ONE

Myth and Attic Tragedy

Any title which includes the word "myth" is almost certain, these days, to raise expectations, entertained by some with enthusiasm and by others with dismay, that the writer will deal in wide, if not universal, terms of reference—the complexes, displacements, and sublimations of Sigmund Freud; the somewhat arbitrary archetypes of Jung; the Indo-European tripartite functions of Dumézil; or the codes, contradictions, and mediations of Claude Lévi-Strauss—and also that the article will come equipped with at least one complicated diagram. This essay is less ambitious. It tries to deal in specific, pragmatic terms with a limited area—the myths preferred by the Attic tragic poets of the fifth century B.C.

The thirty or so Greek tragedies we still possess (as well as many others we know only in fragmentary form) were performed in Athens some 2,500 years ago at a citywide festival which was a religious ceremony and also a political occasion, a celebration of the imperial power and social cohesion of the Athenian people. It is hard to think of any period since then in which the theater has expressed so clearly and directly the mood and mind of a whole community; this is in fact the ideal relationship between stage and audience to which all theaters look back in envy. And yet, as is well known, the subject matter of the plays, far from reflecting the immediate concerns, the everyday life of the audience, dealt almost exclusively with the action and suffering of mythical figures who were believed to have lived and died in a far-off past. With a few exceptions at the beginning of the century (excursions into recent history), the tragedies of the great age of Athenian drama dealt exclusively with the figures and events of myth.

Drama, since it can function only as a contact between poet and audience through the medium of actors, can never be a hermetic art, one that demands time and interpretation for its understanding; it may be outrageous, it may be unexceptional or even dull, but whatever else it is, it *must* be immediately intelligible to a mass audience on some level, must appeal at once to that audience's deepest sympathies, its secret fears, its ambitions, its hopes. The fifth-century Athenian

dramatist, at the very birth of the theater, succeeded in doing so by using, in the main, story material handed down from the immemorial past. How was this possible? In other words, what resources, what strengths, did the tragic poets find in myth? An attempt to answer that question may perhaps explain what myth—at least the kind of myth tragedy made peculiarly its own—meant to the fifth-century Athenians, why it had such a hold on their imaginations, and how it functioned in their social, religious, and political life.

It is often assumed (even in contexts where it is not explicitly stated) that the use of such mythical themes was imposed on the dramatists by the force of tradition and the religious nature of the occasion; myth is seen as the natural, indeed inevitable, content for a dramatic medium which, to use the terms of Aristotle's influential metaphor, was an organic growth from Dionysiac ritual to perfection of form. Most modern theorists of tragedy's origin, as if relieved to find one aspect of Aristotle's account they could all agree on, have laid great stress on the ritual, religious origin of the performance in the theater of Dionysus. And a process of gradual evolution from some kind of Dionysiac ritual performance—dithyrambic, satyric, phallic—to fully dramatic presentation rides easily in harness with a parallel theory of the development of content, from "sacred tales" of Dionysus to myths that may indeed have "nothing to do with Dionysus" but still deal with gods and men imagined in the far-off past and represented in the same social religious mode.

One influential theory of the origin of tragedy emphasized the ritual element by reconstructing out of airy nothing a full-fledged Dionysiac passion play and saw its continued pervasive influence in the structure and tone of fully developed drama, even in that of Euripides (in fact, one of the weaknesses of the theory was that the "ritual structure" was most clearly discerned in Euripides, left little traces of its presence in Sophocles, and was almost invisible in the plays of Aeschylus). Frazer and Jane Harrison laid the foundations for the theory; Cornford in an exciting book, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*,[1] and Murray in his excursus on the ritual origins of Greek tragedy (an appendix to Jane Harrison's *Themis*[2]) built an elaborate structure on this foundation. It was, however, a shaky structure at best, not the least wobbly of its pillars the addition to an already overcrowded Greek pantheon of a new divinity, the *eniautos daimon*, the Year Spirit.

A meticulous and destructive analysis of this theory in Pickard-Cambridge's indispensable book *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy*[3] (now, alas, unobtainable) left the "ritual structure" of developed tragedy in ruins more desolate than those of Pentheus' palace in *The Bacchae* and laid forever the ghost of the *eniautos daimon*. Or so one happily thought.

But in T. B. L. Webster's revised edition of Pickard-Cambridge's great book, the work is undone. Webster's edition has its merits—the addition of new evidence, the discussion of the vase paintings, a field in which he was an acknowledged authority—but his attempt to cancel out Pickard-Cambridge's exorcism of the *daimon* is regrettable. "With our extended knowledge of the history of the Dionysus cult," he says, "the theory can be restated in a form both tenable and valuable." This form is as follows: "ritual of the *eniautos daimon* type in the Mycenaean age very early (and certainly before Homer) gave rise to myths which were dramatized very early and so established a rhythm which was so satisfying that stories from other mythological cycles were approximated to it." This sounds more like a simple repetition than a restatement; in any case, that second "very early," though less precise than one could wish, seems to claim the existence of dramatized Dionysiac ritual, complete with pathos, threnos, and epiphany, long before tragedy as we know it began some time in the second half of the sixth century. If so, the problem of the origin of tragedy is solved and its later preoccupation with myth perfectly comprehensible and almost inevitable. But the evidence for this restatement "in a form both tenable and valuable" is not impressive. It consists of "the likeness of the ecstatic dances of Dionysus' Maenads to the ecstatic dances which appear on Minoan and Mycenaean works of art," a likeness which, we are told, "is obvious." Apart from the fact that ecstatic dancing Maenads do not appear in Aristotle's account of Dionysiac origins, the likeness is not obvious to everyone. The Mycenaean works of art on which these scenes are found are rings, and these rings, Webster tells us, "can be arranged by the variation of the foliage on the trees in the background as a cycle proceeding from winter through spring to summer and harvest time. The cycle starts with mourning for the dead and a hope that the young god (who may perhaps be called Dionysus) will appear and possibly ends with the departure of goddess or god and goddess in a boat. The cycle is certainly a Year God cycle . . . the ritual is designed to overcome the forces of nature which resist the new growth of vegetation and in story this resistance is translated into the resistance of human Kings to the worship of Dionysus and his Maenads . . . Pentheus . . ." and so on.[4]

This is "evidence" which will impress some more than others; it would have appalled Pickard-Cambridge, who limited himself to "what can really be said to be proved or probable." The interpretation of the tiny figures on Mycenaean seal rings is a guessing game at best, but it requires the eye of blind faith to detect seasonal changes of vegetation on those crude schematic designs. And the method of this argument leaves much to be desired. "The rings can be arranged . . . as a cycle"; of course they can. They can also be arranged in any way you wish,

depending on what you want to prove. The "arrangement" becomes a "cycle" which emerges as a "rite"; "the resistance" of the forces of nature (how is *that* represented on the rings?) is translated into "the resistance of human beings"—a transformation, to use the terms of a more recent anthropology, of the vegetable code to the social.

Webster's attempt to push the origin of tragedy back in time into what he assumes was a more "ecstatic," barbaric context is of course in the spirit of our age; interestingly enough, performances of Greek tragedy in recent years have followed suit. Tyrone Guthrie's company, when still located in Stratford, Ontario, produced a famous version of the *Oedipus Tyrannos* (widely known through the film adaptation) in which actors and chorus wore hideous rubber masks, like the Halloween goblin masks American children put on at that season, and the grim proceedings on stage gave the audience the impression they were watching some kind of Druidical human sacrifice. Some years ago, in a garage in New York City, a theatrical group staged *The Bacchae* of Euripides under the title *Dionysus in 69*.[5] It did take place in 1969, but some of the stage action suggested that the title was chosen with an eye to the sexual connotations of that number. In the Dionysus-Pentheus scene, for example, Dionysus exerted his power over the king by persuading him to commit fellatio on him (needless to say, the text of Euripides had long since been left behind in favor of creative improvisation). The killing of Pentheus took place onstage (except that there was no stage—the spectators, who had had to remove their shoes before they were let in, sat on the floor in a circle), and the Maenads (rather hefty girls most of them) stripped naked, splashed themselves with tomato ketchup, and proceeded to pass the equally naked Pentheus through their legs in what was billed as an African rebirth rite.

It seems clear enough, of course, that the origin of tragedy did have something to do with Dionysus, perhaps even with Dionysiac ritual, though no one seems to be sure what that ritual was. But the problem is: how did something like *The Oresteia* develop from it? It does not seem likely, given that the essential fact about ritual is that it does not change, that the process was an orderly, evolutionary progression, an organic growth; some new elements must have been added, some violent disruptions of continuity effected.

It was once possible (and indeed almost general) to argue for the smooth evolution from ritual to drama by arguing backward from the formal evolution observable in extant tragedy—from a choral, lyrical tragedy to a vehicle dominated by actors. This argument depended of course on the early date of the Aeschylean *Supplices*. It was obviously early because it was clearly, from the standpoint of fully evolved drama, apprentice work; the second actor was so clumsily used that he must

have been recently introduced, the actor's *epeisodia* were short, the choral odes long, involved, and magnificent. But a papyrus fragment has removed the play to the sixties of the fifth century from the nineties in which it had so confidently been placed. Exhibit A for the idea that early tragedy was, as Kitto named it, "lyrical tragedy" vanished into thin air and left us with the maverick *Persae* as the earliest extant play—maverick in its nonmythical content, the inordinate length of the first *epeisodion*, the switch from iambic trimeter to trochaic tetrameter and back again in the Darius scene, and some other peculiarities as well.

In recent years the whole theory of orderly evolution has been subjected to searching criticism. Gerald Else, in his radical and brilliant book, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*,[6] has made the iconoclastic suggestion (and it is not the only one in the book) that "the origin of tragedy was not so much a gradual 'organic' development as a sequence of two creative leaps, by Thespis and Aeschylus." He goes on to stress the importance for the formative period of tragedy of Homeric recitations at the Panathenaea, and the impact of the personal (i.e., self-dramatizing) poetry of Solon—in iambic verse. He sees Thespis' achievement as "a new creation" which "brought together three different things which had never been joined before: the epic hero, impersonation, and iambic verse." Dionysus and ritual form no part of his picture of the origin of tragedy.

Whatever may be thought of the theory as a whole (and it does depend to some extent on the exclusion of a crucial sentence in Aristotle's *Poetics* as an interpolation), there is much to be said for the idea that the early stages of Attic tragedy were not an "organic" growth but a series of daring experiments. One successful experiment, for example, was the addition to the Dionysiac festival of the satyr play by Pratinus of Phlius, which, it is now generally agreed, came toward the end of the sixth century. There may have been experiments which had no imitators: the Aeschylean *Aitnaiai*, it now appears, had frequent changes of scene. In any case, the experimental openness of early Attic tragedy is clear from the fact that, among the few tragedies produced prior to 470 B.C. of which we know anything at all, three deal not with mythical but with contemporary themes. Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus*, probably produced in 492, moved the audience to tears and resulted in a fine for the author; his *Phoenissae*—its subject the arrival at the Persian court of the news of Salamis—was produced in 477–76; and in 472 Aeschylus produced *The Persians*, a fresh treatment of the same subject. The recently discovered fragment of a Gyges drama may also come under this head; it has even been suggested that its author was Phrynichus.[7] Be that as it may, the evidence suggests firmly that in the first decades of the fifth century, Attic tragedy was far from being

locked on a fixed course of dramatic adaptation of myth. But, as it turned out, the drama based on recent history seems to have been an experiment that was not repeated; we hear no more of such subjects for tragedy until the late fourth century. The fifth-century tragic poets, with the exception of the three plays already mentioned, drew their themes, as far as we know, from the great body of traditional mythology.

What kind of myth did they prefer? Since the plays which have survived intact are only a pitiful remnant of the hundreds of tragedies staged in the course of the century, this may seem like an idle question. But in fact we are not so badly off as at first appears. We have 31 complete tragedies which were produced before the end of the fifth century. But we know by fragments, by title, or both, 61 more plays of Aeschylus, 81 of Sophocles and 52 of Euripides. To this we can add titles and fragments from ten other dramatists who we know were at work in the fifth century—a total of 54 plays.[8] And there are 14 plays of which we have indicative fragments or titles but no author's name and which have a fifth-century look about them. This gives us a total of 293 plays. If we end our period with B.C. 402 (the date of the posthumous production of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*) and assume, with much probability, that no performances took place in 479, 478 and 404, years of destruction and revolution, we come up with a total of just over a thousand tragic plays[9] (9 at each Dionysia, 4 at the Lenaea from 440 B.C. on). So we have some knowledge of the subjects of close to one-third of the century's tragic production. Since our sample was produced by processes as varied as selection for school use in the Byzantine empire, citation by rhetoricians and lexicographers, inclusion in encyclopedic lists, and the fortuitous preservation of inscribed stone fragments or torn pieces of papyrus, our one-third is a random sample. Its nature as well as its size justify some generalizations about tragic subject matter in the great age of Athenian drama.

The first striking fact about the plays of this sample is that not one of them deals exclusively (and only two of them—the *Prometheus* plays—extensively) with gods. The whole cycle of myths which told of the birth, marriages, and wars of the Olympian divinities, the material of Hesiod's *Theogony*, was left almost untouched by the tragic poets; even the *Prometheus* has one prominent human character (though it is true that, as Housman put it, she is provided with four hooves, two horns, one tail), and in the *Prometheus Unbound* the hero Heracles plays a key role. The normal material of Attic tragedy is the complex of myths which told the stories of the men and women of the Greek past. The gods may, indeed often do, appear on stage, but though their role may be, theologically speaking, causal, it is, dramatically speaking, secondary.

This exclusive preoccupation of tragedy with human as opposed to divine myth is emphasized by a contrasting phenomenon, the fairly frequent appearance of divine, even cosmogonical, myths in comedy and satyr plays. Hermippus wrote a comedy called *The Birth of Athena* [*Athenas gonai*]; the fragments contain a speech by Athena herself and part of an account of how Zeus gave her her name. In the *Nemesis* of Cratinus, Zeus is told to change into a big bird in order to seduce Nemesis; Nemesis subsequently lays an egg and Leda is told to get to work, Λήδα, σὸν ἔργον, "act exactly like a rooster and hatch it out." She does, and it produces Castor, Polydeuces, Clytemnestra, and Helen of Troy. In satyr plays, too, the gods have prominent roles. There are no human characters in Sophocles' *Ichneutae*, and his *Judgement* [*Krisis*] seems to have brought the three goddesses on stage for the beauty contest on Mount Ida. Achaeus wrote a satyric *Hephaestus*, in which Dionysus persuades Hephaestus to come back to Olympus; the many representations of Hephaestus' return on the vases suggest that this was a hilarious and drunken scene. Achaeus also wrote an *Iris*, Astydamas a *Hermes*, Timesitheus (who may have produced in the fifth century) a *Birth of Zeus*—all satyr plays.

Tragedy, however, avoids such themes and concentrates on human, heroic myth. But even within this category, it is highly selective; the bulk of the tragedies we can identify draw their themes from a surprisingly small segment of the vast mythological repertoire. The Trojan War and its ramifications account for no less than 68 of the known plays; the voyage of the Argo, its antecedents and consequences, for 21. The house of Cadmus and the story of Thebes down to its capture by the Epigonoi give us 33 titles, the house of Tantalus, from Pelops through Atreus to Iphigeneia, 31. Heracles and his children are the subject of 14 dramas; Athenian myth (including Theseus) contributes 19, Crete and the line of Europa 10, Calydon and the famous hunt 8. The Perseus cycle was used in 10 tragedies, the adventures of Odysseus in 10 more; Bellerophon and family appear in 7 plays, Ixion and his descendents in 6. The remaining 54 titles of our sample include the two Prometheus plays and 2 each for Melanippe, Phaethon, and Tyro.

This body of traditional material is a closely woven pattern of human lives, the action and suffering of men and women in their relationships with one another and with the gods, organized in a complex of interlocking family histories and grouped round a number of great central events: the Trojan War, the founding and the siege of Thebes, the voyage of the Argo, the Calydonian boar hunt—events with repercussions that spread, like circles from a stone thrown into a pond, outwards through the whole to the extreme borders of the pattern.

It will be obvious from this description of "tragic myth" that one of the things the poets found in it, one of the sources of its powerful hold on them and their audience, was the authority of what we would call "history." Tragic myth, for the fifth-century Greeks, was the story of their past, their history—for early times the only history they knew. It was not of course history in our sense of the word. The Greek alphabet, adapted from a North Phoenician syllabary,[10] makes its appearance in the archeological record some time in the late eighth century B.C., and writing does not seem to have been used for literary rather than commercial purposes until the start of the century after that. All the events of tragic myth are thought of as many centuries back in time. There was no written record of these events, no conceivable way to find out what actually happened. There were only the myths—"what they say," ὅσα μυθέονται.

M. I. Finley has stressed the fact that myths have no real chronology and that "dates and a coherent dating scheme are as essential to history as exact measurement is to physics." It is also true that, as he goes on to point out, the time of the mythical events is not fixed chronologically with regard to known historical events. Herodotus, he says, "was able ... to establish some kind of time-sequence for perhaps two centuries of the past, roughly from the middle of the seventh century B.C. on. All that came before remained as it had been when he began his work, epic tales and myths believed to be true, at least in essence, but incorrigibly timeless." And yet, in spite of Herman Fränkel's statement (which Finley quotes) that in the epic "there is no interest in chronology, whether relative or absolute,"[11] his conclusion that the myths are "incorrigibly timeless"[12] seems to go too far. They were timeless in the sense that fifth-century Greeks could not relate them chronologically to known events of the immediate past, but they did have a rough internal chronology of their own, a fixed sequence of main events. The labors and death of Heracles and the siege of Thebes preceded the Trojan War; the trial of Orestes and the return of the Heraclidae followed it. And often the internal chronology of individual myths is quite precise: the Trojan War lasted ten years, as did the wanderings of Odysseus; Orestes returned to Argos to kill his mother in the eighth year after the murder of Agamemnon. Heracles' last and fatal absence from home was one year and three months.

These, it may be objected, are conventional mythical numbers, not chronological statements; this is of course true, but the statements are not timeless. To see what a timeless myth is like, one has only to look at Hindu mythology—for example, the *Mahabharata* story of the death goddess and her attempt to avoid her odious duties. She "slipped away without having promised to destroy creatures, and returned to Dhenuka. There the goddess practised the supreme asceticism that is hard to practise: for fifteen thousand million years she stood on one foot ... Brahma ... again spoke to her, saying, 'Death, obey my command!' But she disregarded him and immediately began to practise asceticism on one foot for another twenty thousand million years, and then yet another ten million million years she dwelt with the wild animals."[13] She ends up standing on one big toe for a thousand million years before she gives in and gets to work.

It was the elementary chronological structure of Greek mythology which tempted later scholars in Alexandria—Eratosthenes and Callimachus in particular—to pursue cross-references in order to establish an internally coherent chronology of the whole body of heroic myth, anchored to the capture of Troy. The attempt was of course a failure, for there are too many contradictions. Laios of Thebes, for example, carried off Chrysippus, the young son of Pelops, from Argos (or Mycenae), an event which will put his son Oedipus in the same generation as Atreus, and so Polynices and Eteocles in the same generation as Agamemnon—which is manifestly impossible since, according to other cross-references, they had been dead a long time when Agamemnon gathered the fleet at Aulis. Yet the fact that scholars as well-read as Eratosthenes and Callimachus thought it worthwhile to try to systematize the heroic myths in a valid chronological relationship shows that, even for the sophisticated intellects of the Hellenistic age, heroic myth appeared to be the raw material of history. But for the fifth-century Greeks, before Herodotus began his inquiries into the past and Thucydides established strict standards for writing the history of contemporary events, it was their only vision of their own past.

How far it was a true vision is another matter. Opinions are divided today on whether there was in fact a Trojan War or not, but the Greeks believed that there was. Herodotus tells us that when, in the face of Xerxes' preparations for invasion, Spartan and Athenian envoys were sent to Gelon of Syracuse to ask for help, they were promised it on condition that Gelon should be appointed commander in chief of the Greek forces.[14] The Spartan envoys' reply was an indignant negative, expressed in Homeric phrase: "Surely Pelops' son Agamemnon would wail with anguish if he could hear that command was taken away from Sparta by Gelon and the men of Syracuse." When Gelon, evidently a reasonable man, offered to settle for the command of the fleet, the Athenians replied, equally indignant; they invoked their claim to be the oldest people in Greece, the only ones who had never migrated, and reminded Gelon that they were mentioned by Homer as sending to Troy the best man to dispose and marshal an army. (He would have needed a reminder, since the man in question, Menestheus, is one of

the least conspicuous figures of *The Iliad*.) As a result, the Greeks had to do without help from Syracuse. Agamemnon and the obscure Athenian king (whose qualifications may be an interpolation)[15] were for the Greeks historical facts, with, as this instance suggests, the power that historical facts which have acquired symbolic significance can exert on present action.

An even more striking example of this attitude toward myth can be found in Herodotus' account of the arguments between the Tegeans and the Athenians before the battle of Plataea.[16] Both contingents demanded the honor of fighting on the left wing of the Greek forces; their speeches are addressed to the Spartans, whose king commanded the whole force and who fought on the most exposed flank, the right. The Tegeans' claim to the post rests on an exploit of their king Echemus, who, chosen to represent the Peloponnesians in single combat, killed Hyllus, king of the invading Heraclidae. The Athenian answer counters with not one but four mythical feats of arms: their protection of the Heraclidae against Eurystheus; their defeat of the Thebans, who refused burial to Polynices and the rest of the seven champions; their defeat of the Amazons, who had invaded Attica; and their part in the Trojan War. They concede that these events are long past and admit the objection that a people who had been brave once might be cowardly now. But they can add a recent feat of arms to meet this objection: the battle of Marathon, fought only eleven years before. And the only distinction they make between this event and the battles of the far-off past is one between ancient and recent (*palaia te kai kaina*). For them, as for their hearers (and for Herodotus and his), all these exploits are equally historical: the hard-riding one-breasted Amazon invaders are as real as the Persians who had been routed in 490 B.C. by the fathers of many in Herodotus' audience.

That unrecorded events, believed to have been preserved by collective memory over centuries, should be accepted as fact, myth as history, is something hard for the modern age to understand. It is especially hard for Americans, for America is the youngest of the western nations and has no myth of this type at all. America was born in the seventeenth century and came of age in the eighteenth century, the Age of Reason. There is no dim, unrecorded past in the American memory: no Achilles and Hector, no David and Goliath, no Beowulf, no King Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, no *poema del mio Cid*, no Roland or Roncesvaux, no Siegfried and Brünnhilde. There is no American time for which myth is the only authority.

When the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow tried to create an American mythical memory, he had to go back beyond the birth of the nation and draw on the traditions of the displaced and subjected Indians.

But the attempt was a failure, not only because of the pedestrian quality of Longfellow's muse and his monotonous adaptation of the trochaic line of the Finnish *Kalevala* (the target of dozens of hilarious parodies), not only because, in a final canto few have read, he lost his nerve and made Hiawatha welcome the arrival of the Christian missionaries ("told them of the Virgin Mary, and her infant son, the Savior"). It failed also because Manitaw the Mighty, the shores of Gitchee Goomee and Minnehaha, Laughing Water, cannot possibly stir in American (or for that matter Indian) hearts that mysterious sense of continuity, even identity, which Arthur can produce in the Englishman, Roland in the Frenchman, or, more potent and terrifying (as my generation learned to its cost), Siegfried, die Walküre, and Götterdämmerung in the German.

Of course there are American myths—George Washington and the cherry tree for example—but they do not command the power inherent in stories which go back to remote antiquity. They are all of them subject to correction, if not destruction, by the evidence; in the face of the evidence, no one can persist in the belief that George Washington said "I did it with my little hatchet"—the evidence is all too clear that the story was fabricated by one Parson Weems. The modern historical myth is choked at birth by the modern historical sensibility and the wealth of evidence which can be marshaled against it.

In the Capitol in Washington, visitors can see in the Rotunda a huge painting of a much-loved story from the early days of the Virginia Colony: the rescue of Captain John Smith from execution through the intervention of Pocohontas, the daughter of an Indian chief. The story is told at length and in vivid detail by John Smith himself in a book published in 1624 entitled *The General History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles*. Captain Smith is brought before Powhatan, the Indian chief. "Then," he tells us, "as many as could, laid hands on him, dragged him to two great stones and thereon laid his head and being ready with their clubs to beat out his brains, Pocohontas, the king's dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms and laid her own on his to save him from death, whereat the Emperor was content he should live." Now Captain John Smith and Pocohontas are historical characters with a real existence; in fact, Pocohontas was taken to England in 1616 to be presented at court, died there, and was buried at Gravesend. And Captain John Smith, on the occasion of the visit, wrote a letter (or says he did) to the Queen telling the same romantic story of his escape from execution. Unfortunately, he had published an account of his adventures among what he calls the "salvages" eight years before the letter to the Queen and sixteen years before the published account of the incident. It is called *A True Relation . . . of Virginia 1608*, and it does not mention Pocohontas at all. Here is

his first account of his meeting with the Emperor Powhatan: "The next night I lodged at a hunting town of Powhatan's and the next day arrived at Aranamoco upon the river of Pamaunke, where the great king is resident. Arriving at Weramocomoco their Emperor ... kindly welcomed me with sundry victuals, assuring me his friendship and my liberty within four days."[17]

Take a more recent instance. In 1917, a United States Marine division went into the attack at Belleau Wood in northern France. A sergeant climbed out of the trench into heavy fire, then realized that his men were hanging back. He turned and shouted to them: "Come on, you sons of bitches, do you want to live forever?" This is a story which was reported by correspondents at the time and is believed by every United States Marine. Unfortunately, this memorable phrase had been used before. At one of the many bloody engagements he directed on the Spanish peninsula, the Duke of Wellington, observing that the Forty-fifth Light Infantry was not advancing as ordered, yelled at them: "What's the matter, Forty-fifth, do you want to live forever?" And in the century before that, in one of the many battles fought by the Prussian soldiers of Frederick the Great, the king, standing on the Feldherrenhügel, the hill from which Prussian kings surveyed the battlefield—well in the rear—saw his guards retreating. He screamed at them: "Ihr Hunde, Wollt Ihr ewig leben?" ("You curs, do you want to live forever?"). That story, a version with the punchline verbally identical with that of the Marine sergeant except for the difference of one canine generation, is to be found in Carlyle's life of Frederick the Great, a book most newspaper correspondents of the 1917 generation would have read, and one is entitled to doubt, especially if one has known any rank-and-file U.S. Marines, that the sergeant said any more than the first six of the words attributed to him.

The modern myth is hindered if not completely checked at the very beginning of its metamorphosis into history. But in fifth-century Athens there was no such damning evidence, no records, no archives, no one to question the reality of the Trojan War, no one even ready to cut it down to size and treat it as a poverty-stricken piratical raid until Thucydides, for reasons that had little to do with history, did just that right at the end of the century—in a book which, to judge by the references to history made by the orators of the next century, seems to have had no influence whatever on popular opinion. All through the fourth century for example, orators praising Athenian dead who had fallen in battle continued to invoke, in their appeal to tradition, the mythical precedents: the Athenian victory over the Amazons, the rescue of the Heraclidae, the defeat of the Thebans and burial of the Argives. This is clear from the literary imitations in Lysias, Plato's *Menexenus*

and pseudo-Demosthenes; Aristotle, in fact, in the *Rhetoric*, says that a reference to the rescue of the Heraclidae is essential in such a speech. All this in spite of the example given by Thucydides, who makes his Pericles say, as the later orators do, "I shall begin with our ancestors," but goes no farther back than the Persian Wars.[18]

For the fourth-century Athenians, as for those of the fifth, myth, and therefore tragedy, which gave it dramatic form, had the unquestioned authority which we grant to history; the masked actors on stage were the great figures of the audience's past. But it is history in which the original core of genuine memory, if indeed that ever existed, had been transformed by the selective emphasis of the oral tradition. Over many generations of oral transmission, stories change on the lips of tellers to reflect new preoccupations, new attitudes. And in such a process only what remains meaningful and relevant will survive. The oral tradition, myth, "what they say," emphasizes and preserves only what is memorable. A witty book by two English history teachers, *1066 and All That*,[19] stated in joking fashion a profound truth: "History is what you can remember." And it is remembered only because it has meaning (or is given new meaning by adaptation and addition); it embodies a view of life, an attitude, an ideal, a warning; it has contemporary significance. In the absence of records only what continues to have significance will survive in the communal memory.

What myth, the popular memory, preserves is not historical fact, not the particular details, the multiplicity, complexity, and ambiguity of any *real* happening. It preserves, creates, and recreates symbolic figures and situations, persons and events which typify recurring dilemmas and challenges, heroes whose relations to gods and to their fellow men embody permanent religious and social problems, whose actions present an ideal by which men can live and die or a monitory example of conduct to be avoided. Myth, in other words, is indeed history for the fifth-century Athenians, but it is history transformed by the selective emphasis of a long tradition, shaped and concentrated, and so endowed with universal significance. In other words, it is a kind of poetry.

Even today, in the age of records, of computer banks which remember the date of birth, credit status, and Social Security number of every one of us, even today, undaunted by the easily ascertainable historical facts, a poetic, a mythical history of this kind is not dead. For most of us, history is indeed "what we can remember." And what we can remember is not very much and not even that little will always stand up to critical examination. I take an American example again. What does the popular memory say of one Patrick Henry, a prosperous lawyer who lived in Virginia in the eighteenth century? That he forced the royal officials in Virginia to pay three hundred pounds for the

gunpowder they had removed form the colony's stores? That he bitterly opposed the ratification of the Federal Constitution in 1788? It says none of these things; in order to find them, one has to consult the historical record. But if that record disappeared forever, the popular memory would still credit Patrick Henry with two unforgettable phrases. Speaking at Williamsburg against the Stamp Act, he said: "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles I his Cromwell, and George III . . . ". Interrupted by cries of "Treason!" he continued, "and George III might profit by their example—and if this be treason, make the most of it." And he also said: "Give me liberty or give me death." And after all, these two phrases are the most important thing about him. If he had not said these things his name would hardly be remembered, and there would certainly not be an aircraft carrier named after him.

We can go farther. Though it now seems fairly certain that he did *not* in fact pronounce the first of these two memorable phrases in exactly the canonical form,[20] the oral tradition will not abandon him; the myth will live on—they will go on saying it—as the myth of Belleau Wood lives on among the Marines. That Marine sergeant's words sum up a grim ideal by which thousands of brave men have lived and died, on Pacific islands, Korean mountains, and in Vietnam jungles, and Patrick Henry's defiant words are an unforgettable expression of the fierce American devotion to independence. They are both symbolic figures, belonging, to use the terms of Aristotle's distinction between poetry and history, to the area of the universal and so are superior to the particular—even to the awkward particular that one of them may have expressed himself in much more diplomatic terms and the other may never have existed.

Today, of course, few will agree with Aristotle's statement that poetry is more philosophical and valuable than history since poetry deals with the universal and history the particular. Yet, in terms of his own distinctions, he is not so far wrong. For history itself becomes more philosophical and valuable as it moves from the establishment and collection of particular facts to the generalizations which can be extracted from them. What distinguishes the great historian from the mere compiler is precisely the ability to discern patterns of order in the chaos of detail—to emphasize, select, and synthesize. What the great historian does, paradoxically, is to create a myth. So Gibbon created from the fantastic agglomeration of the facts and fancies of 1,200 years of European history the eighteenth century myth of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: a vision of an empire "governed . . . by absolute power under the guidance of virtue and wisdom" which, however, carried within it the seeds of its own death, its vast extent ("immoderate greatness"), and the corruption of overcivilization. Threatened by barbarian invasion from without and undermined by Christian fanaticism within, "the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight." So Macaulay created out of the particulars of the English civil war and revolution of the seventeenth century the powerful nineteenth-century myth which has since been called "the Whig interpretation of history": the story of the rise to power of the English landed gentry, seen as the triumph of universal freedom over an oppressive and regressive autocracy. This was a powerful myth all through the nineteenth century and even beyond; it was the charter myth of modern English parliamentary democracy. And Gibbon's great myth, demolished piecemeal and as a whole by historians ever since his death, comes back to haunt us now, as western civilization fears the future and begins to doubt its own ability to survive.

Every people has to have a vision of its past to live by, and even today, in the age of the record, that vision is as much mythical as scientific, in spite of the evidence and prestige of historians devoted to the search for "the untutored incident, that actually occurred." But for the fifth-century Athenians, there was no check of any kind on the mythopoeic creation and adaptation of tradition; their vision of the past, of their own history, was fully poetic from the start, its personages and events symbolic representations of every aspect of man's life on earth, his strength and weakness in the struggle against his fellow men, the forces of nature, and the bleak fact of his own mortality. Myth and its tragic adaptation have, besides the authority of history, the power of poetry. The masked actors in the theater of Dionysus present to the audience not only the historical figures of the past but also poetic symbols of its own life and death, its ambitions and its fate.

But the myth has still another source of power: its religious content. It re-creates the past as a time when men and gods were in closer relationship than they have ever been since. For the fifth-century audience, communication with its gods was possible only through sacrifice, prayer, consultation at oracular shrines, "through a glass darkly," but then, in the vision of the past, men and gods met "face to face." The myths are, besides history and poetry, the sacred tales of Greek religion, the equivalent for them of the Hebrew Bible.

"Bible," of course, is the Greek word for "book." The Hebrews have been justly called "the people of the Book"; it was the repository of their deepest beliefs as well as their laws, it played its part in their communications with their unseen, mysterious God. Consequently, as their laws and religious ideas changed in response to new situations, the Book was revised. Priests and religious and social reformers constantly brought it up to date, suppressing and expanding; the various components which went into the making of what became the final version

have been isolated by the work of generations of Biblical scholars, with the suppressions, additions, adaptations, and occasional oversights of the revisors meticulously exposed. One such oversight gives us a glimpse of earlier beliefs which seem incompatible with the religious feeling of the Book in its final version: the opening verses of the sixth chapter of Genesis, popularly known as "The Angel Marriages":

> And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair, and that they took wives of all which they chose. . . . There were giants in the land in those days: and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men, which were of old, men of renown.

This sounds for all the world like a prologue to a Hesiodic catalogue of the loves of gods and mortal women, the births of heroes. But such lapses are rare; the revisors did their work well enough so that when the final version was completed after the return from the Babylonian exile, the Book became canonical; from that point on it might be, indeed *had* to be, interpreted, but it could not be changed.

But the Greeks are the people not of the Book but of the myth. How can you revise, correct, or suppress "what they say"? You may try, but they are perfectly free to go on saying it, even if by changing moral standards it is wrong, even if to new ways of thought it is ridiculous. You cannot correct or suppress, you can only enlarge, add one more version—a more powerful one, you hope—to the limitless complexity and variety of traditional story. A constant process of such enlargement and attempts at correction was inevitable: the myths, all concerned to a greater or lesser extent with the relation between men and gods, imply each one a view of the divine nature and its governance of the world; new moral and religious views had to come to terms with them. So the fifth-century poet Pindar tries to correct the famous and scandalous story of the banquet of Tantalus. Tantalus, king of Lydia, was a friend of the gods, who condescended to eat at his table. He began to think that they were no better than he was, and, to test his idea, served them up a dish which consisted of the flesh of his own son Pelops. The gods realized what the meat was and drew back, except for Demeter, the goddess of the wheat crops and cereal harvests; she was hungry and ate Pelops' shoulder. Tantalus was punished, Pelops was put back together again (except for the shoulder—he was given a prosthetic one of ivory) and went on to found the Olympic games and give his name to the Peloponnese. Pindar is appalled at this story (as well he might be); he rejects the idea that the blessed gods were gluttonous

cannibals and substitutes what seems to him a more decorous tale: he will tell the story of Pelops "in opposition to those who went before" (*antia proteron*). What really happened was this: Poseidon fell in love with young Pelops and carried him off to Olympus, to serve the same purpose as Ganymede later did for Zeus. And when Pelops could not be found, some neighbor, in envious spite, invented the story of the cannibalizing feast.

Pindar rejects the myth, accounts in remarkably rationalizing terms for its existence, and tries to supplant it with what seems to him a more moral and dignified version. But he clearly is not confident that he will succeed: he knows what he is up against. "Myths, ornate with the embroidery of lies, are deceivers [*exapatonti muthoi*]. And the charm of poetry, which creates all delights for men, adds its prestige and time and again makes the incredible believed." Quite apart from the charm of poetry, Pindar was flying in the face of the difficulty that his story was much less memorable; who could forget Demeter gobbling that shoulder?

It is, of course, true, as Elroy Bundy demonstrated, that many things in Pindar which were once blithely assumed to be personal or general statements are really (though one should perhaps more cautiously say "are also") sophisticated techniques for praising the *laudandus*. And Köhnken has pointed out that Pindar's implied comparison of Hieron to young Pelops made some correction of the Tantalus myth politic if not necessary.[21] But even with all these factors taken into consideration, Pindar's procedure is, in terms of any other known socioreligious context, extraordinary, to say the least.

What is striking about the passage is not so much the nature of his attempt to revise the myth as the fact that the task is undertaken by a poet, and a poet, at that, who was writing, on commission for pay, an ode celebrating a victory in an athletic contest. With not the slightest hint that he thinks he is doing anything exceptional, he attacks a problem which in Israel lay in the province of the high priest and rabbi, which in Christian Europe was the restricted domain of bishops and theologians. Of course there were priests in Greece too, but their expertise and authority were confined to matters of ritual: the formulas of prayer, the ceremonies of sacrifice and purification, the celebration of the mysteries. In this area there was no deviation from immemorial custom, no laxity, no variation. But these observances were not, as in Israel and the Christian church, indissolubly wedded to an organized and canonical vision of the nature of divinity, its operation in human affairs and its concern with human morality, nor, as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, to charter myths of ritual and royal ceremonial which guaranteed the stability of central governments administering the

complicated technology of river valley civilizations. These larger questions of man's relationship to gods, the nature of those gods, and the human morality appropriate or possible given the nature of those gods—all this in Greece was the province of myth, and so of the epic and tragic poets, until the philosophers claimed it for their own, and either replaced the myths with more seemly fictions, like Plato, or abandoned them entirely, like Aristotle and his successors. Any presentation of a myth which involved gods as well as men (and all of them did) implied an attitude to these great questions; any important modification of the story was a fresh contribution to the continual search for an understanding of the nature of divine government and the proper place and conduct of man in the world. "Homer and Hesiod," says Herodotus, "were the first ... to give the gods their epithets, to allot them their several offices and occupations and describe their forms"; they also raised difficult questions of the attitude of the gods to man and man's society, and man's proper attitude toward them. The moral and philosophical problems inherent in the religious tradition were already posed by the myths, and the tragic poets accepted the challenge: Attic tragedy from the first extant play, *The Persians*, to the last, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, wrestles with these same problems. The masked actors on stage presented to the audience not only figures molded by the oral tradition into shapes symbolic of all human hopes and fears, all human victory and defeat, but also, invoked at every turn if not actually present on stage, those gods who dispensed both good and evil in ways that seemed to pass all understanding.

There was still one more source of power in tragic myth, one which worked strongly on the deepest individual emotions. The myths are set from first to last in the framework of the family, that close unit—closer in ancient Greece than it is today—which sets an indelible mark on our formative years and stays with us, backward and forward, a burden and support, until we die. The family, its hates and loves, its unity and its discord, has of course been the main source of energy for western fiction ever since. "All happy families are similar: every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." So runs the opening sentence of one of the great Russian novels, which records the tragic disintegration of one family and the foundation of another.

I once saw, in a small theater in Piraeus, a magnificent performance, in modern Greek, of Sophocles' *Electra*. The audience was audibly and visibly in tears during Electra's great speech over the urn which she thinks contains her brother's ashes and was profoundly moved by the joy of the recognition scene. When, during the offstage murder of Clytemnestra by her son, Electra, left on stage, screamed to Orestes: "Strike her twice, if you have the strength" (*paison ei stheneis*

diplen, though what the actress actually said was more like *htip' an boreis thipla*), a well-dressed, middle-aged man sitting next to me (he looked rather like a bank manager) jumped to his feet and, applauding vigorously, shouted "Bravo! Bravo!" As people looked around in astonishment, he sat down, embarrassed. But clearly Sophocles had touched some unhealed wound in the man, a wound inflicted in the everlasting hates and loves of family life.

A French literary critic who had just returned from Communist China once began a lecture with the sentence: "Les Chinois sont en train d'abolir la famille. Ce sera la fin de la littérature." In its epigrammatical exaggeration and its implication that *la fin de la littérature* will be *la fin du monde*, it was a typically French statement, but there is more than a grain of truth in it. It is hard to think of a masterpiece of western literature that has not drawn at least part of its power to move us from the deep well of those conflicting emotions which are engendered in us by our existence in a family.

Greek tragic myth is a web of interlocking family histories. Within the families, as well as in their relations with each other, the whole spectrum of the passions family life can breed is displayed. And these passions, as is to be expected of material shaped by oral tradition, are exemplary in their extreme intensity. "When it is in the family relationships [*en tais philiais*]" says Aristotle, "that violence occurs, as for example when murder or some similar action is committed or planned by brother against brother, son against father, mother against son or son against mother—this should be the objective."[22] This advice is addressed to the tragic poet; it was easy advice to follow, for the myths provided a rich array of such incidents. Even a short list will make the point: Orestes and Alcmaeon, the matricides; Clytemnestra, Eriphyle, Deianira, husband-killers; Oedipus the patricide; Medea, Ino, Althaea, Procne, and Agave, who brought about the deaths of their own sons; Agamemnon, a father who kills his daughter; Scylla, a daughter who kills her father; Heracles, who butchers his sons, and Oedipus and Theseus, whose curses have the same effect on theirs; the fratricidal brothers Polynices and Eteocles and the only slightly less murderous Atreus and Thyestes; twin sons who kill their stepmothers, Pelias and Neleus, Amphion and Zethus; mothers who expose their children, Creusa, Hecuba, Jocasta. In addition to acts of violence perpetrated by one family member against another, the myths offer a variety of sexual trespasses within the family bounds: incest, mother and son (Oedipus and Jocasta), brother and sister (Canace and Macareus), father and daughter (Atreus and Pelopeia—their son was Aegisthus); adultery, Helen, Clytemnestra; seduction, Stheneboea, Phaedra; desertion, Jason, Theseus. And the myths also presented

family ties that are not broken but closely knit in love: brother and sister, Orestes and Electra, Antigone and Polynices; father and son, Odysseus and Telemachus; husband and wife, Admetus and Alcestis, Laodamia and Protesilaus, Hector and Andromache; father and daughter, Oedipus and Antigone and Ismene.

In their loves, as in their hates, the mythic figures of tragedy are extreme cases; the daily life of the audience was not so sensational. Yet they must have known the same impulses and passions in muted form in their own family relationships; the tragic figures are larger than life but true to it. Exposure of children was not an unknown practice in Athens; Creusa's heartbroken lyric lament in the *Ion* when she thinks she will never again see the child she left in the cave on the Acropolis would find an echo in the hearts of those who had been forced by circumstances to abandon their own children. The bitter hatred of Polynices and Eteocles for each other was an emotion many would recognize from their own lives; in the legal cases we know from the fourth-century orations, brothers (or half-brothers) pursue each other to the limits allowed by the law in their fierce quarrels over their inheritance, and Isaeus tells us of two brothers, Euthycrates and Thoudippos, whose quarrel over the division of their father's estate ended in the death of one brother at the hands of the other.[23]

We do not have to believe the story that Sophocles in his old age was prosecuted by his son for incompetence in the management of family property. Nevertheless, the enraged curse which Oedipus pronounces on his son in Sophocles' last play may well have stirred up violent emotions in some members of the audience, for such a prosecution was possible, in the old man's life or after his death, to upset his will. "This law," says an authority on the Greek family, "may have provided an incentive to men to divest themselves of their property to their adult sons," and he adds later, with notable understatement, that "the balance of such a father/son relationship was obviously delicate."[24] In the speech Antiphon wrote for the son whose dying father had charged him with the duty to avenge him, the wife, who, according to the prosecution, contrived his death through a poison disguised as a love philter, is compared to Clytemnestra. And a passage from Andocides' speech in his own defense delivered in 399 B.C., an attack on the character of his legal opponent, suggests that sometimes Athenian family relationships could in fact be as lurid as those of the mythical prototypes:

> Let us just see, gentlemen of the jury, whether anything of this kind has ever happened in Greece before. A man marries a wife, and then marries the mother as well as the daughter. The mother turns the daughter out. Then while living with the mother, he wants to marry the daughter of Epilycus, so that the granddaughter can turn the grandmother out. Why, what ought his child to be called? Personally I do not believe that there is anyone ingenious enough to find the right name for him. There are three women with whom his father would have lived: and he is alleged son of one of them, the brother of another, and the uncle of the third. What ought a son like that to be called? Oedipus, Aegisthus, or what?[25]

These echoes of the tragic stage in speeches delivered before the juries of law courts give some idea of how deeply rooted and influential tragic myth was in the mind of the ordinary Athenian. It is hardly to be wondered at. Tragic myth, to recapitulate, was a people's vision of its own past, with all that such a vision implies for social and moral problems and attitudes in its present. It was a vision of the past shaped by the selective adaptation of the oral tradition to forms symbolic of the permanencies in human nature and the human condition. It was rich in religious significance, for its interweaving of human action and divine purpose explored the relation of man to his gods. And the political, moral, and religious questions it raised were given a passionate intensity and a powerful grip on the emotions by their grounding in the loves and hates of family life.

Notes

1. F. M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (London, 1914).
2. Jane E. Harrison, *Themis* (Cambridge, 1912), pp. 341ff.
3. Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy* (Oxford, 1927).
4. Ibid., ed. T. B. L. Webster (2d ed., Oxford, 1962), p. 128.
5. Photographs and descriptions (with sample texts) in *Dionysus in 69* (New York, 1970).
6. G. F. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).
7. E. Lobel, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXXV (1950), 1–12; cf. also D. L. Page, *A New Chapter in the History of Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1951).
8. Choerilus, Phrynichus, Pratinas, Polyphrasmon, Aristias, Aristarchus of Tegea, Ion of Chios, Achaeus, Iophon, Philocles.
9. Horst-Dieter Blume, in *Einführung in das antike Theaterwesen* (Darmstadt, 1978), p. 7, concludes that "die Summe der aufgeführten Stücke [in the fifth century] die Grenze der Tausend weit überschritt . . . ," but he is including comedies and satyr plays in the total.
10. On this point, see E. Havelock, "Prologue to Greek Literacy," in *University of Cincinnati Classical Studies* II, pp. 335ff.
11. M. I. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History* (London, 1975), p.15; Herman Fränkel, *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens*[2] (Munich, 1960), p. 2.
12. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p. 18.
13. W. D. O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit* (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp. 41–42.

14. Hdt. 7.159.

15. The lines quoted by the Athenians (*Iliad* 2.553–54) were athetized by Zenodotus. Menestheus is mentioned in passing in book 4, calls on the two Aiantes for help and helps carry a wounded man out of the line in book 12, and later in the same book is mentioned in a list of the defenders of the ships against Hector. In book 15, Hector kills an unnamed companion of his, and he is not mentioned again.

16. Hdt. 9.26–27.

17. I am indebted for this example of myth in the process of creation to L. A. Fiedler and A. Zeiger, *O Brave New World: American Literature from 1600 to 1840* (New York, 1968), pp. 17–26.

18. Th. 2.22.6.

19. W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and All That* (London, 1930).

20. For two different accounts of this famous incident, cf. Page Smith, *A New Age Now Begins* (New York, 1976), pp. 195–96.

21. A. Köhnken, "Pindar as Innovator," *CQ* 24 (1974), 199ff.

22. Arist. *Po.* 1453b, 19ff.

23. Is. 9.17.

24. W. K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece* (Ithaca, 1968), p. 118.

25. And. 1.128–29.

Part II: Aeschylus

By the same author

THE HEROIC TEMPER
OEDIPUS THE KING (translation)
OEDIPUS AT THEBES

WORD AND ACTION

Essays on the Ancient Theater

Bernard Knox

The Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore and London