices, must partly explain their presence.³³ The Dionysiac origin of tragedy may illuminate its femininity: maenadic (and therefore female) frenzy often occurs in metaphors associated with kin-killing in tragedy, because of its affiliation with the cult of Dionysus.³⁴ The departure of women from the interior of the household, giving rise to its destruction, has also been seen as an originally maenadic motif.³⁵ Zeitlin refers us to the femininity of Dionysus, transvestism in his cult, and symbolic gender inversions in Greek ritual to help explain the role of women as the 'other' of the masculine identity defined in Athenian tragedy.³⁶ Drama required actors playing women apparently to change their gender; this helps to explain the playwrights' attraction to stories involving reversed gender roles (of which the most obvious example is that enacted in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*), and therefore the 'masculinised' women of tragedy.³⁷ Anthropological symbolism shows that patriarchal cultures often use the figures and bodies of women to help them imagine abstractions and think about their social order.³⁸ Moreover, women were regarded as more susceptible to invasive passions than men, especially eros and daemonic possession,³⁹ women were thus both plausible instigators of tragic events, and effective generators of emotional responses.

The category 'women in Greek tragedy' is in itself problematic. It includes children and ageing widows, nubile virgins and multiple mothers, adulteresses and paragons of wifehood, murderesses and exemplars of virtue, lowly slaves and high priestesses, maenads, witches, and Io, the girl with a cow's head chased by a gadfly to the Scythian mountains. Yet there is undeniably a tendency towards plots with disruptive women: one generic pattern relating to male-female relations does draw together a large number of the plays and can be taken as an aesthetic expression of a defining feature of the Athenian male's world view. This plot-pattern can be formulated as follows: women in Athenian tragedy only become disruptive (that is, break one of the 'unwritten laws', act on an inappropriate erotic urge, or flout male authority) in the physical absence of a legitimate husband or *kurios*. This applies equally to unmarried virgins and to married women, who transgress only in the absence of their husbands. The converse does not always apply; husbandless women may behave with decorum (Chrysothemis, for example, in Sophocles' *Electra*, and Megara in *Heracles*). But every single transgres-

³³ Foley (1981) 127-68; cf. Ch. 1. ³⁴ Schliesier (1993) 89-114.

³⁵ Scatford (1993) 115-46.

³⁷ Zeitlin (1990).

³⁸ Gould (1980) 38-59, especially 56-9; Foley (1981) 156-9; Zeitlin (1984) 149-84.

³⁹ See Padel (1983) 3-19 and (1992).

sive woman in tragedy is temporarily or permanently husbandless. This convention can be interpreted as a symptom of the Athenian citizen's anxiety about the crises which might afflict his household during his absence: as a character in a comic fragment said, 'there is no wall, nor fortune, nor anything as hard to keep guard on as a woman' (Alexis fr. 340 K-A).

The pattern is in turn dependent upon the prevalence of the type of plot in which the male head of the household enacts a homecoming (*nostos*) during the course of the play. The *nostos*-plot had an influential antecedent in the *Odyssey*, where chaos had also reigned in the king's absence, although his wife had not in that case been the culprit. More important archetypes were the *Nostoi*, the epic poems which told of the returns from Troy of heroes such as Agamemnon and Menelaus, and the difficulties (at best) they encountered on arrival. Many of the extant plays involve at least one male *nostos*: Xerxes in *Persians*, Agamemnon in his name-play, Orestes in *Libation-Bearers*, Aegisthus in Sophocles' *Electra*, Heracles in his *Women of Trachis*, Theseus in *Hippolytus*, Heracles in *Heracles*, Menelaus in *Orestes*, Pentheus in *Bacchae*, and Jason, back from the palace, in *Medea*. Even Euripides' *Andromache* is a distorted *nostos*-tragedy: the return from Delphi of the householder Neoptolemus is awaited throughout, but when he arrives it is as a corpse (1166).

A speech by Clytemnestra to her husband in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* epitomises the position of women in the tragic universe. She argues that she has been a blameless wife, 'chaste with regard to sexual matters, increasing the prosperity of the household, so that joy attends you when you come home, and good fortune when you depart' (1159-61). There is an implicit acknowledgement that although women *were* transferred from household to household (by male consensus in the case of marriage and male violence in the case of war), they were essentially immobilised, in contrast with the unrestricted movements of men. Greek tragedy generally portrays static household-bound women awaiting and reacting to the comings and goings of men.

It is another tragedian's Clytemnestra, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, who is arguably the most transgressive woman in extant tragedy. She has committed adultery, murders Agamemnon and Cassandra, and aspires to political power. But even she embarked on her transgressive career in the physical absence of her husband, who left her behind many years ago to fight for his brother's wife at Troy. There is no suggestion that Clytemnestra had transgressed her socially sanctioned role before her husband's departure. In extant tragedy the adulterous elopement of Clytemnestra's lovely sister Helen is never actually dramatised. But emphasis is often laid, in the

passages which refer to it, on Menelaus' absence from home when the incident occurred. In Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* this is made quite explicit: Paris took Helen away from Sparta when 'Menelaus was out of town' (*ekdēmon*, 76-7). In *Trojan Women* it is said that the elopement could only occur because Menelaus went on a trip to Crete (943-4). The generic convention of the absent husband thus informs the construction of female transgression even in narratives of the past.

Deianeira, left alone for much of each year by her husband Heracles, does not kill him intentionally. But the *nostos*-plot of *Women of Trachis* underlines the dangers inherent in leaving a wife alone, to make decisions without her husband's guidance. Deianeira's decision to try to win back her husband's love by using a potion of suspicious provenance is presented as the result of panic rather than malevolence, but it is an action she conceives in isolation from him. Similarly, Medea is living alone, abandoned by Jason, when she plans and executes the murders of his new wife and his children. It is also in the absence of Theseus that Phaedra embarks on the course of action which results in catastrophe (see pp. 116-18 below).

In Euripides' *Andromache* Neoptolemus' wife Hermione and concubine Andromache are living under the same roof when Hermione conceives her barbaric plan to murder her rival and her rival's child. Neoptolemus, typically, is removed from his household so that this crisis can occur: he is at the Delphic oracle. Hermione ultimately regrets her miscreant behaviour, blaming it on 'foul-minded women' who would visit her and endlessly gossip, asking her why she allowed a mere slave-woman to share her home and her husband (930-3). This exemplifies yet another generic pattern in Greek tragedy: while friendship between males of different households is consistently idealised, especially in the relationships between Orestes and Pylades, and Heracles and Theseus, no such relationship between two women from different households ever graces the tragic stage. Although great mutual affection is attributed to pairs of sisters like Antigone and Ismene and Electra and Chrysothemis, and female choruses express friendly sentiments to female characters, friendship between individual women is consistently portrayed as a dangerous phenomenon, disparaged even by (idealised) wives (e.g. by Andromache, *Tro.* 647-55).

Euripides' *Bacchae* portrays the return of the young King Pentheus of Thebes. Dionysus says in the prologue that he has maddened the sisters of Semele and sent them out to the mountains. The audience does not yet know the whereabouts of the king of Thebes or of the husbands of Agave and her sisters. When Pentheus arrives he reveals that he 'happens to have been out of town' (*ekdēmos*, 215). It becomes apparent that Agave, Autonoe, and Ino, the Theban royal sisters of whom the Dionysiac frenzy

has taken hold, lack marital supervision. There are several references to Echion, Agave's husband and Pentheus' father, one of the original 'Spartoi' ('sown men') of Thebes, who sprang from the dragon's teeth (265, 507, 995, 1030, 1274). Although it is not stated that Echion is dead, he is certainly not present in Thebes. Autonoe's husband Aristaeus is also mentioned (1227); he seems to be living abroad. There is silence on the subject of Ino's husband, usually identified as the Boeotian king Athamas. Euripides has so structured his picture of the Theban royal house that the only male member present, Pentheus' grandfather Cadmus, is aged and infirm when Dionysus comes to wreak his vengeance through the fragile medium of the psyches of manless women.

Play after play, therefore, portrays the disastrous effects on households and the larger community of divinely inspired madness, anger, sexual desire, or jealousy in women unsupervised by men. This plot-pattern is illuminated by reference to the legal position of Athenian women, who were required to remain under the legal control of a male *kyrios* throughout their lives, and also by the Greeks' view of the frailty of the female psyche. Aristotle said that the deliberative, decision-making faculty of the psyche is 'inoperative' in women: the word he uses is *akuron*, 'without command' or 'authority', literally, 'lacking a *kyrios*' (*Pol.* 1 1260a). The psyches of women were thus perceived as analogous with their legal status.⁴⁰

Medical ideas can provide further illumination. Virginity and chastity were viewed differently in the pagan ancient world: unmarried 'spinsters' were regarded as a social liability. Greek medical writings suggest that for a woman between menarche and menopause regular sexual intercourse was necessary to health; ideally she remained pregnant most of the time. Indeed, enforced sexual continence after puberty was thought to make women liable to physical and psychic disorders. The gynaecology of the Hippocratic corpus frequently prescribes intercourse as a cure for female diseases (*Nat. Puer.* 30.11, 82.6-12); to the Hippocratics, 'menstruation, intercourse, and childbirth are collectively essential to the health of the mature woman'.⁴¹ Beliefs of this kind seem to be a contributory factor in the tragedians' portraits of transgressive wives: the sexual deprivation suffered by Medea is frequently stressed, and if Phaedra had consulted a doctor, it is likely that he would have prescribed sexual intercourse (with her husband, of course).⁴²

The belief also informs the characterisations of the insubordinate virgins, Antigone and Electra. The author of the medical treatise *On the Diseases of*

⁴⁰ Just (1989) 188-93.

⁴¹ Hanson (1990) 309-37, 320.

⁴² Hanson (1990) 320.

Young Women regards girls in and after puberty as prone to madness; marriage and childbirth are the recommended treatment.⁴³ In Sophocles' *Electra* stress is laid on her unmarried status; in Euripides' version *Electra* is so disturbed that she jointly wields the sword which murders her mother (1225). In this play she is married, but the poet seems to indicate that he is aware of the latent generic convention by making characters twice point out that the marriage has never been consummated (43-53, 253-7).⁴⁴

Yet law, psychology, and medicine must be supplemented by an economic perspective. Male anxiety about female transgression, especially female infidelity, always has an underlying *economic* explanation in patrilineal societies where property is transmitted through the male bloodline. One of the ancient Athenian's worst nightmares was that his household would be extinguished by his heirlessness. Even worse was the idea that his household might be extinguished without his even knowing it – that is, by the infiltration of an heir he had not fathered himself: in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* the Corinthian adoptive mother of Oedipus tricked her husband Polybus in exactly this manner (28-31). Women could be challenged to take oaths in front of arbitrators affirming the paternity of children (Dem. 39.4, 40.10, see Aristot. *Rhet.* II 23.11). This preoccupation found expression in the mouth of Homer's Telemachus, who complains that he cannot be sure who his father is, whatever Penelope says (*Od.* I.215-16). A Euripidean character in a lost play expressed the problem succinctly: 'A mother always loves a child more than a father does. She knows it is her own: he only thinks it is' (fr. 1015).

CLASS

Slavery was a central institution of the classical Athenian polis: only the most impoverished citizen could not afford a slave at all. Slavery affected the Athenians' conceptualisation of the universe at every level, a process reflected in their metaphors, for the citizen perceived analogies between his relationships with slaves and his relationships with women and children (see Aristotle's *Politics* book 1). He could use slavery to express the pressures on men in authority: in a rhetorical inversion of the real power structure,

⁴³ Sissa (1990b) 339-64, at 359.

⁴⁴ In Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, the first play of the *Danaids* trilogy, the fifty daughters of the Egyptian Danaus reject marriage with their cousins; in the lost second play they married them but killed them on their wedding night. It is highly likely that the murders took place before the marriage had been physically consummated. Unfortunately the fragmentary evidence for the remainder of the trilogy (on which see Garvie (1969) ch. 5) gives no explicit indication.

Agamemnon in *Iphigeneia at Aulis* reflects that low birth (*dusgeneia*) has its advantages, for the obligation of the high-born to preserve their public dignity means that they are metaphorically 'enslaved' to the crowd (*douleuomen*, 450). Slavery was even used to express the perception of fate: Heracles realises after his madness that men are 'enslaved' to fortune (*douleuteon*, *Her.* 1357; see also an anonymous tragic fragment, *TGF* II 374). And slavery, both literal and metaphorical, is a central focus of the tragic theatre.

One of the most frequent forms of *peripeteia*, or 'reversal', is actually *peripeteia* of status. Numerous characters, especially in plays treating the fall of Troy, lose previously aristocratic status and become slaves, a fate regarded in the tragic universe as particularly hard to bear (see e.g. *Tro.* 302-3). Enslavement was in reality the fate of women in the fifth century if their cities were sacked: when the islanders of Melos surrendered to Athens in 416/15 BC, the Athenians 'put to death all the men of military age whom they took, and sold the women and children as slaves' (Thuc. 5.116). Whether it is Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and the chorus of *Libation-Bearers*, Tecmessa in Sophocles' *Ajax* and Iole in his *Women of Trachis*, or Hecuba, Cassandra, Andromache, and Polyxena in Euripides' *Hecuba*, *Trojan Women*, and *Andromache*, slave women, once royal but 'won by the spear', by their lamentations, their reflections, or just their silent presence, make their catastrophic fall in status a theme of tragedy.⁴⁵

There is a crucial distinction to be drawn here. While heartbreaking descriptions of life in slavery are frequently rendered by tragic characters, for example by Hecuba in *Trojan Women* (190-6, 489-510), they are virtually all expressed by those once free who have lost their freedom. This seems to have been regarded by the free as considerably more 'tragic' than to have been born into a whole life in servitude: as Menelaus says in *Helen*, a person fallen from high estate finds his lot harder to bear than the long-time unfortunate (417-19). Deianeira can tell merely from the appearance of the enslaved Iole in *Women of Trachis* that the young woman is well-born, for she somehow stands out from the other captives (309). The very form of tragedy, while otherwise remarkably egalitarian (see pp. 118-26 below), does reinforce the distinction between the enslaved aristocrat and the slave from birth; the lyric medium is generally denied to characters of low birth status,⁴⁶ while enslaved aristocrats, in common with their free counterparts, can express their emotions in song.

⁴⁵ See Kuch (1974).

⁴⁶ See Maas (1952) 53-4. The only two exceptions, the Egyptian herald in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* and the Phrygian eunuch in Euripides' *Orestes*, are both non-Greeks, and the singing voice was especially associated with overwrought barbarians: see Hall (1989a)

The once-free, moreover, can regain their freedom. This happens to Andromache in her name-play, and to Sophocles' Electra, who is originally treated like a household slave, but has her status restored by her returning brother. Male characters who by accident of fortune lose high status also usually recover it, like Homer's Odysseus, for a time disguised as a beggar: in Euripides' *Alexander* a shepherd is revealed to be the son of the Trojan royal house, and in his *Ion* the servant-priest of Apollo at Delphi is upgraded to his birthright as heir to the Athenian throne. The disguised hero of Euripides' *Telephus* spent time in service as Clytemnestra's porter before he was proved to be the son of Heracles and an Arcadian princess.⁴⁷ While tragedy can *envisage* the opposite social movement, from seeming aristocratic to actual servile birth status, it never actually happens. Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* considers the possibility that his natural mother was 'a third-generation slave' (1062-3), and Ion fears that his mother was of servile or lowly birth (556, 1477), but in both cases their mothers turn out to have been aristocrats.

In the case, however, of the never-free, slaves from birth, the tragic texts everywhere assume that the slave/free boundary is as fixed, natural, and permanent as the boundary between man and god. It was necessary to the perpetuation of institutionalised slavery to foster a belief in the *natural* servility of those born into the slave class, and no character in tragedy proposes abolishing slavery. The majority of the theatrical audience probably agreed with the character in a fragment of Euripides' lost *Antiope*, who announced that 'a slave ought never to form an opinion becoming a free person, nor to covet leisure' (fr. 216); when slaves do express their own opinions in tragedy they often apologise for it, as Deianira's nurse in *Women of Trachis* prefaces her advice to her mistress with the precautionary words, 'if it is right to advise the free with a slave's opinions' (52-3). In the tragic universe characters cannot improve upon the social status into which they were born. In Euripides' version of Electra's story, she is married to a free poor peasant whom Pylades is to make a wealthy man (1287), but even he was originally from an old Mycenaean family. The sole exception to the inescapability of birth status is suggested by Alcmena's promise to grant freedom to the slave who reports the victory over Eurystheus in *Children of Heracles*, a promise of which he later reminds her (789-90, 888-90); but textual problems frustrate an exact understanding of the situation here.⁴⁸

83-4, 119, 130-2. The nurse in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* almost certainly does not sing: see Easterling (1982) 183.

⁴⁷ See Handley and Rea (1957); Webster (1967) 45.

⁴⁸ The text of this play almost certainly contains gaps (see below, n. 64); were it complete, the significance of this unique emancipation motif would presumably be clearer. It must be

Tragic characters of servile status perform various functions. Almost always nameless, frequently mute, they attend upon royalty and carry out menial tasks such as the carrying of Clytemnestra's carpet in *Agamemnon* (908-9), or the binding of the heroine on Menelaus' orders in Euripides' *Andromache* (425-6). The so-called 'messenger' is often a slave; his or her function is to report important incidents taking place within or away from the household. It is intriguing that tragedy should have granted such lowly figures these privileged speeches, especially since slaves could not even give evidence directly in Athenian courts. Although modern audiences can find them static, the frequency with which the scenes they describe appear on vases is an indication of their ancient popularity (cf. Ch. 4).⁴⁹

Indeed slaves, although formally powerless, can wield enormous power in the world of tragedy through their access to dangerous knowledge.⁵⁰ Of peculiar interest is the Theban shepherd in *Oedipus the King*. He was a slave born into the Theban royal household, rather than bought in from outside (1123). This man with no name, identified variously as 'shepherd', 'peasant' and 'slave', is the only living person other than Tiresias who knows the truth concerning Oedipus. Mysterious parallels are drawn between the slave and the prophet; they are both reluctant to answer summonses to the palace. Tiresias was sent for twice, and Oedipus was surprised at how long it took for him to arrive (*palai*, 289): the slave who witnessed the murder of Laius was also summoned twice (see 118, 838, 861), and, when he finally arrives, Oedipus similarly comments on how long it took him to arrive (*palai*, 1112).

The ageing slave refuses to concede that he gave the baby Oedipus to the Corinthian messenger until he is threatened with the torture to which all slaves were subject at the discretion of the lawcourts of Athens. Indeed, slave evidence was regarded as inadmissible unless extracted under torture (Antiphon, *Tetralogies* 1.3.5).⁵¹ Lying, seen as unbecoming to the free citizen (*Trach.* 453-4), was regarded as 'natural' in the slave. Oedipus first threatens the old man with pain (1152), and then actually orders his men to twist his arms behind his back, in preparation for torture (1154). Finally the old man breaks, and the truth is extracted from him. Thus perhaps the most famous *anagnōrīsis* (recognition) in tragedy, Oedipus'

added that the play seems subsequently (esp. 961-82) to be critical of Alcmena's capacity for making sound ethical judgements!

⁴⁹ De Jong (1991) 118 and n. 5.

⁵⁰ Not only in tragedy: for evidence that slaves in reality had access to extensive information about their masters' families, see Hunter (1994), especially 70-89.

⁵¹ DuBois (1991) 35-8; Hunter (1994) 89-95.

recognition of himself, is the direct result of the extorted testimony of a slave.

Critics have objected to so much dangerous knowledge residing in a single man, in particular finding it implausible that the same slave who was asked to expose the baby survived to be the only living witness of Laius' murder. 'This Theban is the man who took the infant Oedipus to "trackless Cithaeron", who witnessed the murder in the pass, who saw Oedipus married to Jocasta. In other words, astonishingly, wildly improbably, he has been keeping company with Oedipus all of Oedipus' life.'⁵² But such criticisms fail to take into account the social structures which meant that slaves, especially those regarded as particularly trustworthy through having been born into the house, must often have known more about their masters and their families than their masters can have known themselves. Is it really so unlikely that a man sufficiently trusted by Jocasta to have been entrusted by her with the exposure of the infant would also have been selected to accompany Laius on his mission to Delphi? The invention of this slave-character in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* expresses at an aesthetic level the ancient awareness that the dehumanised slaves who lived with the free, and were privy to their secrets, sometimes had knowledge with literally lethal potential. He also exemplifies the disastrous results of independent decision-making by slaves: if he had carried out his original order to expose the baby, the deaths of Laius and Jocasta, the incest, and the blinding of Oedipus, would all have been avoided.

An important category of tragic slave is comprised by the old female nurses and their male counterparts (*paidagōgoi*), who were appointed to care for aristocrats in their childhood, and remained with them in their maturity. In reality such figures must have known much about the household which they served, and the playwrights exploited this knowledge for dramatic purposes: in the opening scene of Euripides' *Medea* a nurse and a *paidagōgos* between them provide all the background information required by the audience.

The *paidagōgos*, appointed by a child's *kurios*, was in reality the *kurios*' agent in his absence, 'an instantiation of his interest and an extension of his authority'.⁵³ In the two *Electra* tragedies by Sophocles and Euripides, the *paidagōgos* is indeed a symbolic extension of the authority of the master who had appointed him, even beyond the grave. In Sophocles' version *Electra* significantly wants to call Orestes' *paidagōgos* 'father' (1361), when in reality even elderly male slaves could be insultingly addressed as 'boy' (*pais*).⁵⁴ This

⁵² Cameron (1968) 22.

⁵³ Golden (1990) 62.

⁵⁴ See Golden (1985) 91-104. At Aesch. *Cho.* 653 Clytemnestra's doorman is addressed as 'boy'.

slave is an authoritative figure obsessed with avenging Agamemnon's death. He urges on the two siblings to matricide, rebukes them for time-wasting, and facilitates the murder by his brilliant 'false' messenger-speech, reporting the fictional death of Orestes. Euripides, typically, takes convention to extremes: his *paidagōgos* had reared not only Orestes, but also Agamemnon.⁵⁵ Thus his authority stretches far back into the past; he is the appointee of Atreus himself.

Nurses and *paidagōgoi*, like other slaves, exhibit a profound 'vertical' allegiance to the households they serve, rather than to others of their class.⁵⁶ Two Euripidean slaves, the nurse in *Medea* (54-5) and the second messenger in *Bacchae* (1027-8), express emotional attachment to their owners, saying that good slaves suffer along with their masters' fate. Even Orestes' old nurse Cilissa in *Libation-Bearers*, while hating Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, remains loyal to the household as represented by Agamemnon's memory and Orestes.

The influence of nurses and *paidagōgoi*, like the knowledge of Oedipus' Theban shepherd, can prove lethal. A driving force behind the plot of Euripides' *Ion* is cultural anxiety about the influence of slaves upon free members of the household, in particular women. If there is a crime in this tragedy it is the attempted murder of Ion, whom Creusa, at the time she agrees to it, believes to be an illegitimate child of her husband Xuthus.

Predictably, the dangerous dialogue between the slave and the woman occurs in the emphasised physical absence of her husband: Xuthus, who thinks he has discovered a long-lost son, has left to sacrifice on the 'win peaks' of the mountain (749, 1122-7). Creusa now enters, with her old *paidagōgos*, long ago appointed by her father (725-7); the scene can be read as implying an unhealthy degree of cross-class intimacy. For Creusa insists that he is her friend although she is his mistress (730-4), helps him physically as he limps onto the stage (739-45), and affectionately hails the chorus as her 'slave-companions' in her weaving (747-8).

The plotting scene which ensues enacts the influence which trusted household slaves might be imagined by absent *kurioi* to wield over their mistresses. If women's deliberative capacity was thought by Aristotle to be 'imperative', it was not present at all in natural slaves (*Pol.* 1 1260a12-13). The upshot of the scene, in which the two characters who both require the guidance of a free male are left to their own devices, is that the slave leaves to slip poison into Ion's drinking-cup. But it is important to see how the scene evolves psychologically. The Chorus transmits the necessary information (as slaves must often have had to do, 774-807). But it is the *paidagōgos*

⁵⁵ Bassi (1942-3) 80-7.

⁵⁶ Synodinou (1977) 62.

who suggests that Xuthus is planning to eject Creusa from her ancestral home in the house of Erechtheus (808–11). Xuthus, the slave suggests, has been breeding behind Creusa's back and intends to pass on her inheritance to his illegitimate child. He tells her to kill both Xuthus and Ion, and volunteers to stab Ion himself (844–56).

Creusa ignores the talk of murder, and spends over a hundred lines lyrically lamenting her fate (859–973). Once again the slave, who is almost preternaturally solicitous about the fate of the royal house, urges her to take action. Creusa does find the moral strength to withstand most of his suggestions. She wisely refuses to burn down Apollo's temple or to kill Xuthus (975, 977). But on the question of Ion's life she yields and provides the poison herself. It cannot, however, be sufficiently stressed that it was the slave who raised the question of murder. He encounters a slave's fate for his pains: he is tortured to extract Creusa's name (1214). But the plotting scene emanates from a social anxiety about the lethal effect of manipulative slaves on susceptible women lacking the judgement of a free male to steer their own.

In Euripides' *Hippolytus* the crisis is caused by a similar interaction between a slave with a dangerous degree of initiative and a psychically frail mistress, in the absence of her husband. The precise point, in human terms, at which the lethal machinery of this plot is set in motion, is when Phaedra breaks silence and confides her passion for her stepson to her nurse. For it would have damaged none but herself had it remained unspoken; Phaedra has, in fact, been in love with Hippolytus since before she and Theseus were required to leave Athens (24–40). Aphrodite says in the prologue that Phaedra has since been suffering the goads of *erōs* in silence, and adds the intriguing detail, the significance of which will only later become apparent, that 'not one of the household servants knows of her affliction' (40).

Theseus is away from Trozen: the nurse tells the anxious chorus that 'he happens to be out of town (*ekdēmos*), away from this land' (281). When he arrives it is clear that he has been on a pilgrimage to a cult centre or oracle (792, 806–7). It has been argued that Theseus' absence, and the reason for it, were invented for the present play, and that the author's motive was purely dramaturgical: it was to provide an 'effective contrast ... with the disaster which greets him'.⁵⁷ But this is to overlook the ideological potency of the plot-pattern by which the *kurtios* must be physically absent while the meddling slave and the emotionally susceptible mistress can jointly engender catastrophe.

⁵⁷ Barrett (1964) 313–14. In the Sophoclean version Theseus was in Hades, believed dead.

The nurse is solicitous towards Phaedra: she brought her up (698). She shares with the *paidagogos* in *Ion* a loyal devotion to her mistress's position in the household, including Phaedra's two sons. Her emotional onslaught opens with the claim that Phaedra's death would betray them by allowing Hippolytus (an older son of Theseus by an Amazon) to share their patrimony (304–10). She applies more pressure (implying that the audience believed that slaves generally wanted access to their superiors' secrets (328)), and beseeches Phaedra with a formal act of supplication (310–33).⁵⁸ She persists despite the protests of her mistress, until Phaedra admits that she is in love. But at the climactic moment when Hippolytus is named as the object of her desire, it is, significantly, the nurse and not Phaedra who utters the name (352).

Uniquely for one of such low social status, the nurse is given the second largest part in the play. Her sinister instigation of the action on the human level would have been underscored in the likely event that she was played by the same actor who played Aphrodite, who instigates it on the superhuman level. The nurse is also dangerously well-educated. In the persuasive speech designed to make Phaedra act on her desire, the nurse marshals arguments from moral philosophy (pragmatism and expediency), and also from cosmogonic theory (447–50). Euripides ironically makes her cite mythical examples of the effects of *erōs* on the gods, whilst simultaneously signalling that such knowledge requires a full-time education in the liberal arts: such tales, she says, are known by those who study paintings and spend all their time with the muses (451–3).

To dangerous rhetorical proficiency the nurse adds excessive initiative. In direct disobedience to Phaedra, she decides to intervene with Hippolytus. An ideological premise of the tragic plot is that when slaves act independently as moral agents the results can be catastrophic. The moral boundary between slave and free is further underscored by the contrast between the nurse's breaking of her word to Phaedra, and Hippolytus' refusal to break the vow of silence imposed upon him by the nurse (657–60), even when his father curses him. Phaedra articulates the underlying premise of the first half of the play by excoriating the nurse for her untrustworthiness and meddling (712–14), before she departs to commit suicide.

The hazards involved in talking to servants, signalled so conspicuously in Aphrodite's prologue, are made quite explicit in Hippolytus' great invective. He says that women should be attended not by servants but by voiceless beasts, for it is communication between licentious women and their

⁵⁸ On the social ritual of formal supplication in tragedy and elsewhere, see Gould (1973) 74–103.

attendants which brings unchastity into the world (65-8).⁵⁹ What Hippolytus does not, however, articulate is the overall impression made on those who have watched the foregoing scenes, that trusted slaves can manipulate vulnerable women, and, given a little knowledge, manipulate them into taking positions at which they would never have arrived alone: it is clear from the fragments of Euripides' *Stheneboea*, another notorious tragedy where an older woman developed a passion for a young man (in this case her husband's guest), that it was not Stheneboea but her nurse who made the approaches to the young Bellerophon.⁶⁰ It is no accident that the 'boorish man' amongst Theophrastus' *Characters* is recognisable by his habit of confiding matters of utmost importance to his slaves while distrusting his own friends and family (4.2): Aristotle recommends that children, whose moral capacities he regards as undeveloped, 'spend very little time in the company of slaves' (*Pol.* VII 1336a39-40).

POLYPHONY

The appreciation of the ideological potency of tragic plot-patterns, while an important corrective to the romantic vision of democratic Athens and her sublime drama, cannot, however, do full justice to the ideological complexity insinuated by the dramatic form itself. It has been one aim of this chapter to demonstrate by an examination of some recurring plot-patterns that, taken as a whole, tragedy legitimises the value-system necessary to the glorification of Athens and the subordination of the slaves, women, and other non-citizens who constituted the majority of her inhabitants. But it is also important to the understanding of the 'sociology' of the plays to remember that the polyphonic tragic form, which gives voice to characters from all such groups, challenges the very notions which it simultaneously legitimises. Some of the most thrilling moments in Athenian tragedy are created when women and slaves are permitted, however briefly, to challenge the hegemonic value-system, and tell us how it felt.

The multivocal form of tragedy, which allows diverse characters to speak (and, more importantly, to disagree with each other), reflects the contemporary development of rhetoric in democratic Athens, itself a product of the increased importance under the democracy of public debate in the assembly and the lawcourts (see Ch. 6 below). Students of rhetoric were trained to think antithetically, to be able to counter any one point of view or argument

⁵⁹ In Lysias' first oration the speaker, whose wife allegedly committed adultery, constructs his narrative throughout so as to appeal to a similar assumption that transgressive wives collaborate with their 'go-between' slaves.

⁶⁰ Webster (1967) 82.

with a speech in opposition. Some rhetorical exercises survive, including Gorgias' famous speech in defence of Helen of Troy, and Antiphon's *Tetralogies*, sets of two speeches in prosecution and two in defence in a hypothetical trial. Certainly by the second half of the fifth century the audiences of tragedy, like those of Shakespeare's day,⁶¹ were trained to appreciate both arguments and counter-arguments and the defence of even seemingly indefensible positions and unconventional points of view. Their mindset, their imagination, was inherently dialogic. A character in a lost Euripidean play said, 'if one were good at speaking one could have a competition between two arguments in every case' (fr. 189 N²).

In later antiquity Plutarch complains that tragedy represented women as clever rhetoricians (*De Aud. Poet.* 28a), and the Christian writer Origen said that Euripides was mocked in comedy because he inappropriately made 'barbarian women and slaves' articulate philosophical opinions (*Contra Celsum* 7.36.34-6). The tragic actor Theodoros refused to allow any other actor to appear on stage before him because, he said, 'an audience always takes kindly to the first voice that meets their ears' (Aristot. *Pol.* VII 1336b27-31). This statement applies as much to the character being assumed as to the actor himself. It is striking, therefore, how often the audience's sympathies are first enlisted by female or servile characters, who appear before anyone else: Antigone, Helen, and Andromache open their name-plays, as Deianeira does *Women of Trachis*, and the prologue spoken by a low-class character seems to have been a regular feature (e.g. *Agamemnon* and *Medea*). And some classical Athenians were already aware of tragedy's dangerously radical potential for giving voice, and a sympathetic hearing, to the citizen's subordinates.

In tragedy, for example, even the most virtuous of women (e.g. Andromache) are often rebuked for speaking too freely and too antagonistically to men (*Eur. Andr.* 364-5). In Plato's *Republic* Socrates demonstrates that the main difference between drama and other kinds of poetry is that it consists entirely of speeches in the first person (that is in direct *mimēsis* or 'imitation' of characters), to the exclusion of narrative in the authorial voice. He says that the direct impersonation of 'inferiors' such as women and slaves, which drama entails, is profoundly harmful morally (III 394b3-e5); he is just as concerned about the ethical damage caused by the representation of 'womanish' emotions in tragedy (10.605c10-e6).

Tragedy consists of polyphony and antiphony. No genre is so definitively dialogic, nor conceals the authorial persona to such an extreme degree. Interestingly, *mythical* poets and bards figured much more as characters

⁶¹ Altman (1978).

than the extant plays would lead us to suppose. Orpheus was a central character in Aeschylus' lost *Bassarids*; both Aeschylus and Sophocles composed plays named *Thamyris* dramatising the singing competition between this bard and the muses; Euripides' *Hypsipyle* portrayed the citharode Euneus, who founded an Athenian clan of musicians;⁶² his *Antiope* featured a debate between Zethus and his lyre-playing brother Amphion about the benefits which poets confer on a community.⁶³ Yet the authorial voice of the tragic poet himself is more elusive in this genre than in any other ancient literary form, including comedy. The views of the speaking characters are thus subjected to no controlling moral evaluation, except by other characters and by the audience.

Even the laudatory tone with which democracy and Athens are usually discussed in tragedy is occasionally challenged. The polyphonic form even allows a Theban herald, in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, to provide a critique of democratic constitutions, pointing out that they can lead to rule by an ignorant mob (410–25). In Euripides' *Medea* the whole plot-type by which non-Athenian heroic figures could bring honour to Athens is subverted by the addition to their ranks of Medea, the murderous barbarian sorceress; she ends the play, unpunished and unrepentant, flying off on the chariot of the Sun to Athens, 'to live with Aegeus son of Pandion' (1385). And the laudatory effect of the famous choral panegyric of Athens (824–45) is undercut by its occurrence after the scene in which Medea has dominated him completely.

Perhaps the best example is embodied in the figure of Demophon in Euripides' *Children of Heracles*. On a superficial reading the first half of the play seems to follow the standard lines of the 'patriotic' tragedies about Athens' own mythical past. The children of the deceased Heracles, persecuted by the Argive king Eurystheus, have arrived at the temple of Zeus (god of suppliants) in the Attic district of Marathon, a particularly patriotic site for the Athenians ever since the Persian wars. The suppliants are received by the old men of Marathon with politeness, pity, and pledges of protection. The play abounds in praise of Athenian democratic institutions, especially the rights to free speech, impartial judgements in the courts, and to sanctuary. Yet ambiguities suggest that in this play the Athenian king Demophon is not quite the exemplar of virtue the audience might have become accustomed to expect in an Athenian ruler in tragedy; he is made to threaten the herald Copreus with violence, an act of great impiety, as he is reminded (270–1). It is also implied that he is too susceptible to the advice of oracle-tellers (a group who were often the target of tragic criticism), when

⁶² Plathly (1985) 79.

⁶³ Webster (1967) 207–8.

he heeds their admonition barbarically to sacrifice a high-born female virgin (399–409).⁶⁴

Throughout the tragic corpus speakers disrupt the dominant ideological assumptions about women. Euripides even seems to have been aware that much of the blame for the bad reputation of women in myth must be laid at the feet of the male poets who had created them (*Med.* 420–30). His *Medea* includes a supremely negative portrait of a vituperative, vindictive, and murderous female, which could only be the product of a patriarchal society.⁶⁵ Yet by giving Medea a voice, and *imagining* the emotions of an abandoned wife, it allows her to deliver the most remarkable account of the second-class status of women to be found in ancient literature (214–66). She complains about the dowry system, about men's control over women's bodies, and about wives' lonely isolation in the home; she even asserts that giving birth to a single child is worse than standing three times in the front line of battle! This speech's explosive political potential caused it to be recited at meetings in Edwardian London in support of women's suffrage.⁶⁶

Women's perspective on marriage was voiced in other plays: besides Medea's speech, the most striking example is Procne's denunciation of women's experience of marriage in Sophocles' famous *Tereus*. In this play Procne's husband had raped and mutilated her sister. Procne complains on behalf of women (fr. 583 Radt):⁶⁷

... when we reach puberty and can understand, we are thrust out and sold, away from our ancestral gods and from our parents. Some go to strange men's houses, others to foreigners, some to joyless houses, some to hostile. And all this, once the first night has yoked us to our husband, we are forced to praise, and say that all is well.

Moreover, a reading sensitive to tragedy's portrayal of relations between men and women sees signs that male disrespect towards women in the sphere of the household met the same disapproval in the theatre as in reality. For however pervasive the sexual double standard in tragedy, as in Athenian life, which allowed men multiple sexual partners while severely

⁶⁴ Thereafter this fascinating play continues to confound expectations, as it develops from a suppliant drama into a revenge tragedy: Alcmena, Heracles' mother, vindictively demands the brutal execution of Eurystheus. His initial role as hostile invader of Attica then becomes transformed into its opposite: an oracle predicts that his grave will offer protection to Athens against the (Peloponnesian) descendants of Heracles, much as Orestes, Oedipus, and Heracles in other plays (discussed above) become allies of the city. But the textual problems which the play presents, especially the probable gaps after lines 629 and 1052 (concisely discussed by Wilkins (1993) xxvii–xxx), make it difficult to draw conclusions about the overall presentation of Athens.

⁶⁵ Murray (1913) 82.

⁶⁶ See Rabinowitz (1993) 125–54.

⁶⁷ Translation taken from Lefkowitz and Fant (1992) 12–13.

punishing female adultery,⁶⁸ there is an immanent rule discernible in the genre by which the instalment of a concubine in the *marital home* is strictly censured. Every man who attempts it in tragedy suffers death shortly thereafter: Aeschylus' Agamemnon, who brings back Cassandra from Troy, Heracles in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, who does much the same with Iole, and Neoptolemus in Euripides' *Andromache*, who has outraged his wife by introducing Andromache to his marital home. As Orestes remarks in that play, it is a bad thing for a man to have two women he shares a bed with (*leché*, 909); in the world of Greek tragedy it is apparently not only bad, but fatal. The ideology underlying this story pattern is a refraction through a mythical and poetic prism of the same culturally endorsed notion which leads the orator Apollodorus to praise Lysias for having refrained from bringing his girlfriends home out of respect for his wife and old mother ([Dem.] 59.2).

The recurring figure of the dignified priestess (especially those of Apollo at Delphi in *Eumenides* and *Ion*, and the high-minded Theonoe of Euripides' *Helen*) also reflects the importance of the one sphere in which women could achieve public authority in the city-state: it was women's central role in oracles and ritual to which Melanippe appealed in her famous defence of women in Euripides' lost *Melanippe Captive* (Eur. fr. 499 N²).⁶⁹

Men's criticism of women is worthless twanging of a bowstring and evil talk. Women are better than men, as I will show ... Consider their role in religion, for that, in my opinion, comes first. We women play the most important part, because women prophesy the will of Zeus in the oracles of Phoebus. And at the holy site of Dodona near the sacred oak, females convey the will of Zeus to inquirers from Greece. As for the sacred rituals for the Fates and the nameless Ones [i.e. the Erinyes], all these would not be holy if performed by men, but prosper in women's hands. In this way women have a rightful share in the service of the gods. Why is it, then, that women must have a bad reputation?

The speeches of Medea, Procne, and Melanippe were spoken by expert (male) actors in a poetic language enhanced by highly wrought rhetoric and elevated diction. Tragedy's medium of communication operates at a more heightened level than everyday speech, actually permitting Medea and the others to elicit responses beyond those achievable by mere communication of content.⁷⁰ Yet this same heightened language is shared by all the characters, whatever their ethnicity, gender, or class; there is little attempt

⁶⁸ See Cohen (1991).

⁶⁹ Translation from Lefkowitz and Fant (1992) 14.

⁷⁰ Coward and Ellis (1977) 79.

to differentiate even the speech of barbarians.⁷¹ Tragic language is a democratic property owned collectively by all who use it; in the tragic theatre individuals whose ethnicity, gender, or status would absolutely debar them from public debate in democratic Athens can address the massed Athenian citizenry. It is clear, then, that only a bifurcated reading, sensitive both to latent ideological import and its patent verbalised subversion, can hope to do justice to texts of such complexity.

By giving voice to persons of lower social status than their aristocratic masters, tragedy also offers some remarkable, imaginative representations of the perspectives of the lower classes. The military life, and the ordinary soldier's personal experience of war, recur as topics of discussion. The experience may be displaced into the rhetoric of an upper-class figure: Peleus, for example, gives a fascinating speech in opposition to the militaristic Menelaus of *Andromache*. Despite Peleus' own personal high status the speech permits the audience to hear a grievance which must often have been felt by the ordinary citizen, that the glory for victory in battle goes always to the general and never to the thousands of soldiers who laboured under his command (693–8). Sometimes the lower-class characters themselves voice their own perspective on the leaders. The military chorus of the *Rhesus* attributed to Euripides (but see Ch. 9) criticise their leader Hector's decision, and state that they do not approve of generals who exercise power harshly and put their men in danger (132). In the same play there is a debate between Hector and a shepherd on the intellectual capacities of country people. Hector is contemptuous of the humble shepherd and his like (266–70), but the shepherd turns out to be both an acute observer of military matters and bilingual (284–316). And the common in *Agamemnon* gives a unique account of what life was like for the common soldier in antiquity: the miserable quarters and inadequate bedding, the sensations of being rained on and infested with vermin, the unendurable cold of winter and the searing heat of summer-time (555–66).

Tragedy's fondness for portraying enslaved former aristocrats allows it to express some fascinating 'worm's-eye' views of slavery. The captive heroine of Euripides' *Andromache*, attacked by her mistress, laments that as a slave she cannot hope for a fair hearing, and that people hate to be worsted in argument by their social inferiors (186–90). A messenger, impressed by the virtues demonstrated by the sons of the (temporarily) captive Melanippe, remarks that even the children of slaves can prove nobler than free men with empty reputations (Eur. fr. 495 N², 41–3). Occasionally even slaves

⁷¹ Although see Hall (1996) 40–1, for some possible exceptions. In comedy there was much greater exploitation of foreign accents: Hall (1989a) 117–21.

from birth are allowed to express something of their life experience. Menelaus' loyal slave in *Helen* proudly declares (728-31), 'Even though I was born to serve, I would like to be regarded as a noble slave. I may not have the title of a free man, but I have his mind.' Later in the play a slave of Theoclymenus offers to die instead of the priestess Theonoe, thus displaying virtues singularly lacking in his master; with heavy irony, Euripides makes him say that it is a great honour for 'noble slaves' to die on behalf of their masters (1640-1). And Cilissa, the nurse in *Libation-Bearers*, speaks with remarkable freshness across the centuries about the labour and responsibilities involved in child-care: her speech articulates the closest thing to an authentic first-hand account of the experiences of a servile nurse to survive from antiquity. The audience hears how as a baby Orestes disturbed her sleep with his urgent cries; she remembers his hunger, thirst, and even his 'call of nature', which often meant that she had to launder his linen (749-62). Unusually, Cilissa also expresses dislike for her mistress, a truly 'suppressed' voice released by the imaginative capacities of drama, for the grumbles of the real discontented slave women of Athens are for ever silent.⁷²

The manner in which aristocrats treat their subordinates is an important means by which their characters are 'tested' in tragedy. Menelaus' clichés about the importance of the free not tolerating insolence from slaves in *Andromache* (433-4) are subverted by his own brutal cynicism. The central function of the guard in *Antigone*, besides bringing the news of the two burials of Polyneices, is to elicit responses from Creon suggesting his heavy-handedness and impetuosity. The guard fears that as simply a bringer of bad news he may be punished for a crime of which he is innocent (228), and his fear turns out to be justified: Creon threatens him with torture unless he and his fellow guards find the culprit. They are all to be strung up alive (308-9). The herdsman who delivers the first speech in *Bacchae* serves a similar function with respect to Pentheus' tyrannical tendencies. He asks Pentheus whether he can speak freely, or whether he should exercise caution, since he fears Pentheus' anger and royal power (670-1). Similar concern is expressed by the old female porter in Euripides' *Helen*, who is terrified to bring bad news to her savage master Theoclymenus (481-2).

CONCLUSION: TRAGEDY AND DEMOCRACY

It is customary in the late twentieth century to upbraid the ancient Athenian democracy for being far from democratic in the modern sense of the word.

⁷² It is a realistic touch that Cilissa's name denotes her place of origin, Cilicia, which was a principal source of real slaves in fifth-century Athens.

Women, slaves, and foreigners were denied political power and silenced in the public discourse of Athens. The ideas and values which were necessary to the system's perpetuation permeated the tragic genre at every level: in just a few examples, we have seen how Athenian tragedy consistently manipulated myth to authorise Athens' claim to hegemony over other cities, and to provide enacted poetic justifications for the control of women by men and for the subordination of slaves. And yet the multivocal form of these documents of the collective Athenian imagination overleaps those narrowly restricted notions of democracy and right to free speech which mark our documents of Athenian reality, such as historiography and oratory.

Athenian tragedy is thus a supreme instantiation of what Marxists call art's 'utopian tendency'; this expression denotes art's potential for an inclination towards transcending in fictive unreality the social limitations and historical conditions of its own production.⁷³ To put it more simply: Greek tragedy does its thinking in a form which is vastly more politically advanced than the society which produced Greek tragedy. The human imagination has always been capable of creating egalitarian models of society even when they are inconceivable in practice, such as the communistic utopias of some 'golden age' myths; in tragedy the Athenians created a public dialogue marked by an egalitarian form beyond their imagination in actuality. Tragedy's multivocal form and socially heterogeneous casts suggest an implicit egalitarian vision whose implementation in the actual society which produced it was absolutely inconceivable.⁷⁴ Tragedy postulates in imagination a world rarely even hoped for in reality until very recently. It is a world which is 'democratic' in something akin to the modern, Western sense; it is a world in which characters of diverse ethnicity, gender, and status all have the same right to express their opinions and the same verbal ability with which to exercise that right.

Aristophanes, who was certainly aware that tragedy permitted publicly silenced voices to be publicly released, seems to have been prophetically aware of our more modern sense of the term 'democratic'; he gives his Euripides an extraordinary claim in his contest with Aeschylus in *Frogs*. Euripides says that he has made tragedy 'democratic' (*dēmokratikon*), precisely by keeping his women and slaves, young girls and crones, talking alongside 'the master of the house' (949-52).⁷⁵

Although the Aristophanic Euripides here misrepresents Aeschylus and Sophocles in implying that it was he who first gave important tragic roles to women and slaves, this instance of the term 'democratic' deserves close

⁷³ On the 'utopian' tendency of art and its capacity for imaginative transcendence of social reality, see Jameson (1981) 290-1; Rose (1992) 36-42; Ryan (1989).

⁷⁴ Ryan (1989) 17. ⁷⁵ On this passage see also di Benedetto (1971) 213.

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The language of tragedy: rhetoric and communication

attention. Its inclusive meaning, extending to women and slaves, is unparalleled in Athenian discourse; the 'people' (*dēmos*) who exercised power (*kratos*) is elsewhere always exclusively defined as the collective male citizenry of the polis. But the context of the inclusive use is of course a discussion of *tragedy*. Despite the genre's prevalent authorisation of the social status quo, it does give voice to those debarred by their gender or class from what *we* would call their 'democratic right' to free speech. It grants them temporarily in imagination the 'equality in the right to public speaking' (*isēgoria*) and the freedom to express opinion (*parrhēsia*) in reality enjoyed solely by citizen males.

Athenian tragedy's claim to having been a truly democratic art-form is therefore, paradoxically, far greater than the claim to democracy of the Athenian state itself. The tension, even contradiction, between tragedy's egalitarian form and the dominantly hierarchical world-view of its content is the basis of its transhistorical vitality: it is certainly an important reason why it is proving so susceptible to constant political reinterpretation in the theatres of the modern world (see Ch. 11 below).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

- For the Athenian and Athenocentric aspects of tragedy see Loraux (1993); Goldhill (1986) ch. 3; Hall (1989a) chs. 2–4; M. Whitlock-Blundell, 'The ideal of Athens in *Oedipus at Colonus*', in Sommerstein et al. (1993) 287–306.
- The more important contributions to the study of gender issues in tragedy include Foley (1981) 127–68; Zeitlin (1984) 149–84, and (1990) 63–96. See also des Bouvrie (1990); Just (1989); Rehm (1994).
- On issues of social class in tragedy generally there are important insights in di Benedetto (1971), Citri (1978), and Rose (1992) chs. 4–5. Slavery in tragedy has not prompted much work, except on Euripides, for whom see Synodinou (1977), and Kuch (1974).

In Plato's *Republic*, when Socrates is describing the imperviousness to fear of the Guardians of his new Republic, he catches himself using rather grand metaphorical terms, and he immediately rebukes himself for speaking *tragikōs*, 'tragically', 'like a tragic character' (413b4). Demosthenes, the great orator, dismisses the rhetoric of Aeschines, his opponent, as bombast with the verb *tragōidēin*, 'to play in a tragedy' (which is also a dig at his former career as an actor) (18.13; 19.189). The comic playwright Aristophanes, who repeatedly parodies the language of tragedy, has a character in his play *Peace* wonder why the hero didn't fly on Pegasus rather than a dung-beetle, and thus appear *tragikōteros*, 'more tragic', 'more like a tragic hero' (136). Already, in the classical polis, 'the tragic' has become synonymous with a certain grandeur of expression, high-flown periphrasis and even heroic posturing. Tragedy is – and was perceived to be – made up of a particular register of language: there is a style and vocabulary proper to the genre. So how is the language of tragedy to be characterised? There are several types of answer that can be given to this question, that take us far beyond generalisations about the grand and the heroic. What is more, the tragic texts themselves are deeply concerned with how language is (to be) used. This chapter will explore the questions of tragic language.

The first type of answer that can be developed is a formal one. One basic articulation of tragedy is the difference between scenes and choral odes. The scenes are conventionally divided into *rhēseis* and stichomythia. A *rhēsis* (plural *rhēseis*) is a set speech of varying length (rarely more than a hundred lines) in which a figure offers an exposition of his or her position, or a description of an event, or a reflection on events. Stichomythia is the rapid exchange of mostly single lines between two or more characters. Often the formal exchange of *rhēseis* breaks down into violent argument in stichomythia, and such a scene is known as an *agōn* (plural *agōnes*), 'contest'. Both *rhēsis* and stichomythia are almost invariably written in the iambic metre, which Aristotle calls the 'closest to human speech'; and in Attic

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