Here, the theatre of Dionysus conspired with the tragic mask, for a space where most of the audience sits high above the action demands that performers literally keep their heads up, always projecting forward and outward in order to be seen and heard. Even mute characters wear the possibility of their verbal intervention, silent but never silenced. Consider Pylades in Aeschylus' *Choephori* who says nothing the entire play, only to break his silence for three brief lines, advising Orestes to perform the unthinkable and kill his own mother. In Euripides' *Electra*, produced some forty years after *Choephori*, we expect the mute Pylades to speak at a key moment like his Aeschylean predecessor. But this Pylades *never* speaks, a twist on the tradition that suggests the absence of the gods in the sordid world of Euripides' play.

For all the physical distance between actor and audience in the theatre of Dionysus, both parties found themselves drawn together by natural surroundings in a natural light. Stage conventions that seem exotic to us were practical and effective means to make that common world sustain dramatic life, producing a compelling experience for the audience. To understand more fully how tragic art and artifice combined, we will consider other dramatic conventions in the next chapter. But we should never lose sight of the fact that the Greek theatrical drive was towards reality, a grounding of issues in a public forum where the human world was set in meaningful relationship to nature, a theatre where the world was included rather than shut out.

5

CONVENTIONS OF PRODUCTION

I daresay that audiences in most cultures and historical periods have felt that the dramatic characters in their theatre represented (or were intended to represent) intelligible human beings – whether the form was the American musical, Jacobean tragedy, German *Sturm und Drang*, the Peking opera, Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, medieval Mystery plays, Noh drama, or a Broadway production of *Nicholas Nickleby*. To appreciate the fact that audiences of different cultures and periods viewed their theatre as realistic is to acknowledge the conventional nature of all theatrical representation. A fifth-century Athenian (*mutatis mutandis*) transported to London to see a revival of David Storey's *The Changing Room* would think the production riddled with artifice and convention, presenting a picture far less compelling than, say, Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*. Such an audient might consider the images and language of the locker room too specific to reveal much of value about 'real people', preferring the story of the struggle between two mythical brothers at Thebes for the very reason that it seems closer to the reality of a human situation. Similarly, what strikes *us* as conventional and 'artificial' in a performance of Greek tragedy (or Japanese Kabuki, or Indian Kathakali) would seem to a Greek audience (or their Eastern counterpart) to be perfectly normal and appropriate.

The conventionality of all theatrical performance is worth belabouring, for we cannot hope to understand a given dramatic style or period without grasping the nature of its accepted artifice. To call Greek theatre stylized, conventional, or artificial illuminates little, since the same attributes describe every other drama, even that which strikes a modern audience as perfectly lifelike.[1] Although linguistic metaphors frequently obscure more than they clarify, understanding a given set of theatrical conventions is not unlike learning a foreign language. We realize that our native tongue (with its rules, grammar, syntax, and idioms) is no more or less 'natural' than another, but that any language allows us to represent and operate on the real (non-linguistic) world. As our facility with new languages increases, we come to understand that each tongue has its own strengths and weaknesses, enabling it to work at some tasks better

than others, to describe the physical world or to sustain abstractions, with more or less concision, fluidity, power, subtlety, complexity, and specificity.

In similar fashion, if we are to understand and take advantage of the communicative opportunities of a foreign theatrical mode, we must become familiar with the relevant conventions that inform its operations. We then can translate as necessary, using the appropriate conventions from our own theatre. Shakespeare provides an illustrative example. The diction and verse in his plays strike us as highly artificial compared to everyday English, and yet an actor playing Hamlet fails if he sounds like a poetic metronome. On the other hand, if the actor delivers the 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy like a crisis-centre operator, then he ignores the structure, thought, and mode of expression implicit in the metre and the language. We fault the former for failing to make the convention his own, the latter for ignoring the integral connection between theatrical form and content. We fault both for failing to engage the material, since the play demands a living character whose thoughts, emotions, and style of speech are mutually informing.

In this chapter we will examine the major conventions that provide the form and expressive mode of Greek tragic theatre. The term 'convention' is used in a loose sense, a tacit agreement among the various participants in a performance, both on-stage and in the audience, that allows the drama to unfold in a meaningful way. I will concentrate on those conventional aspects of tragic texts and performance that might strike us as odd, recalling that a fifth-century audience would consider them part of the dramatic furniture. Naturally the Greek tragedians could and did use these dramatic givens in innovative and shocking ways, but the conventions *per se* would seem no stranger to a Greek audience than an invisible fourth wall in a proscenium stage seems to us.

We already have examined the constraints and possibilities implicit in a large outdoor theatre where the performers wore masks. Before looking at other conventions, let us begin with the question of dramatic illusion in tragedy, which forces us in turn to consider approaches to characterization and acting style. We then will examine the modes and functions of the chorus, including a brief look at different metrical forms, followed by the conventions of dramatic rhetoric, especially stichomythia (alternating dialogue), messenger speeches, and formal debates or *agôns*. We then will examine costumes, props, and the function of corpses in the plays. To understand how tragedies begin and end, we will look briefly at the prologue and the *deus ex machina*. A conclusion will summarize these conventions in terms of the relationship they establish with the audience, the most important factor to keep in mind when considering appropriate modern equivalents.

IN AND OUT OF THE SCENE – DRAMATIC ILLUSION, CHARACTER, AND TRAGIC ACTING

Some critics believe that the actors in Greek tragedy never acknowledged the audience as such, and the audience in turn never was encouraged to view the play as a play, but was caught in a kind of spell where the fiction implicit in the performance went unquestioned. According to this view, the audience watching a tragedy operated in one basic mode, that of belief – or, as is more commonly put, 'a willing suspension of disbelief' – and, as a result, the dramatic illusion of the performance was complete.

This form of presentation might appear to characterize much of the drama on stage, television, and screen today. We understand that the actors represent real people whose lives unfold before us, and we are encouraged to focus our attention on them and *not* on the manner by which their story gets told. Applied to cinema, for example, we remain unconscious of camera angles, changes in perspective, variations in narrative technique (flashbacks, monologues, voice-overs), references to other films, lighting and special effects, all the interventions of the medium itself. We may note in passing the signs of artifice behind the representation, but we are meant to subordinate them *all of the time* to the dramatic events in question.

Brief reflection suggests that this is not how we actually watch a film or a play, for we are (intermittently) made aware of the means, as well as the matter, of production. Greek tragedy operates similarly. The genre was highly conscious of the Homeric tradition that preceded it, alert to the ways in which other playwrights and poets had treated the same stories, alive to the political situation facing the city, and so on. Above all the tragic playwrights were aware of the shifting relationship between the characters on stage and the audience, manipulating with artistry (and an admirable willingness to experiment) the spectators' perspective on, and commitment to, the action. They constructed their tragedies so as to implicate the audience emotionally and intellectually, consciously and unconsciously, not only in the story but in the very processes of the drama.

Although Greek theatre neither maintained nor depended on a seamless dramatic illusion, the argument that it did so is an understandable reaction against the once popular belief that any drama with such strange conventions as masks and chorus could not be interested in representing intelligible people in recognizable situations, or in presenting characters whom an audience could loathe, reject, learn from, laugh at, or sympathize with. The 'dramatic illusionists' also position themselves against the trendy view that theatre is always and only self-referential, endlessly fabricating and unravelling a skein of signifiers that only the naïve would consider to be of any substance.

Once we entertain questions about dramatic illusion and the tragic theatre's relationship to reality, a wide range of issues emerge as problematic,

including what we mean by such fundamental concepts as personal identity and agency. In what sense can we think of Sophocles' Oedipus as real, or as a person? Is he a dramatic figure with human capacities, or a fictional construct where we locate our own acts of consciousness? When we introduce the actor, the complexities multiply. What does it – or did it – mean for an actor to 'play' Oedipus? Does he act a part, perform a role, or is there any sense in which he 'becomes' the character? In classical Athens, how did the audience react as they watched this process? Were they conscious of seeing a human being, or a mythical figure, or an actor? The case of Oedipus is difficult enough, but what did the fifth-century audience think when the character who took the stage was a god? Did their response alter fundamentally in such plays as *Eumenides* and *Ion* where one of the deities is Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, the city where the plays were performed? On those occasions did the audience give themselves over to the fiction of the performance? Or was their relationship to the events more like a game of make-believe, with the character Athena serving as a prompt to their imagination? Did they watch in a detached, critical mode, attending to the rhetoric of her speech and enjoying the innovations of the scene? Or, did they hear the goddess's pronouncements as relevant to the city itself, above and beyond their connection to the play?

Simply posing these questions helps us to realize that a lively interplay between belief and incredulity, between emotional proximity and distance, must have operated in the Greek theatre as it does in even the most 'realistic' of dramatic presentations now. After all, unquestioning belief on the audiences' part would convert us from spectators into agents, ready to intervene on behalf of the other characters in the drama. On the other hand, complete distance would turn us into objective observers, emotionally unaffected by the highly charged situations facing the characters. We would react like the hardened paramedic who registers the pulse of every walk-in rather than the friend who cares desperately about the results, or an onlooker who is drawn into sympathy and concern.

If a distanced, scientific, objective response were all that was intended in Greek tragedy, then we would expect a different kind of writing and a different mode of presentation. As Aristotle points out, the great advance that tragedy made over epic was the appearance of characters 'as living and moving before us' (*Poetics*, 1448a.24–25), that is, characters as embodied. The physical presence of the actor defined the earliest drama, and the actor remains the irremovable obstacle in the path of those who view Greek tragedy (or the theatre in general) as a sophisticated playground for mental conundrums, as opposed to a place of live, and lived, human experience. With all due respect for the life of the mind, there is something inhuman about not responding to the humanity of dramatic characters who come to life before us in performance.

The audience of Greek tragedy witnessed recognizable events happening

to intelligible human characters (and, occasionally, highly anthropomorphic gods) as they made free choices and discovered the consequences. The responsibilities of the audience included participating with the performers in investing the characters and their dramatic situation with a rich intellectual and emotional life. Yet the form of the plays and the context of their performance also compelled the audience on occasion – and in a manner guided by the production – to view these same characters and circumstances as elements in a consciously constructed drama that pointed to a world beyond the theatre.

Take, for example, the highly poetical and imagistically charged language of Greek tragedy. Given its full weight and complexity, the language takes on a life of its own, appropriate not only to the immediate situation, but also to the overall dramatic project. The brief space of an image can store a powerful emotional experience, enriching the context with each iteration and variation, amplifying the relationship of events and characters towards a more abstract significance. We recognize how fitting it is in *Agamemnon* that the king who threw a net on Troy is netted in the bath, just as Orestes who traps Clytemnestra in *Choephori* is snared metaphorically by the Furies in *Eumenides*. But we also become aware of how the concatenation of images works through the trilogy independently of character and plot, part of the larger case that Aeschylus wishes to make. Through the power of its language, the *Oresteia* expands in scope and texture, alerting us to the wider setting as it deepens the imaginative significance of specific moments. The process is one in which the audience shifts from the immediate dramatic situation to the larger world of the play, and then moves beyond it, constantly negotiating different levels and formulating responses appropriate to them, inspired by (but hardly bound to) the initial commitment to dramatic illusion.

A more obvious sign of the tragedians' interest in keeping the audience alive to the fact of performance involves dramatic irony and humour. Although not a formal convention, the practice of employing ironically charged words and disruptive language alters the audience's relationship to the action. Take, for example, the ubiquitous word-play in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* on the name of the hero, *oidipous*, literally 'swollen foot' but also containing the Greek word *oide*, 'I have seen' = 'I know'. At times the repetition of the name draws us into a horrified sympathy with the protagonist; at other times it distances us from his individual plight until we view the play as an exemplary tale about human ignorance and blindness.

In Euripides the difference between the characters' knowledge and that of the audience can become so involved that we delight in the play of irony for its own sake. In *Helen*, for example, Euripides alters the standard story of the heroine's abduction, presenting a version in which a phantom goes to Troy while the real Helen spends the war years in Egypt. When the Greek Teucer lands there on his way home from Troy, ignorant that the war was fought for a phantom, he meets the real but unrecognized Helen and wishes

her the best, then curses Helen of Troy and prays for her death. The ironies are rife, and the audience cannot help but enjoy the play of illusion – that is, until Euripides returns us to the stark reality of the war as Helen laments the suffering inflicted in her name on the women of Troy.

Although not normally associated with tragedy, humorous moments scattered through the plays pull the audience out of the immediate circumstance with a laugh, only to drop them back with a vengeance. In Euripides' *Heracles*, for example, the goddesses Lyssa ('Madness') and Iris arrive unexpectedly in the middle of the play, sent by Hera to drive Heracles mad. Lyssa argues that Heracles has done nothing to warrant such punishment, prompting Iris to respond: 'The wife of Zeus did not send you here to exercise your sanity' (857). Madness appears as the voice of reason and is chided for it, the kind of pointed Euripidean humour that momentarily takes the audience out of the dramatic situation. However, Heracles' ensuing madness is conveyed so vividly that irony and humour are quickly forgotten, and the play shifts from rescue and triumph to slaughter and suffering.

Tragedy also calls attention to itself by referring to (and even parodying) scenes from earlier tragedies, and so introduces a more complex sense of dramatic representation and illusion. Again Euripides is the master, and his parody in *Electra* of the recognition scene between Electra and Orestes in *Choephori* splits the focus of the audience. Part of our interest lies in the earlier treatment by Aeschylus, the other part in the Euripidean version being acted out before us. Distrust of such quirky dramatic practices once led scholars to delete the passage as spurious, but recent critics have recognized that Euripides systematically involves the audience in this kind of dialectical relationship, alternating between their belief in the illusion of the play and their awareness that they are part of the process by which that illusion occurs. The ambiguity that results in *Electra* ultimately serves dramatic ends, for the Old Man insists on the validity of the traditional signs of Orestes' identity against the rationalist arguments of Electra. He proves to be right, confounding Electra's view that Orestes is far too heroic and manly to return home incognito.

Euripides was not alone in exploiting the theatrical conventions available in Greek tragic production. As we shall see in Chapters 6 and 7, Aeschylus and Sophocles also used these basic elements – the messenger speech, the *deus ex machina*, the prologue, stichomythia, the chorus – not only to build their dramatic illusions, but to undermine them as well. In so doing, they forced the audience to confront the material of the play, encouraging them to adopt new perspectives and to reorder their priorities when they left the theatre.

What do these observations regarding dramatic illusion and its violation tell us about the style of acting in Greek tragedy? No handbook on ancient acting has come down to us, and even if it had, we would be suspicious of how representative it was, given what we know of the many conflicting approaches to acting today. We know that acting style changed over the course of the fifth

century, judging from the anecdote in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1461b.26–1462a.4). The old actor Mynniscus who had performed for Aeschylus, and lived long enough to win the actor's prize for a Euripidean trilogy in the 420s, criticizes a young actor, Kallipides (who won his first acting prize in 418), for overly naturalistic mimesis, likening Kallipides' efforts to those of a monkey.

Far from there being an unbridgeable gap between ancient theatrical practice and our own, Plato indicates that the way an ancient actor identified with his role(s) was not so alien from what many contemporary performers strive for. In the Platonic dialogue *Ion*, a Homeric rhapsode answers Socrates' questions about his 'process'. He speaks as if he were possessed by the role, that the character was playing him, that he served as a conduit for the poet (or playwright, the difference here is immaterial) and succeeded best when he was least conscious he was acting. This is not the description of acting we would expect from a theatre so frequently characterized as 'stylized' or 'conventional'. Although dating from the first century BC, the description of the tragic actor Aesopus by the Roman Cicero (*De Oratore*, 2.46.193) may capture the feeling of earlier tragic acting:

> What can be more fictitious than poetry, plays, the stage? However, in this genre I myself have often seen the eyes of the actor flashing from behind his mask as he spoke [quoted lines]. . . . And then he would say, lowering his voice to a pitiable tone [quoted lines]. . . . He seemed to be weeping and grieving as he spoke these lines.

There is ample evidence that such close identification between actor and character had a correspondingly strong emotional effect on ancient audiences.[2] Again we are reminded that tragic productions struck the original performers and spectators as realistic, a far cry from the art-pieces to which some modern critics compare them.

This does not mean that tragic acting privileged the idiosyncratic and the personal – the standard rule in psychological realism – over the generic and typical. As we recall from Chapter 4, masked acting in a large outdoor theatre imposed on Greek drama a generic account of human existence. Characters operated more on an ethical than on a psychological level, their status depending on qualities that were socially recognized and sanctioned, not on peculiarities of individual behaviour or consciousness. According to Aristotle, tragedy did not concentrate on presenting individual characters as much as on imitating an 'action'. By action Aristotle meant something like a plot, a poetic structure of events arranged in narrative sequence that tells a story of some gravity and importance, and from which the audience derives pleasure appropriate to the genre.[3] Whatever the original audience's responses to tragedy, it seems unlikely that they arose from watching detailed portraits of highly individualized characters, but rather reflected the overall patterns of the story as informed by the actors who, as we recall, usually played more than one role.

Tragic acting style took its cue from the expansive outdoor theatre, the scale of the dramatic events, and the form the material was given. As a result, acting was big-voiced, front-footed, and fully displayed, not low-key, withdrawn, and inner. Aristotle tells us that the main metre adopted for speeches and dialogue – iambic trimeter (three sets of double-iambic feet, each line scanned ˣ -˘ - /˘ -˘ - /˘ -˘ ˣ/ where – is long, ˘ is short, and ˣ is either long or short) – was more conversational than epic dactylic hexameter. This fact should warn us against adopting the false analogy between tragedy and musical theatre or opera. Tragic dialogue was neither sung nor accompanied by music, but was deemed to follow the rhythms of common speech, although controlled more formally and expressively than in day-to-day conversation.[4] The actor did most of his work through his voice, and the primary attributes of a would-be performer were the quality and range of his vocal powers.

Ancient actors usually played more than one role, but the task may have been slightly easier than it first appears. There is little indication in the tragic texts (and none in other sources) that the diction of different characters – queen or nurse, king or servant, male or female, Greek or foreigner, god or mortal – was marked in any individualized way. We may contrast, for example, the Professor's speech with that of Waffles in *Uncle Vanya*, or the prose of Roderigo with the verse of the Moor in *Othello*. Unlike Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who would 'aggravate' his voice to play Thisbe, we find no indication that Greek tragic actors changed their pitch or delivery in any substantial way when performing different characters within the same drama. Even if they did – if there were, for instance, a characteristic 'vocal quality' for an old woman or a herald – the audience still would recognize the distinctive voice of each of the three actors behind the masks.

The fact of vocal recognition means that doubling roles folded the issues of dramatic character back into the larger patterns of the play, an opportunity that the playwrights fully exploited. For instance, the same actor played both Agamemnon and his rival Aegisthus in *Agamemnon*; both Electra and Clytemnestra, the estranged mother and daughter of *Choephori*; Heracles and Deianeira, the husband and wife who never meet in the course of *Women of Trachis*; Antigone and Haimon, who finally join off-stage in a 'marriage to death' in *Antigone*; Orestes and Clytemnestra, avenging son and murdered mother in Sophocles' *Electra*; Agave and Pentheus, both the mother and the son she kills in *Bacchae*. In Sophocles' *Ajax*, the division of parts broke down along the lines of support or antipathy for the title character – the protagonist played Ajax and Teucer (half-brothers), the second actor, the 'deuteragonist', portrayed Odysseus (sympathetic to Ajax) and Tecmessa (Ajax's wife), and the third actor, 'tritagonist', performed the roles of Athena, Menelaus, and Agamemnon (Ajax's enemies in the play).[5]

Actors performing tragedy in contemporary productions are free of the demands of doubling roles, and from the prodigious vocal projection

required in the theatre of Dionysus. Nonetheless, attention to the words and to the ongoing flow of speech and dialogue provides the surest guide for any actor or director who wishes to take full advantage of Greek tragic form. To be avoided is the temptation to convert Greek tragic figures into modern characters by adopting a mode of delivery best suited for domestic/living-room drama – mumbling, using exaggerated breathing as an emotional marker, making inarticulate acknowledgements and prompts, taking long pauses to convey moments of gravity, and employing other irregular patterns of speech and silence. Tragedy demands a different, but no less expressive, discipline, one that subordinates psychological marking via speech/non-speech habits to the 'acoustic mask-wearing' appropriate to its subject and scale.[6] In this kind of acting, character is revealed in the forward movement of speech and dialogue, and the development of a role is in the service of the overall action of the drama and not an end in itself.

Ancient discussions of gesture (*cheironomia*) indicate that physical expression also played an important part in tragic acting. Judging from the plays, the most important gestures involved ritual actions associated with mourning the dead, and we can tell from vase paintings and from the texts themselves something about how they looked. The same is true of gestures connected with pouring libations (liquid offerings), swearing oaths, celebrating a wedding, and making supplication. The last example is particularly important because supplication (placing oneself at the mercy, and protection, of another) provides the organizing principle of several tragedies, giving rise to the sub-genre of the suppliant play, including Aeschylus' and Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, and several others.[7]

By incorporating patterns of movement and gesture drawn from contemporary ritual and religious practice, the tragedians incorporated important elements of fifth-century life into the world of the mythic/heroic figures who inhabited their stage. In fact, a thoroughgoing anachronism operated in Greek tragedy, making powerful and immediate contact with the lived experience of the original audience. The actors presented the spectators with a vision of the contemporary world writ large, not simply a version of the mythic and heroic world writ small.

THE GREEK CHORUS

The chorus represent the single aspect of Greek tragedy that is least understood and most rarely honoured, both in productions and in critical writing on the ancient theatre. This situation is unfortunate, since what distinguishes the earliest drama from its later offspring is the presence of the chorus, or more specifically, the coexistence of two contrasting modes of presentation – the rhetoric, or speech of the actor (usually in iambic trimeter, as noted above), and the lyric of the chorus, a combination of dance, music, and verse in a variety of metres.

The difference between rhetoric and lyric, between actor and chorus, has been expressed in a variety of ways. The opposition between individuated character and the undifferentiated chorus influenced Nietzsche's vision of the wellsprings of theatre in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In more pragmatic terms, the actor/chorus dialectic did much to energize theatrical group-work and the revival of alternative theatre in the 1960s. The distinction between language as lyric, filled with imagistic and temporal leaps, and language as rhetoric, used for narrative and argumentative purposes, informed the old critical polarities of connotation and denotation, and has found a new critical life in terms of poetic versus public discourse. Considering the non-verbal aspects of choral performance, we may contrast the emotional nature of movement and music/song with the rational, logic-bound control of speech, suggesting the traditional dichotomy of reason and passion, or any number of modern variations, including the distinction between left- and right-brain activity. We also can view the modal differences in terms of the categories of the 'hot' medium of language and the 'cool' medium of the chorus's lyric and dance.[8]

However one construes the differences between the rhetoric of the actor and the lyric of the chorus, the interplay between the two expressive modes sets Greek tragedy apart from other drama. Compare the popular Broadway and West-End fare that consists of people in a room talking, or the contemporary avant-garde 'theatre of images', that provides one stage picture after another with minimal narrative or story-line. At best, each offers but half of the possibilities inherent in Greek tragic form. Some critics argue that opera or musical theatre offers a helpful analogy to Greek tragedy, but the apparent similarities are superficial and misleading. The power of speech is absent or extremely attenuated in opera, with a dearth of argument and case-making, of persuasive rhetoric, of cut-and-thrust dialogue and public debate. Similarly, the opera's use of dance – often balletic interludes or atmospheric pieces of folklore – bears little resemblance to the combination of poetry, song, and movement that constitutes the Greek chorus.

As for the comparison of tragic lyric to popular music theatre, one of the central tenets of the integrated musical is that the song or dance reveals character, or signals a major development in the plot, or (in less well-crafted pieces) offers a 'vehicle' for the star. Think how often in a musical number a character establishes his or her situation, a couple falls in or out of love, an important decision is reached, a discovery made, a deal struck, and so on. As we shall see, the choral lyric of tragedy rarely serves so explicit a function. By providing a different mode from the rhetoric of the actors, the chorus engages the play in an ongoing dialogue with itself. Through the different 'voices' of that dialogue – sometimes complementary, sometimes additive, sometimes opposed one to the other – the tragedy takes shape and comes to dramatic life.

We can get a better handle on how the lyric differs from the surrounding

action by looking at the practical demands of choral performance. As far as we can tell, the tragic chorus originally consisted of twelve members, and at some point grew to fifteen, the same performers serving for the entire tetralogy of a given playwright. Perhaps the change to an odd number offered advantages for asymmetrical choreography, or highlighted the role of the chorus-leader, who did most of the speaking when the chorus conversed with the dramatic characters.

The initial arrival of the chorus into the theatre usually took place through one or both of the side entrances called *eisodoi* ('ways in') or *parodoi* ('side roads'), giving the name *parodos* to the first chorus. Frequently the metre for the choral entrance is anapaests – a combination of ˘ ˘ ¯, ¯ ¯, and occasionally ¯ ˘ ˘ in a repeating pattern – often referred to as 'marching anapaests', although tragedies in which the chorus could be said to move into the theatre in military fashion are few and far between (see Chapter 3, p. 27). There are formal processions, as in the opening of Aeschylus' *Choephori* where the slave women bring libations to the tomb of Agamemnon, and in Euripides' lost *Phaethon*, where the chorus enter singing a wedding hymn. In some tragedies the choral entrance is drawn out purposely, as in Aeschylus' *Persians*; in others the chorus arrive with a sense of urgency and dispatch, as in Euripides' *Alcestis* and *Medea*, or with a festive sense of excitement, as in *Ion* and *Electra*. On rare occasions the chorus are discovered in the orchestra when the play begins, moving into place in a 'cancelled entry' that is understood to take place before, and outside of, the dramatic action. Analysed in Chapters 6 and 8, the choruses of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Euripides' *Suppliant Women* are pre-set in this fashion.

Once established in the orchestra, the chorus sing and dance a series of odes over the course of the play, usually designated by the general term stasimon or 'standing song'. The name does not imply immobility but simply means that the chorus are already in the orchestra when they perform. Recently the term 'act-dividing song' has been introduced to indicate a more dramatic sense of structure, applied to a choral song that is preceded immediately by an actor's exit and is followed by an actor's entrance.[9]

Although there are odes with no metrical responsion (called astrophic), most choral songs consist of paired stanzas, a *strophê* (meaning 'turn', henceforth strophe) and *antistrophê* ('counter-turn'). In this structure the metrical pattern in one stanza is repeated precisely in the next, then a different metrical pattern is introduced in a new strophe, which is followed precisely in its antistrophe, and so on: a – a'/ b – b'/ c – c'/. Sometimes an independent passage called a mesode ('middle song') is inserted between the two parts of a strophic pair, marking a rhythmical break before the pattern of the strophe repeats in the antistrophe: a – mesode 1 – a'/ b – mesode 2 – b'/ and so on. To close off a chorus, the playwright occasionally employs an epode ('after-song') that does not correspond precisely to any of the preceding strophic pairs. The tragic

playwrights worked complex elaborations on the basic schemes, and a graph of the metrical patterns can prove helpful in grasping the overall movement of the lyric. Although we should not mistake the pattern on the page for the experience of an audience during performance, a director of Greek tragedy would do well to remain alert to the interlocking musical patterns, observing the way the lyric brings together different subjects and motifs by virtue of repeated rhythms and movement, or emphasizes tonal shifts by introducing a break in the pattern.

The precise nature of the dance of the chorus has been lost, but we gain some insight from the content and substance of the songs, from representations of dancers on ancient vases and sculpture, and from the lyric metres themselves. It seems likely that the Greek chorus did not eschew mimetic and expressive movements. When they sang of the animal world and the forces of nature, there was a quality in the dance that reflected its power and beauty. When the lyric included threnodic elements and other aspects of mourning rites, or dealt with sacrifice, weddings, athletic contests, or military actions, we may be sure the dance drew on recognizable gestures and movements from those rituals and events. The chorus generally moved and sang in unison, although we may assume that individual dancers could move independently while the group maintained the basic rhythm, and that solo voices emerged when dramatically effective. At times the chorus divided into two half-choruses, allowing one group to move with less restraint while the other carried the song, and vice versa. In modern terms, Greek choral dancing seems closer to synchronized modern dance than to ballet, more in the mould of expressive movement than kinaesthetic abstraction.

There must have been close co-ordination between the dance and the lyric rhythms, but the complexities of Greek metre are formidable, and it is wrong-headed to associate specific metres with a particular set of movements or a single emotional effect. A rough scale of physicality from constrained to wild would put the steady and somewhat repetitive anapaests at one end and dochmiacs at the other. The dochmiac is a syncopated rhythm signalling great tension, anxiety, and even abandonment, with the metrical foot ˘ - - ˘ - in repeated patterns, capable of wide variation including the resolution of all the long syllables into shorts (˘ ˘˘ ˘˘ ˘ ˘˘) as at line 1330 of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In between anapaests and dochmiacs lie a variety of metrical systems, any of which can be adapted to a wide range of emotional and movement possibilities.[10]

English translations rarely aim to capture the lyric variation of the original, a wise course given the limitations of English syntax. As a fully inflected language, ancient Greek uses the endings of words and not their order to signal grammatical function in a sentence. By allowing maximum flexibility in terms of word placement, the Greek language enables remarkably complex metres to be repeated precisely. To identify these lyrical patterns, a commentary on a Greek text is an essential guide, since the editor usually provides a breakdown of the metres of all the choruses. Of course, strict

allegiance to the original metrical scheme is neither possible nor desirable in a modern translation or production. But sensitivity to this aspect of choral lyric can help those working on Greek tragedy to a fuller appreciation of the chorus's changing dramatic role, suggesting places where modern theatrical equivalents to metrical responsion can and should be considered.

In approaching Greek lyric, one also should be aware of 'metrical quotations' and references to other genres. As Herington points out, the innovation in tragic lyric did not lie in discovering new metres, but in 'its fusion of the known metrical genres within the compass of a single work'.[11] For example, when dactylic hexametre (the metre of Greek epic poetry) occurs in tragic lyric, the playwright may be suggesting a Homeric and heroic feeling to the passage. Alternatively, hexametres may suggest an oracular tone, since responses from the Delphic oracle also were delivered in that metre. Another genre incorporated in tragic choruses is that of the epinician or 'victory ode' discussed in Chapter 1, invoking the world of athletic competitions and the aristocratic ideal of the 'beautiful and noble' victor. In Euripides' *Electra*, the chorus and Electra welcome Orestes and Pylades back from their murder of Aegisthus with an epinician-influenced lyric, crowning the young men as if they were victors at the Olympic games. The incongruity becomes clear when Orestes presents his sister with the head of Aegisthus, duly reviled by Electra in a long and disturbing speech.

Euripides' *Heracles* illustrates another, related convention in lyric, in which the chorus question the nature of the song they are singing. They compare Heracles' madness to a Bacchic celebration run amok, where the *aulos* accompanies a crazed dance and gives rise to a fatal song (877–79). Of course, the chorus themselves are dancing to an *aulos* in the orchestra, so that their performance comes to signify the inverted Dionysiac ritual they are describing. By transforming the choral dance in the theatre into its own 'negative image', Euripides asks the audience to consider the fabric of song that once praised Heracles as victor and now unravels in disorder and madness. In their final lyric, the chorus express their doubts about what song they should perform: 'What groans/ or dirge or song of death, what dance/ of Hades should I take up?' (1025–27). Euripides answers the question by never having the chorus sing and dance again, with over 350 lines before the end of the play. Perhaps by their collective stillness and silence Euripides suggests that the tragic lyric adequate to the experiences of *Heracles* has yet to be written.

The most famous example of a chorus calling its own activities into question occurs in the second stasimon of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. At this point in the play, Apollo's oracles seem unfulfilled, and the shifting eddies of fortune appear so random that they threaten any sense of human purpose. If such is the state of the cosmos, the chorus wonder, 'Why is it necessary for us to dance?' Their question is self-referential but also tied to the action of the play. Why *should* choruses dance? If events occur only at random, what allegiances

are there to the city, the gods, and the notion of a 'cosmos' (the Greek for 'order'), the very things that a tragic chorus gather to explore and celebrate at the festival of Dionysus? By virtue of the chorus's own self-examination, Sophocles raises a fundamental question about the purpose of theatre. How the audience responds to that question is part and parcel of the way *Oedipus Tyrannus* works in performance.

At the end of most Greek tragedies, the chorus leave the orchestra through an *eisodos*. Their exit is often part of the final stage action, as in Aeschylus' *Persians* where the chorus accompany the defeated Xerxes in a dirge back to their homes. Similarly, at the end of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* the chorus form part of the funeral cortege for Heracles. A dramatically important variation of the convention occurs in *Agamemnon*, where the chorus members do not exit together, but leave in small groups after taunting the tyrant Aegisthus. The fragmentation suggests the unsettled political situation in Argos, the divided *polis* that results from Aegisthus' seizing power. In a more formal acknowledgement of closure, several plays of Euripides end with choral 'tags', short truisms about the unpredictability of events as exemplified in the tragedy, after which the chorus presumably exit in silence. Although we cannot be certain, a few tragedies may have ended without a final exit, substituting a final tableau broken only by the audience's applause and whatever passed for the ancient curtain-call.

In four extant tragedies – Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Euripides' *Alcestis, Helen* and *Rhesus* – the chorus actually leave the theatre *during* the play, allowing for a second *parodos* when they re-enter the orchestra. In *Eumenides*, for example, the chorus of Furies leave the theatre in pursuit of Orestes, who has fled Delphi for Athens. When Orestes re-enters the now empty orchestra, we have a clear indication that the scene has changed to Athens, and the Furies arrive to track him down again. In their second *parodos*, they physicalize the theme of pursuit and punishment that runs through the trilogy. In *Alcestis*, the chorus's departure sets a very different tone, for they join Admetus in bearing the corpse of Alcestis out of the theatre, a procession modelled on a fifth-century funeral. After an intervening scene between Heracles and a servant (played in the absence of the chorus), the funeral party returns and Admetus compares their desolate homecoming to his arrival with Alcestis years before on their wedding night. By emptying the orchestra, Euripides conveys not only the collective sense of loss brought on by Alcestis' death, but also the transformation that takes place in the figure of Admetus.

Perhaps the most important function of the chorus is to open up the drama to a variety of non-linear influences that a strict narrative can deny or inhibit. Time and again the choral lyric introduces striking images of the natural world, in the manner of the extended epic similes discussed in Chapter 1. In *Agamemnon*, for example, the images of the vultures orphaned of their young, the eagle and the pregnant hare, the lion cub

who turns from pet to killer, the nightingale singing of her loss, take on a life of their own. Through the choral lyric, human activities in the *Oresteia* are viewed against the vast backdrop of nature and prove to be both at one and at war with the natural world. Intermingling past, present, and future, the chorus also free tragedy from a strict temporal sequence. By introducing examples from myth, they encourage the audience to view specific dramatic actions within the (relatively) timeless context of mythological paradigms. Space and location also become transmuted in the performance of lyric, as when the chorus of *Heracles* evoke various points at the edge of the known world, or when a chorus sing an 'escape' ode, like the Danaids in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, conjuring a location far from the immediate problems of the play.

By diverging from the strict path of the plot, the chorus enable the audience to view the preceding and subsequent action through a different focusing perspective.[12] For example, the *parodos* of Euripides' *Bacchae* ends with a dynamic image of maenadic worshippers leaping with the natural grace of a deer in the wild. As the chorus finish their dance, two old men dressed in the fawn skins of Dionysiac cult haltingly make their way into the orchestra. The striking juxtaposition is both humorous and instructive, especially when the old men, Cadmus and the blind Teiresias, try to rationalize their 'conversion' to the new religion. Unlike the maenads leaping deer-like in the woods, there proves to be nothing natural or graceful in their worship.

In addition to singing and dancing on their own, the chorus can share the lyric with a dramatic character in a *kommos*, literally 'a beating' of the breasts in mourning. The name indicates that the shared lyric frequently arises at times of grief – the return of Xerxes at the end of *Persians*, after the death of Jocasta and the blinding of Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and during the final appearance of the heroine in *Antigone*, where her wedding hopes end in a funeral procession. On other occasions, characters and chorus can interact in what is called a lyric dialogue, where they maintain their respective modes of rhetoric and lyric. As we will see in Chapter 6, Cassandra and the chorus in *Agamemnon* share such an exchange, but with the roles reversed – Cassandra sings and the chorus speak, until the prophetess draws the group into her dance and together they share a *kommos*.

Actors sometimes perform in lyric metres on their own in what is called a monody, or 'solo song'. The title characters in Euripides' *Ion* and *Electra*, for example, enter the orchestra singing a monody much like a chorus arriving in the *parodos*. After an opening section of anapaests (again, modelled on a choral entry), Ion sings a work song as he sweeps the temple precinct with his broom. The fact that his lyric is divided into a strophe and antistrophe suggests that dance movements accompanied his song. In *Electra* the protagonist returns with a water-jug filled from the well, singing and dancing a lament for her wretched fate. The formal structure reflects her inner turmoil, for each strophe and antistrophe is

separated by a short mesode that interrupts the metrical correspondence, underlining Electra's anomalous position as a married virgin and revealing her propensity for self-martyrdom.

Euripides is particularly fond of monodies, and he has two different characters (each played by a different actor) sing significant lyric passages in *Alcestis* (Alcestis and her son Eumelos), *Andromache* (Andromache and Peleus), *Ion* (Ion and Creusa), and *Trojan Women* (Cassandra and Hecuba). Frequently he uses a monody to convey utter isolation at a moment of great emotional intensity, as when Evadne suddenly appears in *Suppliant Women* ready to leap to her death on her husband's pyre, or when Creusa confesses her rape by Apollo in a moving solo in *Ion*. After the lyric monody, the character often presents the material again in a speech or dialogue. For example, Alcestis 'dies' first in a beautiful song and then plays out the death scene again in rhetoric. Cassandra in *Trojan Women* sings a perverse wedding hymn in honour of her union with Agamemnon, afterwards explaining to her mother why the occasion deserves celebrating. The process of 'going through things twice' is highly conventional, for we find no examples where an actor's monody or shared *kommos* is *preceded* by a speech on the same general topic. Since the pattern is conventional, the 'repetition' does not imply inauthentic behaviour or rhetorical posturing, but quite the opposite. The character has undergone an experience of sufficient power and importance to warrant it being presented in two different modes, forcing the audience to grapple with the different perspectives and emotional responses that they elicit.

Just as actors can adopt the medium of the chorus in a *kommos* and a monody, so the chorus occasionally speak. Editors usually assign their dialogue lines to a single *coryphaeus*, or chorus-leader, who takes on the role of group representative, as in the Furies' cross-examination and dialogue in the trial scene of *Eumenides*. At other times, however, we hear various voices from the chorus, as in the exchange after the death of the king in *Agamemnon*, when each member speaks his view on the best course of action. Lines also may have been divided among different speakers in the more conventional utterances of the chorus, such as identifying new arrivals, bidding farewell to departing characters, offering a short break between long speeches, and helping the audience to follow a change in principal speaker (difficult in a large theatre with masked actors) by interjecting a call for moderation between the two contending parties.

It was an established convention that tragic choruses do not 'make speeches', but even here we must allow for the exception. The *coryphaeus* in *Heracles* delivers a twenty-three-line speech, longer than Aegisthus' part in *Choephori*, or Eurydice's in *Antigone*. He focuses on the chorus's impotence to resist the tyrant Lycus, ending with the wish that they might regain their youthful prowess. This unprecedented speech by a chorus member paradoxically emphasizes the group's weakness, further exposing the gap in the action that only the absent Heracles can fill.

This survey of choral function should put to rest the notion that the chorus had a single, consistent character within a play. Some choruses do represent a clearly defined group who operate as such from beginning to end – the elders of the city in Aeschylus' *Persians*, and the Furies in *Eumenides*, for example. But even these groups challenge our assumptions about character consistency in any strong sense. Is raising a ghost the kind of thing Persian elders do? Why should the immortal Furies sing a binding song around Orestes in the manner of a fifth-century Athenian cursing his opponent to render him ineffective at a trial? These questions may seem absurd, but they follow directly from the way some critics and productions have insisted on the continuity and consistency of character in the Greek chorus.

We would do better to approach a chorus with an extremely flexible notion of identity, as exemplified by the group of slave-women in *Choephori*. Literally 'libation-bearers', the chorus are foreign-born servants who, at the command of their mistress Clytemnestra, bring offerings to Agamemnon's grave. However, in the *kommos* the women come to represent the forces of familial memory and outrage that urge Orestes to vengeance. Later they provide the mythological paradigms against which to view Clytemnestra's murder of her husband, only to return to the role of servants loyal now to Orestes and Electra. Acting as key players in the plot, they persuade the Nurse to change her message and help lure Aegisthus to his doom. As the murder of Clytemnestra approaches, however, the chorus shift again to distance themselves from the matricide, and conclude the play as if they were the voice of the house of Atreus, recounting the murders of the past.

Clearly, these libation-bearers are both less and more than their name implies. They are capable of acting as agents in the drama, but equally capable of effacing their identity and participating without any definable character beyond that of a group of performers who bring dramatic pressure to bear as the play requires. We see even greater flexibility in the choruses of Sophocles and Euripides, where the arrival of the group invariably is accounted for as sympathetic friends, elders of the city, visitors, suppliants, and so forth. But this initial identification is forgotten, developed, contradicted, and exploited in various ways as the action unfolds. The appearance of a secondary or 'shadow' chorus is the exception. Here, the playwright introduces a subsidiary chorus to perform a specific function, such as the secondary chorus that escorts the Eumenides at the close of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

The dramatic gains from the flexible chorus are enormous. To take but one example, the chorus of women in Euripides' *Helen* sing the following passage in their long-delayed first stasimon:

> Fools! who strive for glory in war,
> in the shock of spear against shield,
> you senselessly try to stop
> once and for all

the labour of mortal life.
Must contests of blood decide
these things? Then strife will
never leave the cities of men.
You see what these men won – wedding chambers
in the Trojan earth,
and they could have
settled it with words, their strife over you.
Ah Helen!

(*Helen*, 1151–60)

This group of captured Spartan women first enter the play announcing that they have left their washing by the river to dry. Nine hundred lines later they sing their first stasimon, a diatribe against war. Euripides has not constructed a set of circumstances, or presented a characterological or psychological profile, that would account for this change in choral sensibility. Nor would the original audience have expected such an undertaking, or found it necessary. The chorus's outburst here is part of a message that the play as a whole develops in several ways, but none of them dependent on the realistic conversion of the chorus from washerwomen to anti-war protesters.

Although looking for character consistency in the chorus is a red herring, maintaining the given gender of the group is not. It is essential to the play that the chorus of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and Euripides' *Bacchae* are female. It makes dramatic sense that Medea has an initially sympathetic group of women at hand, and the same can be said for Deianeira in *Women of Trachis* and Creusa in *Ion*. Similarly, the fact that the choruses of *Agamemnon* and *Antigone* are male highlights the essential conflicts and transformations of those plays.

By considering the chorus as a highly malleable but gender-specific entity, we cease to lock the group into a single function or point of view, the tendency of criticism since the eighteenth century. We read variously that the chorus represents the ideal spectator, the city, the common man/woman, the fifth-century world-view opposed to the archaic ethos of the heroic characters, the voice of the poet, and so on. We do better to understand the chorus in theatrical terms, as raw material to be shaped as the mood and plot demand, a group of performers who influence the audience as much as the action, who are not bound to strict determinants of identity or character. Both in what they perform, and in the fact that they usually sing and dance when they perform it, the chorus infuse the play with a different kind of energy from that of the actors, and so change the pulse and temperature of the action. They force the audience to consider elements not strictly related to the plot, and yet not extraneous to the workings of the play. Through their lyric and dance, they cast disturbing shadows back on the scene we have just watched, or throw an interpretive filter over what will transpire.

The chorus are free to support, ignore, question, or reject the actions of the central characters, reorienting our response to the rhetoric as they do. They compel us to experience the drama as an ever-changing dynamic relationship, and not as the unfolding of the inevitable.

MODES OF TALKING: MESSENGER SPEECHES, STICHOMYTHIA, AND FORMAL *AGÔNS*

Messenger speeches

We have discussed how Greek lyric can canvass time and space, bringing the past and future, the distant and remote, to bear on events in the play. An important convention of the rhetoric of tragedy, the messenger speech also aims at bringing an off-stage world into the theatre, but in a more focused and emotionally charged manner. The theatrical opposite of a large group supported by music, song, and movement, the messenger stands alone, a performer stripped of everything but his capacity to hold the stage while he speaks.

Messengers are rarely named, and in their narrative they subordinate character almost completely to dramatic function. Here, if anywhere in Greek tragedy, the text must speak through the actor. Modern productions rarely grasp the dramatic strength of these remarkable speeches, substituting for hard-edged narration a personally felt, angst-ridden account. Imbued with a sense of '*I* was there', such performances are at odds with the form, for a messenger speech demands that the 'I' should give way almost completely to the 'there'. The audience should focus on the events that are described, *not* on the person giving the description, especially considering the graphic nature of those events – the blinding of Oedipus, the suicide of Antigone and Haimon, the madness of Heracles, the dismemberment of Pentheus. A messenger speech does not benefit from over-interpretation by a performing middle-man, but makes its strongest impact when the actor serves as the medium through which the audience create the off-stage events in their own imaginations.

It is true that the messenger always has a reason for being on the scene – the handmaid of Alcestis describes her mistress's farewell to the house, a servant of Medea describes the death of Glauke and Creon, and so on. However, the point is to present a credible eye-witness who can relate accurately what was said and done, not to lay the groundwork for a fully developed character. The messenger frequently sets up the narration dramatically, as if he or she were a member of an audience either privileged to be there, or forced to observe an event that no one would want to see. In *Heracles*, for example, the Messenger reports how the household gathered as participants in the

sacrifice to celebrate Heracles' return and purify the house after the murder of Lycus. But confusion reigns among the servants at the strange behaviour of Heracles: 'Is our master playing, or has he gone insane?' (*Heracles*, 952). The concerned comment of an onlooker anticipates the horrible truth, for Heracles has been struck mad by Hera and proceeds to hunt down his own wife and children.

As this example suggests, a convention of messenger speeches includes the quoting of at least one passage of direct dialogue from someone on the scene. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the second Messenger reports the words of both mother and son, Agave who is possessed by Bacchic madness and Pentheus who is spying on their mysteries. Agave calls on her fellow Bacchantes to uproot the tree in which her son sits, and the Messenger follows with Pentheus' desperate appeal: 'Mother, it is I, your son,/ Pentheus, whom you bore to Echion./ Mother, please, have mercy on me. I have/ done wrong, but I am your son. Don't kill me' (*Bacchae* 1118–21). Through their own words, crazed mother and doomed son come to life in a moment of tragic clarity, before the Messenger turns to the grisly details of Pentheus' dismemberment: 'One of them bore an arm,/ another a foot still in its boot, and his ribs/ were stripped with their rending. Every hand was red/ with the blood, as they played ball with Pentheus' flesh' (1133–36).

Although there are few passages in drama more gruesome than this, the convention of the Messenger does *not* entail the mistaken notion that all violence in Greek tragedy takes place off-stage. Physical pain, brutality, and even bloodshed do occur within sight of the audience – the hero commits suicide on stage in Sophocles' *Ajax*, the suppurating wound of the title character in *Philoctetes* is constantly before us, the tormented Heracles exposes his pain-wracked body in *Women of Trachis*, and a battered son dies in the arms of his father in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. What distinguishes the convention of the messenger speech is not the compulsion to avoid on-stage violence, but the absolute reliance on the audience's imagination to visualize and re-animate that violence in their minds' eye. We might compare the messenger's report to a modern radio play that depends on the imaginative participation of the audience for its success. Those who have worked in radio drama stress the medium's incomparable visual richness,[13] and the same quality infuses the messenger speeches in tragedy, where language and imagination do the work that modern theatre and film have surrendered too readily to technical wizardry and special effects.

Stichomythia

Cut-and-thrust dialogue called stichomythia ('story by lines') constitutes another important convention of tragic rhetoric. It can take a variety of forms, normally alternating single lines of dialogue between two characters, but also two lines per speaker (distichs) or only half a line each (hemistichs),

not unlike a pentameter line in Shakespeare split between two actors. Although employed in a variety of circumstances, stichomythia usually signals a quickening of tempo and focusing of dramatic energy. In its neutral function, it can mark the transition from the end of one speech to the beginning of the next. For example, the stichomythic exchange initiated by the chorus-leader in *Agamemnon* manoeuvres the Herald from his announcement of the fall of Troy to his account of the disastrous storm that destroyed the Greek fleet. Stichomythia also can be used to identify and welcome a new arrival on-stage, important in a large outdoor theatre where the actors are masked and character identity may not be visually self-evident.

As part of his exploration of tragic form, Euripides experimented boldly with stichomythia. In *Ion*, for example, Creusa's first meeting with her (unrecognized) son generates over *one hundred* lines of stichomythia, by far the longest stretch of such dialogue in tragedy. Here, the rapid exchange of questions, answers, and reactions replaces the series of speeches we would expect to establish the situation early in the play. By using stichomythia to provide the narrative background, Euripides ironically underlines the fact that mother and son, intimately connected by blood and symbolically drawn together in dialogue, continue to be separated by the self-serving secrecy of the god Apollo.

Often plots are laid in stichomythia, as in Euripides' *Electra* where the old Tutor and Orestes map out the murder of Aegisthus. After thirty-five lines alternating between the two, suddenly Electra enters the dialogue, replacing the troubled Orestes as interlocutor and introducing her own chilling plan to kill her mother. Alternatively, the catechistic form of stichomythia can bring a character to an understanding of some larger scheme in which he or she is the victim. In *Heracles*, for example, Amphitryon's dialogue with his son guides Heracles to the realization that he has killed his family in a fit of god-sent madness. In *Bacchae* the stichomythic exchange between Cadmus and his daughter Agave draws her out of her Bacchic frenzy until she sees that the lion's trophy she holds in her arms is really the head of her son Pentheus.

Frequently a character employs stichomythia to persuade another to change his mind. Clytemnestra's dialogue with her husband in *Agamemnon* leads to his walking on the tapestries against his better judgement. In *Philoctetes*, Neoptolemus has a series of stichomythic exchanges with Philoctetes and with Odysseus, highlighting the radically different choices facing the young man. Time and again he repeats the phrase *ti drasô*, 'What shall [should] I do?', perhaps *the* tragic question, whose recurrence reminds us of the strong ethical dimension in Greek drama.[14] By means of stichomythia, characters focus on the issues of choice, decision, and action as determined through engagement and dialogue with others, and not through abstract speculation.

The rapid exchange of alternative points of view also reflects the process

by which Athenian juries reached their verdicts. But the lawcourts intermixed cross-examination with prepared speeches, a pattern we observe in such court-influenced tragedies as Sophocles' *Ajax*, where competing arguments for and against the burial of Ajax are presented by Menelaus, Teucer, and Agamemnon. Let us turn to this more elaborate convention of tragic rhetoric, the formal debate between two characters called an *agôn*, or 'contest'.

The theatrical *agôn*

The political debate in the Assembly and legal judgements in the lawcourts provided the inspiration for comparable scenes on the Greek stage. We find a formal trial scene in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, a fitting culmination to a trilogy imbued with legal terminology and metaphor, as we shall see in Chapter 6. Scenes of political debate on the relative merits of democracy figure prominently in both Aeschylus' and Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. References to specific Athenian political and legal practices occur in many tragedies, reminding us of the thoroughness with which the mythic and heroic characters articulate fifth-century concerns.

A manifestation of the political nature of tragedy is the convention of formal theatrical debate, called an *agôn*, in which a character makes a case as if speaking before a body of jurors or voters. That position is then attacked by the other party in the conflict, responding point by point like a lawyer or political opponent. Although recognizing the conventional aspects of the verbal exchange, the audience is encouraged to come to a judgement, to grapple with the arguments and apply them to the issues raised by the tragedy. Sometimes the play exposes the way that such rhetorical structures are manipulated to serve the ends of power; on other occasions the scene calls into question the efficacy and appropriateness of public debate itself.

The second half of Sophocles' *Ajax* consists primarily of arguments between Teucer and the brothers Menelaus and Agamemnon over the burial of Ajax. In their *agôns*, an ethical principle is challenged and ultimately reaffirmed, for Ajax's erstwhile enemy Odysseus helps to ensure that the burial takes place. The first encounter in *Medea* between Medea and her estranged husband takes the form of a prosecution and defence. By the time the two cases have been argued, Jason has inverted almost everything the audience knows to be true, flouting the very aspects of Greek culture that he claims to have introduced to Medea. He resembles those fifth-century Athenian politicians (and their modern epigones) who clothe personal advantage in terms of justice, making a mockery of the values and institutions they claim to support.

Euripides scrutinizes various argumentative strategies in the *agôns* of other plays. In *Alcestis*, Pheres precipitates a bitter debate with his son Admetus, interrupting the funeral procession for Alcestis who has sacrificed herself for

her husband. Ostensibly gathered in her honour, the two men escalate their mutual recriminations until the funeral situation is forgotten. In this *agôn*, played out before Alcestis' corpse, neither party wins and the debate itself is grossly out of place. In *Trojan Women*, Hecuba is confident that a debate will demonstrate the bankruptcy of Helen's sophistry and persuade Menelaus that his unfaithful wife deserves to die. Replete with tonal ambiguities and rhetorical flourishes, the *agôn* between the old woman and young beauty seems at odds with the sombre atmosphere of the play. Hecuba's faith in the efficacy of words is as ill founded as it is touching, for the scene reveals the futility of rational discourse when events have reached such a stage. No matter what is said, Menelaus will welcome Helen back to his marriage bed and Hecuba will continue to suffer.

An even more problematic *agôn* involves the tyrant Lycus and Amphitryon in *Heracles*. Before killing Heracles' family who are suppliants at the altar of Zeus, Lycus unleashes a verbal assault on Heracles for using a bow, the weapon of a coward. In response, Amphitryon does not confront Lycus' treachery, or appeal to the rights of suppliants, or even expose the tyrant's own cowardice. Instead he mounts a point-by-point defence of his son's use of the bow rather than the traditional armour and tactics of the hoplite infantryman. Critics claim that the issue was a topical one in military strategy, and others argue that the bow serves as a problematic image of Heracles' courage. But neither of these explanations accounts for the presence of such extended rhetoric, especially given the dramatic circumstances.

Perhaps Euripides lingers over these speeches to force the audience to consider what lies *behind* the convention itself. Full of contemporary sophistry and 'legalese', the bow debate dramatizes a miss, an *agôn* of ineffectiveness, a failure to engage the important matters of the play. Perhaps the fifth-century audience recognized the misdirected speeches that made up a good portion of public debate during the Peloponnesian War, in full swing at the time of the play's production. If so, then Euripides uses the convention of the formal *agôn* to expose how public rhetoric can skirt or even *displace* crucial issues, as opposed to confronting them directly.

COSTUMES, PROPS, AND CORPSES

The costumes worn by tragic performers were what we would call 'modern dress' – they resembled contemporary fifth-century clothing and did not aim at reflecting historicist notions of authentic Bronze Age, archaic, or heroic attire. This situation applied not only to the characters' domestic and public costume, but also to military apparel, armour, and hand props (swords, bows, and the like) in plays set during the Trojan War. The contemporary look of the actors, coupled with anachronisms from the civic, political, and military spheres, suggests that the tragedies of the last third of the fifth century set

during the heroic wars at Troy or Thebes brought the Peloponnesian War (431–04) immediately to mind.

This is not to imply that an Athenian spectator saw his next-door neighbour on-stage, or mistook tragic action for a slice of life. Nonetheless, the actor playing Agamemnon in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, for example, dressed more or less like a contemporary, and spoke a poetic, but recognizable, version of Athenian speech. His concerns about how to prosecute the war, and what sacrifices it was worth, resonated with contemporary relevance for the Athenians in the theatre. A modern production could do worse than aim for a similar combination of distance and proximity *vis-à-vis* its contemporary audience.

Bridging the gap between the heroic characters and the fifth century, tragic costumes and props often mirrored specific aspects of Athenian ritual life. Evadne appears in her wedding dress in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, in marked contrast to the chorus who wear the black robes of mourning. So, too, Cassandra in *Trojan Women* perversely celebrates her upcoming wedding with Agamemnon, to the point of carrying her own nuptial torches, normally borne by the mothers of the bride and groom. In *Alcestis*, Admetus dresses in black with his hair cut in mourning to lead the funeral procession of Alcestis. At the end of the play, however, Heracles miraculously hands back the resurrected Alcestis, who is dressed and veiled like a bride, and Admetus accepts the 'stranger' much as a husband does his new wife at an Athenian wedding.

As well as contemporizing ritual activities in tragedy, prop and costume elements could indicate status and character: staffs for old men like the chorus of *Heracles* and for blind prophets like Teiresias in *Antigone*; swords for Aegisthus' guards in *Agamemnon*; special robes to indicate service to a god for the Pythia in *Eumenides* and the priestess Theonoe in *Helen*; wands wound with cotton to identify supplicants in the various suppliant plays; and so on. Costumes could take on a graphically realistic flavour, as in the rags of Euripidean characters that are parodied mercilessly in the comedies of Aristophanes. The shipwrecked Menelaus arrives in tatters in *Helen*, and his change of costume near the end of the play signals a return to the old warrior. In *Electra* the embittered protagonist bemoans her rags and poverty, and makes much of the water-jug she hauls back from the spring. However, she ignores her husband's offer of help with the water-carrying and rejects the chorus's gifts of more festive clothing, revealing herself to be oppressed by wilful self-martyrdom as much as by circumstance.

For all his notoriety, Euripides was not the first to use costume and props to suggest suffering and deprivation. Aeschylus builds the climax of his *Persians* around the return of the defeated commander Xerxes, who is dressed in rags. The Greek word for his apparel, *stolos*, also is used for Persia's naval fleet destroyed at the battle of Salamis. Arrayed in tattered garments and bearing an empty quiver, the young king symbolically

wears the defeat of his empire. Sophocles, too, uses distressed costumes to suggest the abject suffering of his hero, from the suppurating wound and wild appearance of the title figure in *Philoctetes* to the tormented Heracles in *Women of Trachis*, borne on a litter and crying in anguish as he uncovers his poison-burnt body.

More common than the representation of physical agony in tragedy is the appearance of corpses or other remains of the dead (usually requiring a corps of mute actors to bring them on- and off-stage). A formal procession escorts the body of Alcestis out for burial, and a similar cortège brings the corpse of Neoptolemus into the theatre in *Andromache*. The bodies of the recovered seven against Thebes are paraded in the orchestra in *Suppliant Women*, and afterwards their orphaned sons return bearing the urns of their ashes. These and other spectacles of the dead recall the importance of burial rites to the Greeks, where preparation of the corpse and funeral rites were performed by the family, not by professionals. In *Antigone* the issue is the catalyst for the tragic action, for Antigone decides to bury Polyneices in spite of Creon's decree outlawing such rites. Although Antigone dies for her actions, it is Creon who must bury the corpses of his loved ones at the end of the play. He returns carrying the body of his son, Haimon, only to learn of his wife's suicide as well. She is revealed on the *ekkyklêma* draped over the household altar, a striking image of the death of Creon's home.

Costume, props, and a corpse often come together at key dramatic moments, a concentrated image of the central action. Sophocles has the tortured heroine in his *Electra* hear the (false) news of her brother's death, and she mourns over his ashes in what she thinks is his funeral urn. Miraculously, the empty container leads Electra to the living Orestes, who reverses the trick at the end of the play. The purported corpse of Orestes lures Aegisthus on-stage, but the covered body is revealed to be that of the murdered Clytemnestra, with Aegisthus soon to join her. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, the Greeks hurl Astyanax, the young son of Hector and Andromache, from the walls of Troy. His broken body is carried on-stage cradled in the great shield of his father, a chilling symbol of the death of the city's hopes, and the merciless cruelty of the conquerors.

Perhaps the most daring conjunction of costumes, corpse, and dramatic action occurs in Euripides' *Bacchae*. In the famous 'drag scene', Pentheus dresses up in women's clothing to spy on the Bacchic mysteries. We laugh at his cross-dressing ('Is my head cover sitting right?' 'How is the line of my dress?' 930–31, 935–36), but the fact that he is totally under Dionysus' spell gives the laughter a vicious twist. More disturbing for the original audience was the fact that the woman's garment Pentheus puts on reaches to his feet, not normal for Athenian dress but standard for burial raiment. Dionysus dresses Pentheus not only for the Mysteries, but also for his funeral. At the end of the play, Cadmus returns with the dismembered bits of Pentheus' body torn apart by the Theban women

in their Dionysiac frenzy, an appropriate closing image for the play's devastating fragmentation.

In some tragedies, stage props provide the locus for choice, a symbol of the dilemma that the tragic hero faces. In Sophocles' *Ajax*, the sword that Ajax received from Hector comes to represent his outmoded heroism and serves as the means of his suicide. In *Philoctetes*, a prophecy states that the hero's bow must be brought to Troy if the Greeks are to take the city. For the wounded and marooned Philoctetes, the weapon is his sole means of survival; for Odysseus, it is the guarantee of victory that he must obtain at all costs; for Neoptolemus the bow comes to represent the ethical choice he faces, resolved when he decides to return the weapon to the wretched hero who entrusted it to him. In the final scene of Euripides' *Heracles*, the protagonist also confronts his bow – the attribute of his heroic labours, but also the instrument of his family's murder. By taking up the weapon, Heracles metaphorically shoulders his tragic past and acknowledges a hostile future, transformed into a new kind of hero as he leaves for Athens.

Less violent props include the letter in *Hippolytus* left by Phaedra after her suicide, although its accusations lead Theseus to utter his fatal curse on his son. More salvific is the letter in *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, which the heroine reads aloud and sets off the recognition between her and Orestes. In *Ion* the tokens that Creusa exposed with her baby act as 'non-verbal' letters, speaking after many years to establish Ion's identity. The pattern of last-minute recognition based on tokens from the past recurs in other plays of Euripides, and in many of his lost works. It became the mainstay of recognition scenes in the New Comedy of Menander, the dramatic genre that became the popular form in the latter part of the fourth century.[15]

STARTING AND STOPPING THE PLAY: THE PROLOGUE, *DEUS EX MACHINA*, AND THE GOD'S EYE VIEW

Like most plays, Greek tragedies come 'out of nowhere' and adopt some form of closure at the end. Depending on the play, the opening section maps out the dramatic terrain, provides the horizon line against which we are to see the key events, or clarifies the theatrical impulse that shapes the subsequent action. Similarly, the manner in which a tragedy ends can confirm or frustrate our sense of resolution, turning us back to the issues of the play in a thoughtful, chastened, or disillusioned way.

Aeschylus' *Persians*, our earliest surviving tragedy, opens with the entrance of the chorus, appropriate for a play concerned with a people and not an individual protagonist. The gathering of elders in the orchestra is the peaceful counterpart to the great armed convoys they evoke in their song. At the close, their *kommos* with Xerxes marks a fitting end, as the mournful procession out of the theatre reverses their hopeful arrival at the start of the play.

Usually, however, Greek tragedy begins not with the chorus but with a dramatic character delivering a monologue before the chorus enter in the *parodos*. Sometimes the speaker proves to be the protagonist, as with Orestes in *Choephori*, sometimes a less important character, such as Aethra in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, and on occasion a virtual non-character as in *Ion*, where the god Hermes delivers the prologue and then leaves the play for good.

Often the opening speaker is joined by another, giving a stronger sense of ongoing action as the audience-oriented monologue shifts to an actor-to-actor dialogue. In Euripides' *Medea*, for example, the Nurse welcomes the audience into the play, evoking the legendary journey of Jason and the Argonauts, only to displace the heroic world with one of domestic and marital turmoil. The arrival of the Tutor with Medea's and Jason's children confirms the gap between the epic past and the apparently mundane present. The scene between the Nurse and Tutor is unique in tragedy, consisting of two household servants, a scenario more at home in Greek comedy. Their dialogue establishes a familiar and contemporary tone, important in a play that exposes the destructive nature of the heroic code that leads Medea to slaughter her own children.

The most dramatically charged prologues are those that begin immediately with dialogue, as the scene between Antigone and Ismene at the start of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Here, the conflict evident at the outset prefigures the greater oppositions that emerge in the course of the play. In the opening of *Ajax*, Sophocles goes further, exploiting *three* different perspectives. Speaking from the *theologeion* (the roof of the skene-building), Athena urges Odysseus to revel at the plight of his rival Ajax, whom the goddess has driven mad. From his position below, Odysseus refuses to mock a fellow-mortal, fearful that he could end in the same situation. The *ekkyklêma* rolls out to reveal Ajax surrounded by the carcasses of the sheep that he slaughtered in the delusion that he was killing the treacherous Greeks. Caught between the beasts before him and the goddess above, Ajax embodies the tragic human condition, to which Odysseus finds himself drawn in pity, foreshadowing his role at the end of the play as the champion of Ajax's burial.

Some opening scenes involve two gods, as in Euripides' *Alcestis* where Apollo's monologue is interrupted by the arrival of Thanatos ('Death'), a folkloric bogyman who has come to claim Alcestis. His physical presence establishes that death is a character who can be fought and defeated (at least temporarily), setting up Heracles' miraculous rescue of Alcestis from the grave at the end of the play. The debate between Apollo and Thanatos on their respective plutocratic and egalitarian principles introduces a humorous note that resurfaces several times, supporting age-old doubts about the play's genre. *Alcestis* was the fourth offering in Euripides' tetralogy of 438, meaning that it was performed in place of a satyr-play, even though it lacks a satyr chorus.

Euripides returns to the two-god prologue in *Trojan Women*, where Poseidon describes the situation in Troy after the Greek conquest, pointing out to the audience the prostrate Hecuba who took her position in the orchestra during a cancelled entry. The arrival of Athena transforms the opening from a monologue about the past to a dialogue that predicts the future. Angry over their sacrilege at Troy, Athena persuades Poseidon to destroy the Greek ships on their way home from the war. Although the gods never reappear after the prologue, their opening exchange colours the audience's response to the play. As the Greek brutality escalates, we know that they are blind to the greater forces that will destroy them in turn.

Euripides developed many variations on conventional openings, until his prologues developed into a kind of sub-genre like his messenger speeches, with repeated elements and modifications recurring in play after play. For example, in his innovative version of the story of *Electra*, Euripides gives us *two* prologues. The honest and down-to-earth Farmer emerges from his rustic cottage to deliver the opening monologue, explaining that he was given Electra in marriage, but he has respected her desires and not slept with her. His speech deftly establishes the innate difference between his honest and direct nature and the self-martyring tendencies of his wife. After the stage empties, we expect the chorus to enter in the *parodos*, but instead Euripides gives us a second prologue as Orestes returns incognito from exile, fearful of being recognized but not afraid to talk. Significantly, it is only after the Farmer leaves for good (431) that the play turns its attention to vengeance, as if murder could not be countenanced in the presence of someone like him.

Turning to the end of tragedies, the most difficult convention to understand is also the most familiar, the so-called *deus ex machina* or 'god from the machine'. The machine was a kind of crane used to suggest movement through the air; at other times gods and goddesses appeared on the roof of the skene-building, known as the *theologeion*. Taking their cue from Aristotle's judgement that the *deus*-ending in *Medea* is inadequate, Renaissance critics associated the appearance of a god at the end of a play with an artificial, last-minute resolution to an inept plot.[16] This description fits few, if any, Greek tragedies; when it does seem to apply, a closer look reveals a lively dramatic tension at work between the body of the play and its dénouement.

The appearance of a divinity near the end of a tragedy interrupts the action, surprising the dramatic characters and the audience alike. Although the device became increasingly popular later in the fifth century, not every tragedy employs a *deus ex machina* and there is no way of predicting on the basis of earlier action if a god will appear at the end. The *deus*-figure usually provides an explanation of what has transpired, predicts what lies ahead, and offers an aetiology for the foundation of a cult connected with the tragic events. The combination of summary and prophecy carries the material of the play into the fifth century, in that the cult practices described

by the *deus* usually were well known to the audience. But even with a link to the present, the sense of closure provided by a *deus ex machina* varies enormously from play to play. Irony, iconoclasm, and camouflage can operate no less than the sense that expectations have been fulfilled and the rough edges rounded off.

It would be wrong to confuse the utterances of a highly theatrical stage divinity with divinely sanctioned truths from Olympus, or to conclude that the god provides the key to the play's meaning, or serves as the mouthpiece for the poet. Take, for example, the *ex machina* appearance of the Dioskouroi, Castor and Pollux, at the end of Euripides' *Electra*. Although the twin gods are connected to the action as the brothers of Clytemnestra and Helen, their entrance is neither required by the plot nor expected by the characters on-stage. Pollux remains silent, following the convention of a dramatic mute such as Pylades earlier in the play, but Castor has come to talk. He insists that Apollo bears the responsibility for the murder of Clytemnestra, a proposition that receives little support from the body of the play. Castor then reveals that the Trojan War was fought over a phantom Helen, part of Zeus' plan to unleash strife among mortals. Turning to the future, the god arranges for Electra to marry Pylades, who will set up her erstwhile husband, the Farmer, in business. Orestes will be absolved of his crime in a trial at Athens, where a cult of the Furies will be established, while he travels north to found an eponymous city in Arcadia.

The *deus* speech in *Electra* gains little purchase on the play as experienced by the characters or the audience. Euripides has revealed the all-too-human motivations for murder, and the claim that it was all Apollo's fault convinces only the gullible. The god's assurance that happiness awaits brother and sister has little effect on Orestes and Electra, who stand drenched in their mother's blood. After an initial question, they barely acknowledge the voice from on high. For all the excuses, revelations, and promises uttered *ex machina*, Castor cannot break through to the mortal sphere, where guilt and regret, finally acknowledged, are not so easily dismissed. It is as if Castor were trying to rewrite the ending at the last minute, like a political spin-doctor in the US presidential debates, convincing the audience that something contrary to their experience has, in fact, taken place.

The *deus* convention allows the playwright to probe the relationship between humans and their gods. At the end of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Artemis leaves the *theologeion* because Hippolytus is dying – being immortal, she wants nothing to do with death. Abandoned by the goddess he has served, Hippolytus forgives his father whose curse has killed him, affirming purely human values in an inhuman universe.[17] At the opposite end of the spectrum is the realization that the god from the machine can be too much *like* a human. At the end of Euripides' *Bacchae*, Dionysus manifests his divinity after striking Agave mad and causing her to kill her own son Pentheus. Confronted with the horror of Pentheus' dismemberment, Agave's father

Cadmus cries out to the deity who has destroyed him: 'Gods should not be like men in their anger' (1348).

On other occasions, the *deus* resolution is so improbable that it forces the audience to reconsider the situation that *almost* transpired, in the manner of Gay's *Beggar's Opera* and Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. The clearest example is Euripides' *Orestes*, where a triple-levelled dénouement aggravates the horror of the play by virtue of its very incongruity. After killing Helen and setting fire to Menelaus' palace, Orestes stands on the *theologeion* representing the palace roof, holding a sword at the throat of Menelaus' daughter, Hermione. Menelaus himself looks on helplessly at the orchestra level, locked out of his burning home. Suddenly Apollo appears from the machine to halt the proceedings, announcing that Helen was spirited away before her death and now dwells as an immortal among the stars. Apollo then directs Orestes to put down the sword and take Hermione as his wife, a marriage union that Menelaus accepts without protest. Not to leave anyone out, the god arranges for Electra to marry Pylades, and a tragedy of blood-crazed madness arrives at its 'happy ending'.

Deus endings are associated particularly with Euripides, as over half his extant tragedies conclude with a god or goddess appearing on high. But Sophocles, too, utilized divine appearances, and we know that in his lost *Niobe* Apollo and Artemis suddenly appear on the roof in the middle of the play. While her brother Apollo speaks, Artemis, armed with her bow, picks off one by one the daughters of Niobe, who stand in the palace courtyard behind the façade.[18] Sophocles also ends his *Philoctetes* with the totally unexpected appearance of Heracles on the *theologeion*. Loath to think Sophocles could be as theatrically daring as Euripides, critics continue to argue that Heracles' command that Philoctetes go to Troy is a perfectly natural, rather than a disturbingly ironic, close to the drama. Similar problems posed by the *deus ex machina* endings arise in Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and *Ion*, discussed in Chapters 8 and 9.

A variation on the convention of the *deus ex machina* is those occasions when a mortal character arrives in godlike fashion to effect a sudden change. In Euripides' *Heracles*, the goddesses Lyssa and Iris appear unexpectedly in the middle of the play to strike Heracles mad. They are 'replaced' at the end by the equally unexpected arrival of the Athenian hero Theseus, who tries to redeem on a human level what the gods have destroyed from above. His efforts to convince Heracles to persevere and make his life in Athens raise questions about human society, friendship, heroism, and the kind of gods who are worth worshipping.

If the *deus*-like Theseus brings comfort and encouragement, the appearance from the machine of the protagonist in Euripides' *Medea* does just the opposite. Jason rushes on-stage ready to break down the palace door and save his sons, and we expect the *ekkyklêma* to roll out revealing their dead bodies. Nothing prepares us for Medea's appearance on high in a chariot

of the sun, her children's corpses draped over the railings. Invested with all the properties and functions of a stage divinity, she stands above her estranged husband, predicting the future, and providing the aetiology of a cult in Corinth that will expiate the murders. There is no mistaking that Medea triumphs absolutely in this *coup de théâtre*, and yet triumph implies a victor. The Medea we see has been destroyed, emptied of all maternal love and compassion. As her vile exchange with Jason suggests, she occupies the position of a stage goddess only to emphasize the dehumanizing effect of what she has done, removed from Jason and cut off from the sympathy that once tied her to the audience. The fact that Medea will make her way to Athens, the city of the original performance, indicates that Euripides locates the issues of the play very much in his contemporary world, using the convention of the *deus ex machina* to bring those problems home to his audience with special force.

THE *AGÔN* IN THE AUDIENCE

Many tragic conventions appear self-evident, in that we might expect something similar in any attempt to represent intelligible characters through a dramatic medium. But even in such standard conventions as costume, speech, and gesture, Greek tragedy built a far more immediate relationship with its audience than we often are led to believe. The costumes were contemporary, the specialized gestures reflected the world of ritual activity familiar to the audience, and the dialogue, although poetic, adopted a rhythmical form closer to everyday speech than its epic predecessor. Even the complex lyric of the chorus contains elements from other genres well known in the fifth century, including cult hymns, epinician odes, wedding songs, funeral laments, and so on.

More elaborate conventions involving rhetoric and formal debates point to the world of the Athenian Assembly, the lawcourts, the agora, the day-to-day arguments and decision-making that played an important role in democratic public life. Even the appearance of stage divinities reveals a tendency towards incorporating the local and familiar. Zeus, the father and *primus inter pares* of the Olympian gods, seems never to have appeared on the Attic stage, although he often is addressed and prayed to. On the other hand, Athena, the patron goddess of Athens – whose image adorned public buildings, free-standing sculpture, and the coins of the city – appears several times. In the setting of the action or the destination of the protagonist at the end, several tragedies forge an especially strong link with the city of Athens. The implication is not that she offers a refuge from tragic conflict, but quite the opposite, that the city of the audience is where the tragic tensions meet and must be confronted.

The conventions of tragedy return us to our starting point, the performance culture of Athens where a participatory democracy played out its

political and ethical concerns in an aggressively public and performative fashion. In terms of tragic theatre, the conventions of representation allowed a variety of contemporary elements to be drawn into, and indeed to inform, the dramatizations of the myths and legends of the past. Empowered by such conventions, and the willingness to experiment with them, the tragic playwrights brought their stories home to the audience with such urgency and power that, paradoxically, they transcend their local origins and speak across the centuries.

Part II

EXEMPLARY PLAYS

loses specificity and merges with the outside, blurring distinctions between place and boundary.

17 The convention that an exit out the stage-right or stage-left *eisodoi* signalled, respectively, a departure to the country or to the city is of late date, implying a geographical specificity that was foreign to drama in the fifth century.

18 The claim that Greek tragic performances began at dawn is highly impractical (12,000 people finding their way in the dark?), and arises from the mistaken notion that a typical Greek tragedy took two and a half hours to perform. With the addition of a single comedy after the satyr-play during the Peloponnesian War, we would have a performance day of some twelve to thirteen hours, necessitating a sunrise curtain in order to finish before dark. However, played at speed, even the longest tragedies (*Agamemnon* and *Oedipus at Colonus* at about 1,700 lines) would require roughly 110 minutes to perform, while shorter pieces (*Choephori* at about 1,100 lines) would take perhaps an hour and a quarter. Satyr-plays seem to have been shorter still – *Cyclops* has roughly 700 lines, although *Alcestis*, which was performed in the fourth spot usually reserved for a satyr-play, has 1,160 lines. See P. Walcot, *Greek Drama in its Theatrical and Social Context*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1976, pp. 11–21.

19 For an analysis of masks, see F. Frontisi-Ducroux, 'In the Mirror of the Mask', in D. Lyons (transl.), *A City of Images*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 150–65; A.D. Napier, *Masks, Transformation, Paradox*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986; B.C. Dietrich, *Tradition in Greek Religion*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1986, pp. 62–79; F.I. Zeitlin, 'The Closet of Masks', *Ramus*, 1980, vol. 9, pp. 62–77; and A. Lesky, *Greek Tragedy*, H.A. Frankfort (transl.), 3rd edn, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1979, pp. 27–46. I have benefited greatly from talking about masks in tragedy with Tony Harrison, and many of his ideas have found their way into my discussion. His views can be found in 'Facing Up to the Muses', *Proceedings of the Classical Association*, 1988, vol. 85, pp. 7–29.

20 F.B. Jevons, 'Masks and the Origin of Greek Drama', *Folk-lore*, 1916, vol. 27, pp. 173–74.

21 The joke is that Cleon's face is too frightening to imitate. However, the mask-makers' fear also may refer to Cleon's unsuccessful prosecution of Aristophanes (or his *chorêgos*) two years earlier, charging that his production of *Babylonians* harmed the city. The fate of this lost comedy and that of Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus* (discussed in Chapter 3) are all that we know of theatrical censorship in fifth-century Athens.

22 From illustrations on vases, it would appear that the fifth-century mask had a relatively small mouth, and the wide-open mouth dates from c. 300 B.C. What we may have here (as so often) is evidence of changing conventions of visual representation and not necessarily changing masks *per se*. The late testimony from Pollux that various colours of masks represented different temperaments (like the medieval notion of humours) probably reflects Hellenistic innovations. For a discussion of ancient theatrical masks as objects, see T.B.L. Webster, 'The Poet and the Mask', in M.J. Anderson (ed.), *Classical Drama and Its Influences*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1965, pp. 5–13, and his *Greek Theatre Production*, 2nd edn, London, Methuen, 1970, pp. 35–96.

5 CONVENTIONS OF PRODUCTION

1 To use a familiar example, Bertolt Brecht's estrangement- (or alienation-) effect was a concerted effort to confront the audience with contradictions in the social and economic system that were glossed over by the commercial German stage. Brecht's theatrical practice pointed towards possibilities radically different from those enshrined in the bourgeois theatre and presented there as natural and inevitable.

2 See P. Walcot, *Greek Drama in its Theatrical and Social Context*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1976, pp. 51–53; O. Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978, pp. 159–71; and, generally, W.B. Stanford, *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1983.

3 The nature of this 'tragic pleasure' has been much debated – does it imply some intrinsic delight in watching those worse off than ourselves? Does it operate by purging or cleansing our emotions, principally pity and fear? Or does it align these emotions with intellectual perceptions about events that may seem unlikely on the surface, but in dramatic presentation achieve a probable shape and structure? Is the pleasure we take from tragedy a form of clarification, an 'insight experience' that reflects the ordering of highly charged dramatic events so as to convey their importance and relevance? See, for example, S. Halliwell, 'Aristotle's Poetics', in *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, *Classical Criticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 158–75.

4 Although ancient Greek was accented by pitch and not stress, we get a rough sense of the way common speech fits into metrical forms by considering a colloquial expression like 'I'd like a coke, a burger, and a shake' which scans as iambic pentametre, the standard blank-verse line in Shakespeare. Greek tragic characters occasionally speak in trochaic tetrameter catalectic, consisting of a line scanned -˘-˘/-˘-˘/-˘-˘/-˘-/, where two short syllables can be substituted for any long syllable. For example, during the argument between Iris and Lyssa in Euripides' *Heracles*, Iris suddenly shifts from normal dialogue trimeters to the tetrameter line, the change indicating the moment of crisis is about to be reached, that talk will soon give way to action.

5 See F. Jouan, 'Réflexions sur le rôle du protagoniste tragique', in *Théâtres et spectacles dans l'antiquité: Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg*, Leiden, Brill, 1983, pp. 63–80.

6 The phrase is from J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1962, whose study argues that 'the meaning of the ancient drama for ourselves is best fostered by our mustering what awareness we can of its near-inaccessibility' (p. 278).

7 See B. Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy*, London, Longman, 1973, pp. 438–94.

8 For his somewhat contradictory model of a hot medium (radio) vs. a cool medium (television), see M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 2nd edn, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964, pp. 36–45, 259–68. For the problem with McLuhan's metaphors, see K. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1966, pp. 410–18.

9 The idea that emptying the stage of actors is the structuring principle of a Greek tragedy derives from Shakespearean criticism, outlined by O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, pp. 49–60.

10 For an introduction to Greek lyric metres, see D.S. Raven, *Greek Metre*, 2nd edn, London, Faber & Faber, 1968; and the series of articles on tragic metre, the chorus, and dance by A.M. Dale, *Collected Papers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

11 J. Herington, *Poetry into Drama*, Sather Classical Lectures vol. 49, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, p. 75.

12 See S. Barlow, *The Imagery of Euripides*, London, Methuen, 1971, p. 25.

13 See, for example, M. Esslin, 'Beckett and the Art of Broadcasting', in his *Mediations*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1980, pp. 131–32.

14 See R. Lattimore, *Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy*, Ann Arbor, University of

Michigan, 1969, pp. 28–35; and J.-P. Vernant, 'Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation', in R. Macksey and E. Donato (eds), *The Structuralist Controversy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972, pp. 285–87.

15 See B.M.W. Knox, 'Euripidean Comedy' (org. 1970), in his *Word and Action*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, pp. 250–74.

16 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1454a.37–1454b.2, faults the ending of *Medea* for arising from the machine and not from the plot. For an in-depth treatment of the convention, see D.J. Mastronarde, 'Actors on High: The Skene Roof, the Crane, and the Gods in Attic Drama', *Classical Antiquity*, 1990, vol. 9, pp. 247–94.

17 See B.M.W. Knox's excellent essay, 'The *Hippolytus* of Euripides' (org. 1952), in op. cit., pp. 205–30.

18 See W.S. Barrett, '*Niobe*: P. Oxy. 2805', in R. Carden (ed.), *The Papyrus Fragments of Sophocles*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1974, pp. 184–85.

6 AESCHYLUS' *ORESTEIA* TRILOGY

1 Some editors assign the announcement of the Herald's arrival (489–500) to Clytemnestra, arguing that she reappears from the palace at this point. Since manuscripts do not indicate entrances and exits *per se*, and rarely name a new speaker, editors must make such determinations from the dialogue itself and from their sense of the play. Does a production gain more by having Clytemnestra present and silent during the Herald's speech, or by having her appear suddenly and seize control of the scene after he has finished? The latter seems the better choice; the claim that Clytemnestra must be on-stage to learn that her husband has returned is more appropriate to theatrical realism than to Greek tragedy.

2 The question of Menelaus' whereabouts sets up the satyr-play *Proteus* (now lost) that followed the trilogy, telling of Menelaus' shipwreck in Egypt.

3 The Watchman refers to Clytemnestra as 'like a man in thought' (*Ag*., 11). We meet Apollo the rapist again in Euripides' *Ion*, discussed in Chapter 9.

4 See R. Seaford, 'The Last Bath of Agamemnon', *Classical Quarterly*, 1984, vol. 34 n.s., pp. 247–54.

5 In *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare draws heavily on Ovid's treatment of the same myth.

6 If the *ekkyklêma* was used, then the platform holding the bodies of Agamemnon (in his tub) and Cassandra was rolled out, with Clytemnestra standing above them. If the device was not yet available (it may have been introduced later in the fifth century), then servants carried out the bodies and dumped them on the ground, while Clytemnestra took up her position behind them. See O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, pp. 325–27, 442–43.

7 See A.F. Garvie (ed.), *Aeschylus, Choephori*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 201–23, for an analysis of the stasimon and a discussion of the dramatic device called a priamel, where a series of examples are used as a foil for the point of particular interest.

8 The Greek word is 'parent', but the masculine article implies the father.

9 It is uncertain if the bodies were carried out or revealed on the *ekkyklêma*. See above, note 6.

10 The staging of the opening section has generated endless controversy; the scenario adopted here takes cognizance of the fact that the orchestra was a far stronger playing area than the space back by the façade. It makes clearest sense of the action and enables the prologue of *Eumenides* to forge strong visual links with other key moments in the play and the trilogy as a whole. For a full treatment, see R. Rehm, 'The Staging of Suppliant Plays', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 1988, vol. 29, pp. 290–301.

11 If Aeschylus had four actors available, as some scholars argue, then Clytemnestra could have been part of the cancelled entry before the prologue, rising from the orchestra floor when it was time for her 'entrance'. A fourth actor also would simplify staging problems in *Choephori*, especially in the final confrontation between Clytemnestra, Orestes, and Pylades, when the servant has just left the stage.

12 To have a stagehand carry on a separate piece of stage-furniture to represent the cult-statue of Athena would disrupt an otherwise smooth transition from Delphi to Athens – the Furies exit at 231, Apollo leaves at 234, Orestes arrives at 235. Those who believe that the *ekkyklêma* was used for the *omphalos* and for Athena's cult-statue fail to consider the problems of upstaging that result, or the fact that such an arrangement pulls the action back to the façade, a relatively weak acting area given its distance from the audience. Moreover, movement is severely restricted if the *omphalos* and the cult-statue are placed on the roll-out machine – the Furies cannot surround Orestes in their binding song, drastically reducing the visual and emotional impact of their dance.

13 A.J. Podlecki (ed.), *Aeschylus, Eumenides*, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 1989, pp. 17–21, and A.H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Aeschylus, Eumenides*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 25–32, offer clear and persuasive accounts.

14 The idea that a crowd of spectators, in addition to the jurors, came on-stage is dramatically redundant, given the presence of thousands of Athenians in the audience.

15 Sommerstein, op. cit., pp. 184–85, pictures smaller urns on a table, but such props might be lost in the enormous theatre of Dionysus. Moreover, a solid table would arrest the movement of the jurors when they came to vote. It would be more effective if the jurors could stop between the urns, vote, and then pass through, suggesting the fluidity of the democratic legal process.

16 As a virgin goddess, Athena never subjected herself to sexual domination, a qualification that compromises her apparent subordination to the masculine point of view. R.P. Winnington-Ingram, 'Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena' (org. 1949), in his *Studies in Aeschylus*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 124–31, and S. Goldhill, *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The Oresteia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 258–59, offer interesting analyses of the complex and transgressive character of Athena.

17 Athena's prominence indicates that the primary association was the Panathenaia, but resident aliens, referred to as 'metics' (as the Furies are at line 1011), wore purple robes at both festivals.

7 SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*

1 Excellent discussion of this aspect of the play can be found in E.R. Dodds, 'On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*', *Greece and Rome*, 1966, vol. 13, pp. 37–49; G. Gellie, *Sophocles: A Reading*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1972. pp. 79–105, 201–08; R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 150–204; and B.M.W. Knox, 'Introduction' to R. Fagles (transl.), *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, New York, Viking, 1982.

2 Many different ideas have been proposed for the staging of the opening scene. Perhaps the most interesting alternative to the one I suggest is that *no* suppliants accompany the old Priest, and he and Oedipus both use the theatre audience as the crowd who has gathered to seek relief from the plague. Although this scenario handsomely links the plague in the play to the one in Athens around the time of the production (see following note), the Priest orders at least some of the suppliants

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