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Tragedy and Epic

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Epic Stories and Allusions

When tragedy began in Attica in the sixth century BCE, epic was the most important source for the new genre. Tragedy's great innovation was to combine the existing genres of epic recitation and choral song in dramatic form. Although it replaced the epic narrator with actors and a chorus, it was in many ways a continuation of the epic tradition.

The epic foundation was very rich. By the latter part of the sixth century BCE the Homeric epics were regularly performed in Athens by professional reciters (*rhapsodes*) in a four-yearly contest at the Great Panathenaea. This contest gave Homer a special status, but other epics, of which only fragments remain, were familiar to the tragedians and many members of their audiences: poems about Theban legend, the *Oedipodeia* and *Thebais*, and the poems now called the "Epic Cycle," which collectively told the entire history of the Trojan War (Homer's authorship of all these was disputed); Hesiod's *Theogony*. There was an old Heracles-epic, the *Capture of Oechalia* (attributed to Homer or Creophylus); Panyassis, a contemporary of Aeschylus, composed a long epic on Heracles' life. An epic about the most important figure of Athenian legend, Theseus, was probably composed in the sixth century BCE. The epic on Corinthian history by Eumelus included at least some material about the Argonauts. The genealogical poem attributed to Hesiod, the *Catalogue of Women*, was almost an encyclopedia of Greek legend, providing family trees with brief narratives.

The Homeric poems were unlike these other epics. They had more dialogue, less narration; more focus on fewer characters and events, and more connection among episodes (plots rather than a succession of actions); less magic (Griffin 1977). Homeric epic was already, as the ancient critics realized, highly dramatic: most of the first book of the *Iliad*, for example, consists of a series of dialogue scenes with narrative bridges between them. Drama was a development from an already dramatic epic. Tragedy could not do everything epic could. The narrator could not comment directly on the

action, for example, and the dramatic form imposed severe limits on the length of individual tragedies. Yet tragedy also could adapt the most powerful elements of epic and intensify their effects through its special resources of spectacle and song.

Tragedy had considerable freedom in using epic tales and characters (see chapter 10, this volume). No single narrative ever told the whole story of a traditional character, and no single version, even the Homeric epics, had absolute authority. So lyric, and then tragedy, could endlessly fill in and readapt the old material. Poets frequently created new stories by interpreting familiar ones. For example, both Sophocles and Euripides composed tragedies about the youth of Paris/Alexander. His parents, frightened by omens that he would cause the destruction of Troy, exposed him at birth. After growing up as a herdsman, he competed in his own funeral games and was recognized by his father. This does not seem to have been an epic story, but it has obvious parallels with such familiar myths as those of Oedipus and Perseus, and it resembles Herodotus' account of the childhood of Cyrus the Great. In Homer, the Trojans loathe Paris, yet seem unable to resist him, as if they believe that the evil he would bring is inevitable. In the logic of Greek story, it would be surprising if there had been no omens to warn Paris' parents of how dangerous he was. The invented story is thus a "reading-out" of the existing epic, an interpretation.

The stories could be changed, as long as the overall outcomes remained. Aeschylus, in a tragedy called *Myrmidons*, made Achilles older than Patroclus, though the *Iliad* explicitly says that Patroclus was older. Aeschylus made the two men lovers, and so imagined Achilles, the more powerful hero, as the lover, the dominant partner in a homoerotic relationship. Phoenix, Achilles' tutor, describes in the *Iliad* how he fled home after he seduced his father's concubine and his father cursed him; in Euripides' *Phoenix* this episode became a Potiphar's-wife story with an innocent hero (who was blinded instead of cursed). Euripides was fascinated by Potiphar's-wife stories. When the tragic poets rethought an epic story, they changed not just details but the motivations of characters. They reconsidered how events could have happened, what kind of people could have performed the actions attributed to the epic characters, and where an audience's sympathies should be directed. Homer avoids ever mentioning Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter, while Hesiod's *Catalogue* mentioned her miraculous rescue by Artemis. Even Aeschylus is interested in Agamemnon's feelings more than hers: she is pathetic, but is seen only as the chorus remembers seeing her. Euripides, in two tragedies about her, makes her two, very different, fully imagined people: the desperate and resourceful woman whom Artemis rescued but made her priestess in a remote country in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and the naïve, frightened, and finally resolute victim in *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

The qualities of the Homeric poems themselves prepared for tragedy's adaptations. Both epics, but especially the *Iliad*, are profoundly generous in their treatment of their characters. The poet seems continually aware that while he cares most about Achilles and Odysseus, other characters, even minor ones, have their own stories. Homer does not give much attention to Nausicaa once she serves her function of bringing Odysseus to her parents, but it is enough to make an audience wonder how

the rest of her life was affected by her meeting with the hero. Sophocles composed a *Nausicaa* from Homer's episode. Furthermore, the *Iliad*-poet is a Greek, but his Trojans are sympathetic and richly imagined characters. Even though the *Iliad* does not tell the fall of Troy, Homer's Andromache and Hecuba invited Euripides to imagine the fates given them in the Cycle as their stories, not those of the conquerors.

In general, tragedy took much of its technique and its sense of narrative possibility from Homer, but many of its stories and atmosphere from the rest of the epic inheritance (Herington 1985: 133–6). The claim that tragedy is so profoundly dependent on epic may seem surprising, since tragedy arose in a very different social and political context from archaic epic. Many critics see tragedy as intimately connected with Athenian democracy. Indeed, some important features of Attic tragedy belong exclusively to this "tragic moment" (see chapter 7, this volume). Certainly tragedy shows a distinct tendency to give stories an Attic connection, even when they derive from old, non-Athenian myths. Aeschylus' *Eumenides* is an outstanding example: the traditional story of the royal house of Argos ends with the foundation of an Athenian institution. Not infrequently, too, tragedies confront contemporary issues – the function of the Areopagus council and the Argive alliance in *Eumenides*; the scope and limits of mathematical and rational investigation in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*; political faction and rhetorical maneuvering in Euripides' *Orestes*.

Despite these real differences from epic, tragedy throughout its history depends on epic for actual stories, for a ready-made fictional world, for resonant language, for narrative devices, for allusive depth. Differences between Homeric and fifth-century values that seem obvious now were not salient for the fifth-century audience, who did not read Homer exactly as we do. In modernizing epic material, tragedy helped make epic modern (Plato's Socrates effortlessly compares himself to Achilles at *Apology* 28c–d). Tragedy mined the epic tradition for pathetic and sensational material, stories of violence, cruelty, intrigue, and sexual transgression. It presented these in an exalted, solemn register, with a rich admixture of theological and moral speculations, meditations, and platitudes. In characterization, in plot construction, and in emphasizing the detailed representation of crucial moments, tragedy imitates Homer; but it is more like the Cycle in its interest in the erotic and cruel. Homer mutes the nastier familial violence of his stories (the *Odyssey* manages to avoid mentioning Orestes' killing of his mother), while tragedy seems to revel in it (Seaford 1994: 11–13).

Often, non-Homeric epics, especially the Epic Cycle, were a direct source for the stories of tragedies. Relatively few plays were based directly on the two Homeric poems. Aeschylus had an *Iliad* and an *Odyssey* trilogy. Sophocles composed two plays possibly based on the *Odyssey*, *Nausicaa* and *Niptra*, but many on other Trojan War subjects. Euripides seems never to have challenged Homer directly in a tragedy, although his surviving satyr-play, *Cyclops*, deals with Odysseus' most famous adventure, and the fourth-century tragedy in his style that survives with his plays, *Rhesus*, is based on the tenth book of the *Iliad*. Euripides expanded the brief narrative of how Phoenix, Achilles' old teacher and friend, left his home into a tragedy – changing the

hero's seduction of his father's concubine into a false accusation. Similarly, the *Odyssey* briefly describes the family of Aeolus, who married his sons to his daughters. In Euripides' tragedy, one of the sons had a sexual relationship with his sister, and persuaded his father to marry his children incestuously. The father, however, assigned the daughters by lot, and the son was unlucky. Euripides, however, was especially fond of stories from the *Cypria* (Jouan 1966).

Sophocles' surviving Trojan dramas illustrate the complexity of the literary sources of tragedies. The fate of Telemonian Ajax was told in the *Aethiopis* and Little *Iliad*, but before Sophocles it had been dramatized by Aeschylus, while Pindar offers several, slightly different, short versions. Sophocles' *Philoctetes* treats a tale told in the *Aethiopis*, but already put on the stage by Aeschylus and Euripides. Similarly, Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and Euripides' *Phoenician Women* may all reflect the poets' familiarity with the Theban epics, but Sophocles and Euripides both surely knew Aeschylus' trilogy, of which only *Seven against Thebes* survives, and a papyrus first published in 1977 has fragments of a previously unknown poem of Stesichorus that clearly influenced Euripides. The *Nostoi* told the story of Agamemnon's murder and his son's vengeance (also the subject of extended digressions in the *Odyssey*), but Stesichorus' long lyric *Oresteia* was probably the single most important literary version for Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

When poets renew familiar stories, they invite their audiences to compare their new versions with old ones, or tease them with expectations derived from familiar, epic versions. In *Agamemnon*, the opening song ignores the story, familiar from the epic *Cypria*, that Agamemnon at Aulis, after a deer hunt, boasted that he had excelled Arremis. She then made it impossible for the army to sail until Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to her. Artemis, however, actually rescued Iphigenia and made her immortal, although the mortals present probably did not realize what had happened. In Aeschylus, the chorus describes an omen in which two eagles devour a pregnant hare, foreshadowing the destruction of Troy; Artemis' anger seems to be caused by the omen itself (*Agamemnon* 104–59). The singers describe the preparations for the sacrifice in detail, but insist that they did not see what finally happened (248). The effect is profoundly disconcerting, for Artemis either confuses the omen with the reality, or punishes an action before it takes place. The audience does not know whether Iphigenia was saved or died. Such an effect is possible only in drama, for an omniscient epic narrator who failed to explain such important events would be intolerable. In Sophocles' *Electra*, Clytemnestra justifies her murder of Agamemnon as vengeance for the killing of Iphigenia, complaining that if a war needed to be fought for Menelaus, a child of Menelaus should have been sacrificed. Electra replies by referring to the story of the deer hunt (516–609). Versions from different texts have become competing accounts of the past.

Tragedy also invents new sequences that invite comparison to familiar epic material. The plot of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* is loosely based on the epic story of Jason and the Argonauts (Lange 2002: 107). Here the epic source provides a general plausibility for the invented plot – this kind of quest is typical of the heroic world.

Sometimes borrowings are far more specific, as when the hero of Sophocles' *Ajax* says farewell to his son (545–51). When he holds the boy, insisting that he will not be frightened by his blood-soaked father, and prays that his son may be like his father, but luckier, he strongly recalls the episode in the *Iliad* (6.466–82) when Hector's son cries in fear at his father's helmet, and Hector prays that he may be "much better" than his father. The boy's mother, the concubine Tecmessa, echoes the Homeric Andromache when she pleads with Ajax not to kill himself, but to protect her. The resonances complicate the moment in various ways. That *Ajax* echoes his greatest enemy shows an underlying similarity among all the heroes. Ajax's prayer shows a pride that is especially striking in contrast to Hector's modesty. Yet Hector's prayer works against the hearer's knowledge that the boy will not survive the fall of Troy, while the prayer of Ajax reminds the Athenian audience that Eurysaces, like his father, was among their heroes – Sophocles composed a tragedy about him. So the prayer of Ajax, unlike that of Hector, will be fulfilled. The echo of the famous Hector–Andromache scene is especially striking because Eurysaces is not a legitimate son, Tecmessa a concubine, not a wife, but Ajax behaves as though they were (Easterling 1984 gives a discussion of this scene).

The connections between tragedy and epic are various and complex. Non-Homeric epic provides the stories, but the resulting dramas are frequently profoundly engaged with the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*.

Epic Thematics

In the *Odyssey*, Penelope decides to challenge her suitors to match Odysseus' skill with the bow just when he has returned in disguise. Many critics have thought that Penelope must know that the beggar is Odysseus, although the text tells us clearly that she does not. Others have guessed that our *Odyssey* has borrowed its plot from a version of the story in which she had recognized her husband. As it stands, however, the *Odyssey*'s climax takes place at a murky boundary between coincidence and divine management, between a theological level at which the gods bring about their chosen outcomes, and a narratological one ar which the will of Zeus is that part of the story that cannot be changed. The gods promise that Odysseus will avenge himself on the suitors, but only Penelope's decision, which no god directs, makes the actual outcome possible. Again, the *Iliad* is deeply ambiguous at the divine level. Initially, Zeus is unwilling to agree with Thetis to help Achilles, but once his Plan is in motion, it leads to the fated destruction of Troy, through consequences Achilles did not intend, Hector's killing of Patroclus and Achilles' consequent killing of Hector. The deaths of Sarpedon and of Hector both belong to this sequence and are said to be fated: how would they have happened without Achilles' anger?

Tragedy delights in such situations, variously mixing human causality, chance, and divine meddling. The Homeric epics do not overtly draw the audience's attention to the difficulty of understanding how divine plans and human choices work together, or

to the apparent contradictions in Zeus' direction of events, but tragedy often develops this aspect of the epics. Homeric epic is full of prophecies, but these are rarely primary motivators of the action. Tragedy uses communication from the gods to make the ambiguities of the gods' plans a central feature of its plotting. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the omen of the eagles and the hare reveals at once the support of Zeus for the Trojan War and the anger of Artemis. In *Oedipus the King*, the divine warning itself inspires the human reactions that fulfill the prophecy. In *Philoctetes*, mortal attempts to fulfill a prophecy lead to complete frustration, until Heracles comes from heaven. Euripides often builds a complex web of divine and human motivation, only to end with a direct divine intervention. Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* has the heroes' intrigue almost fail at the last moment, as it appears that Poseidon will not allow their ship to escape. Then Athena, as *deus ex machina*, intervenes, and announces that Poseidon, for her sake, is calming the sea (1444).

Tragedy derives its most characteristic event, the recognition, from Homer. The *Odyssey* provides the models for the many episodes of long-separated relatives who learn each others' identity. Yet the Odyssean recognitions are tame compared to many in tragedy, which often makes its recognitions as sensational or pathetic as possible. Aeschylus' Clytemnestra recognizes her son when the slave says that the dead are killing the living (886); Euripides' Ion is given his recognition tokens as he is about to murder his mother; Sophocles' Orestes reveals himself to Electra only after she has mourned over the urn that she believes holds his ashes.

The *Iliad* is the main source for tragic recognition in the broader sense – those moments when the characters realize that the stories of their lives have not been the stories they thought they were. Achilles in the *Iliad* thinks that he is in control of the narrative. When his best friend Patroclus is killed, he realizes that he was wrong. Just before he receives the news of Patroclus' death, he remembers a prophecy that the best of the Myrmidons would die before him, and suddenly realizes that it could apply to Patroclus (18.9–14). The misunderstood oracle, of course, is a typically tragic device for signaling such disjunctures between human plans and understandings and the divine plans in which human beings are entangled (see Rutherford 1982). But Hector also has a moment of such recognition. First he realizes his own folly in not listening to the wise advice of Polydamas and keeping the Trojans outside the walls after Patroclus' death; then, when he realizes that he has been tricked by a god into believing he had Deiphobus beside him, he sees that the gods have determined his death (22.296–305; Redfield 1975: 128–59).

Tragedy offers a rich repertory of variants on these themes. Sophocles' Oedipus is the most famous, but we should not make it a universal model. Eteocles in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, when the messenger announces that his brother Polynices is the attacker at the seventh and last gate, sees that his father's curse is being fulfilled (655). He insists on going to fight his brother, even though the chorus tries to convince him to avoid such pollution. Eteocles is surely right in seeing supernatural forces in his placement against his brother, but his acceptance of the curse is horrifying. Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, when Hyllus tells Heracles how Deianira was tricked into poisoning

him, recalls two oracles (1159–71). One, a version of the oracle that has been quoted many times in slightly different forms, said that at this time Heracles would be freed of labors. The other said that he would be killed by someone who was dead. Combining the two, he sees that release from labors means his death. Instead of exploring his new understanding of his own fate and Deianira's, however, he immediately turns to managing what will happen next. His own share in the responsibility for what has happened was to take Iole as a concubine (sacking her city for this purpose), and now he insists that Hyllus marry her. He also forces his son to prepare a pyre for him. The Spartan kings claimed descent from Hyllus and Iole, and the story that Heracles ascended to Olympus from the pyre was probably already familiar to the original audience; but Heracles gives no explanation for his demands. So as soon as one gap between human knowledge and fate is closed, Heracles opens another. The spectator cannot tell whether he actually has access to divine knowledge or is simply acting in accordance with it when he insists on these perverse actions. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, the goddess Artemis coolly explains what has happened; she is critical of Theseus, but acknowledges that the goddess Aphrodite caused the events (1325–8). Theseus learns of both his own, human errors, and of the divine plan behind them. Hippolytus, like Hector, has a double recognition. Defending himself to his father, he shows some understanding of Phaedra and so of his own role in his calamity (1034–5); only in the final scene does he learn, just before his death, that Aphrodite was actually responsible at the divine level. Here, though, the emphasis seems to lie less on the human experience of recognition than on the contrast between the mortals' response to it (Hippolytus forgives his father) and the gods' remoteness.

Such recognition is "tragic" even when the reinterpretation is benign rather than disastrous. Euripides' "romances" all have plots that center on recognitions in the literal sense, but that also demand that the characters profoundly reinterpret the past. The *Helen* is the richest of these, for the play provides both a happy outcome for the main chatacters, Menelaus and Helen, and a version of the Trojan War that deprives it utterly of meaning; the Helen for whom Greeks and Trojans died was an illusion. The *Ion* makes the theme most salient; Creusa at 1501–9 sings of how "we are whirled around from there to here by misfortune and again by good fortune" and at 1609 says, "I praise Phoebus, though I did not praise him before."

Even when the characters do not come to understand what has happened, Homer already combines characters' inability to do what they know is best with the gods' broader plans. The *Iliad*'s Priam surely realizes that Paris is bringing ruin to Troy, but cannot bring himself to oppose him. When he refuses to blame Helen, because the war is the gods' fault (3.164–5), he is simultaneously correct and foolish. The gods are at work, but his and Helen's weaknesses are essential to their plan. Even in the *Odyssey*, where the suitors are for the most part entirely unsympathetic, there are two "good" suitors. Odysseus warns Amphinomos that he should leave, but the narrator tells us, in an unusually strong example of divine causation, that Athena has willed that all the suitors must die (18.124–57). Such instances of weakness helped Aeschylus create his Agamemnon, who agrees to walk on the tapestries against his better judgment, just as

he sactificed his daughter. The example of Amphinomos (as well as Polydamas' advice to Hector in the *Iliad*, 18.249–309) shows the Homeric antecedents of the characteristically tragic "warning" sequence. A servant advises Euripides' Hippolytus to revere Aphrodite (88–107 – the audience knows that the goddess' vengeance is already planned); Tiresias and Cadmus warn Pentheus to honor Dionysus in *Bacchae* (266–342).

Closely related to tragedy's theme of recognition and disaster half-foreseen is the characteristic tragic theme of the suddenness of changes of fortune. This, too, has epic antecedents, of course – one might consider the astonishing changes of fortune in the tale the disguised Odysseus tells Eumaeus (14.192–359). The *Odyssey* is very concerned with a special, significant time. At its opening it emphasizes that its narrative begins at a particular point in the story, the time that the gods had fated for Odysseus' return (1.16–18), and the predictions of his homecoming in Ithaca refer to a mysterious unit of time, the *lycabas*. The formulaic system of epic insists on the importance of the day with expressions like "day of return," "day of freedom," and "day of slavery." Greek lyric, in its recurring concern with human vulnerability, frequently uses the epithet *ephemeroi*, "beings of a day." Tragedy, however, is profoundly aware not only of its epic origins, but also of its differences from epic, particularly its concentration and brevity. Although Greek tragedy does not strictly observe the unity of time, since the passage of time during a choral song is undefined, most tragedies seem to take place in a time only a few hours longer than their actual duration. Tragedy thus thematizes "the day" in which lives can be rescued or ruined (or both, as in Euripides' *Heracles*, where the hero returns just in time to save his family from the tyrant Lycus, and then goes mad and kills them himself). Tiresias warns Creon in *Antigone* that he will pay for his confusion of dead and living within a few days (1064–5). Haemon in fact dies on this same day. The possibility of radical change on the day is at once a moralizing platitude and a generic marker of tragedy.

Tragedy takes from Homer the ambition to depict certain kinds of experience with emotional depth. *Women of Trachis* and Sophocles' *Electra* both present a central character whose suffering is modeled on that of the waiting Penelope. *Women of Trachis* alludes to the *Odyssey*: when Deianira sends her son to find her husband, the ideal spectator surely compares Deianira to Penelope directly. Yet what really matters is less that we think about Penelope than that Sophocles recognized in Homer's attention to Penelope a subject worthy of attention. Because the poet is so familiar with Penelope, he thinks about the story of Deianira and Heracles as the story of a woman left alone, not knowing what has happened to her husband. (He then, with the arrival of the husband's concubine, can turn Deianira/Penelope into a potential Deianira/Clytemnestra). In Sophocles' *Electra*, the main character is a sister, not a wife, and the echo of the *Odyssey* is less vivid. Yet when Orestes hears Electra lament, but does not stay to listen and perhaps reveal himself, the audience is invited to remember Odysseus' choice to test his wife rather than trust her in his intrigue. Because the themes of waiting and trust are so familiar from Homer, the tragedian can make them effective quickly.

From the *Iliad* come tragedy's great explotations of the expetience of bettayal. Achilles, when Agamemnon takes away his prize of honor, becomes profoundly disillusioned with the heroic system, in which the hero risks his life in battle and is rewatded with honor. The intensity of his anger estranges him from the rest of the Greek army and leads to the death of Patroclus. Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* are the two surviving masterpieces in which the protagonist most develops the themes of the angry Achilles. Medea, abandoned by Jason, for whom she has betrayed her own family and committed murder, is willing to cause herself the worst imaginable pain in order to make him suffer, by killing their children. The play gives an Achillean need for vindication to a foreign woman who uses cunning and deceit. Philoctetes, left on an uninhabited island by the Greeks, would rather die in misery than return to Troy and achieve heroic glory. Early in the play, Neoptolemus, Achilles' son, wins Philoctetes' sympathy by telling a false story of how the Greeks refused to give him his father's armor. He claims to be sailing home in anger, though he is serving as an agent of the Greek army, under Odysseus' command. Sophocles' audience is supposed to realize that Neoptolemus is using the story of the *Iliad* as well as the Cycle to fabricate this tale. Only Philoctetes, in his isolation, does not know the most familiar of all stories, even though he is truly Achilles-like, while Neoptolemus is betraying his father's memory by evoking it to deceive a friend.

Epic Style and Decorum

Even when a particular play tells a story that has no epic antecedent, however, epic is essential for understanding tragedy's generic aspirations, freedoms, and boundaries. Epic is the basic source of the tragic world. Epic contributes one strain to the tragic language. Much early tragic lyric was probably in the dactylic rhythms that evoked epic, and tragic speech admits distinctly epic words and forms that were foreign to contemporary Attic speech. Even more, epic gives tragedy the rules of what human experiences may be represented. Familiarity and the canonical status of the epic and tragic traditions lead us to take their decorum and the rules of their imagined world fot granted, but these deserve a little attention. The epic presents a world in which gods frequently intervene in the lives of individuals; so does tragedy. Ghosts appear but not Lamias; monsters, following Homer, tend to be kept at the periphery. Even more than epic, tragedy prefers horses to donkeys. The chorus of *Antigone* sings of how men exhaust the untiring Earth by turning the soil "with the race from horses" – in the *Iliad*, Hermes himself drives Priam's horses, but though he breathes energy into his mules, the god does not handle them (24.440–2). Like epic characters, tragic characters often weep and bleed, and sometimes belch or vomit (blood or human flesh), but never fart. Narrative triviality is excluded, so that a hero may forget to sacrifice to the right god, but he never forgets his helmet. The economy is strict.

Both genres, though, sometimes flirt with the limits of their own high decorum. An important character in the *Odyssey* is a swineherd. His pigs do not seem to stink,

although the seals of Proteus do (4.441–2). Aeschylus in *Agamemnon* allows the Greek army to suffer, euphemistically but clearly, from mildew and bugs in their clothes (560–2; neoclassicism would surely forbid both the seals and the lice). Homer admits humor (especially when gods are involved); tragedy does too (Seidensticker 1982). Drunkenness and invective appear now and then. Tragedy can achieve special effects by playing its own testing against that of epic. Euripides' *Electra* evokes the *Odyssey*, and its setting in a humble farmer's house in the countryside recalls Eumaeus. Yet precisely because the *Odyssey* keeps epic grandeur amid rusticity, the play is striking when it makes the characters no grander than their surroundings. When Electra scolds her husband for inviting noble guests despite his poverty, and sends him to invite the old family slave and ask him to bring dinner (404–5, 408–14), we are a distinct step below the small pig Eumaeus sacrifices for his guest. When Orestes is recognized by a scar, it is not the mark of a brave hunter, but the remains of a childhood accident with a pet. Orestes is not the hero Odysseus was (Goff 1991).

Greek epic achieves its grandeur through meter, through being composed in an artificial dialect, and through rich ornamentation. Tragic speech is mostly in the Attic dialect of its primary audience, but it borrows many of epic's tools (and takes its songs from the tradition of choral lyric). Although there is occasional colloquialism in tragic speech, tragedy does not often test the limits of language and of subject matter at the same time. The speech of slaves can be less elevated than that of the noble characters, but the language tends to be euphemistic when the topic is vulgar or dangerous. Tragedy can be sexually explicit, but tends to use grand language (*Women of Trachis* 539–40). Clytemnestra calls Cassandra a "pole-rubber," *histotribes* – the reference is utterly vulgar, but the word is a unique compound. Euripides, whose language is the plainest, shows Phaedra's desire for Hippolytus through her fantasies of wandering in the woods as he does. The Nurse tells Phaedra, "what you need is not specious [i.e. moral] talk, but the man" (490–1). Such bluntness, which almost demands that Phaedra stop being a tragic character, can appear in an argument but not as an expression of feeling, where it would be too transgressive. Tragedy's decorum is in some ways stricter than epic's. The word *kopros*, "manure," appears several times in Homer, but is banned from tragedy – perhaps because tragedy, performed at the same festival as comedy, had a greater need to define itself by contrast.

Tragedies were normally set in the remote past familiar from epic poetry. The epic heroes were stronger and braver than contemporary mortals, and they require elevated language and respectful attention. The epic world is both an ordinary past, historically linked to the present, and a different reality from the everyday world, where gods intervene, words have special power, and the rules of plausibility are slightly different.

Epic customs were different from those of the fifth century, but not too different, especially because fifth-century readers looked for similarity rather than difference. Some differences were useful. The Iphigenia of *Agamemnon* has sung at her father's banquets (242–5), which would be unimaginable in contemporary Athens, but Medea can complain to the Corinthian women about how women "buy" their husbands (232–4), although Homer's culture practices bride-price. Sophocles' Orestes

can compete in the Pythian Games, although they had not yet been founded. In his *Ajax*, the debate between Teucer and the Atridae evokes at least three different contexts at once. Is Ajax a Homeric hero, who, like Achilles, is entitled to demand the honor he deserves, even if he injures the common cause? Is he a contemporary Athenian military leader and aristocrat, whose loyalty the city expects even when it has treated him unfairly – although, in fact, such men sometimes conspired with foreign enemies to recover the status that they believed they deserved? Is he a representative of the Athenians' allies?

Tragedy loved to mix distance and difference with contemporary norms and problems. When Aeschylus ends the *Oresteia* with the establishment of the Areopagus court, he retroactively implies that the struggles over justice enacted in the horrifying murders of the last two plays belonged to the past. Yet the killing of Agamemnon is also a coup d'état, and civic institutions cannot operate against a dictatorship. The fear of tyranny was real in Athens, so that the trilogy can address old history and present concerns simultaneously.

In the epic world, gods frequently have sexual relations with women. In epic, gods' children are usually reared by a grandfather and the women make appropriate marriages (so, for example, Polymele at *Iliad* 16.179–92). Nor do the illegitimate children of the great heroes seem to be an embarrassment. In tragedy, however, these stories are seen through contemporary eyes. So the mothers typically hide their pregnancies and expose their children, and tragedy then generates a variety of stories of the woman's suffering and eventual reunion with her son(s). The *Ion* is the only one of these to survive in full, but there are extensive papyrus fragments of Euripides' *Hypsipyle* and *Antiope*. Tyro, according to the *Odyssey*, fell in love with the river-god Enipeus and would walk by the river's banks, where she was raped by Poseidon. Her sons were the heroes Pelias and Neleus. She married Cretheus, and although Poseidon warns her not to announce her sexual encounter with him, there is no hint that she suffered (*Odyssey* 11.235–59). Sophocles composed two plays called *Tyro*. In one, Tyro was persecuted by a stepmother named "Iron" (and proud of it; fr. 658). In another fragment she laments that her hair has been cut off (659). Such plots about the reunions of separated parents and children then proliferated in New Comedy. As so often, tragedy expanded an epic narrative element so that its possibilities were visible for later authors and genres.

Epic Narrative

Epic forms the basic model for tragic plots. Many Greek tragedies have happy endings: so does the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* brings the human actors to a situation of near-disaster, as Odysseus and his supporters begin a battle with the families of the suitors, but Athena suddenly appears to bring about peace. This is the origin of the tragic *deus ex machina*. Many other tragedies end with a lament, like the *Iliad*. It is probably from the *Iliad* that the tragedians acquired their interest in narratives of two

opposed focal characters. Hector and Achilles are the main characters of the poem, each extensively developed in his own social world, though Achilles is clearly more important. They meet only once, when they finally fight in Book 22, but everything else leads toward and away from that encounter. Hector kills Achilles' surrogate, Patroclus, and Achilles then kills Hector. When Achilles finally ransoms Hector's body, he also releases the Trojan half of the story, so that it can come to an end. Sophocles' *Antigone*, like the *Iliad*, brings two opponents together and then separates them. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, the two never actually meet directly at all, but the scene where they are on stage together and Phaedra's intermediary, the Nurse, approaches Hippolytus, is the moment at which the disaster takes place. In Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, Deianira and Heracles never meet at all (they were played by the same actor). Critics have traditionally argued about who is the "hero" in these plays, but mutual destruction is what these plots are about.

From the Cycle, on the other hand, Euripides took his plots whose focus shifts drastically with a dizzying succession of incident. In *Andromache*, the initial dramatic problem is Hermione's threat to kill Andromache, the concubine of her husband Neoptolemus, and Andromache's child. Andromache is rescued by Peleus, then Hermione is terrified but is rescued by Orestes. Then the messenger reports Neoptolemus' murder by Orestes at Delphi. *Phoenician Women* begins with Jocasta, then moves its attention from Antigone to Eteocles and Polynices, to Menoeceus the son of Creon, back to the warring brothers and the death of Jocasta, and to Oedipus.

Tragedy depends profoundly on epic narrative technique. Of course, drama is in some respects inherently different from epic. One is obvious: Homer can tell, while tragedy must show (though it can show a character who narrates). Homer, however, does not provide a single, authoritative voice. He is often secretive or ambiguous, so that the contrast between telling and showing is not always as great as one might imagine. The other difference, though it sounds banal, is not. Tragedies are short, and the choral songs make the action-time shorter. All the spoken episodes of tragedy tend to resemble the most intense passages of Homer. Homer is full of formulaic narrations of journeys, feasts and sacrifices. In tragedy, if the journey can be taken for granted, it is skipped. Messengers begin their stories when they arrive at the setting of the event. Tragedy narrates only astonishing journeys, like the path of Agamemnon's beacons, or Io's fated wandering through the exotic edges of the world. Homer has long similes, but tragedy is typically metaphorical. Homer is expansive. Although Homeric digressions serve to mark the significance of the episodes they amplify, they nonetheless give the impression that the poet is interested in them for their own sake. Tragedy tends to be tightly constructed.

Still, Homeric epic was the tragedians' abiding model for what made a good story and how to tell it. Their dramatic form often made their needs different from Homer's, but even when they are different it is often revealing to see them in relation to Homer. For example, Sophocles often uses what Barbara Goward has called a "narrative loop" (Goward 1999: 87–118). A false or ambiguous narrative within the tragedy threatens to send the plot in the wrong direction, but in the end the "true"

plot is restored. Euripides does something similar, though in his own manner, in *Orestes*. The *Iliad* is actually a model for the loop, when Zeus is first distracted and then deceived by Hera, so that Poseidon can intervene to make the Achaeans win.

Homer observes a careful distinction between his own omniscient narrative, which often explains events as the work of particular gods, and his characters, who do not know about divine interventions unless they are given supernatural access to this information through prophets or by the gods themselves. Hence mortals speak of "some god" or "Zeus," even though the narrator tells the external audience that an individual god has acted. The tragedians play endless variations on mortals' inability to know the gods' plans and actions. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Choephori*, the characters talk about what various gods demand, but in the final play the gods themselves appear. In Euripides' Hippolytus, the Nurse argues with Phaedra that her passion for her stepson has been caused by Aphrodite, and that she is therefore wrong in trying to resist it (443–76). Phaedra wins sympathy by rejecting this attitude. Yet the audience knows from Aphrodite herself that Phaedra is, indeed, the victim of direct divine intervention. In *Antigone*, the poet has the guard describe the burial of Polynices as astonishing: first somebody manages to slip by the guards and cover the body; then, during the day, a dust-storm forces the guards to close their eyes, and when they can see again, Antigone is beside the body, lamenting. It looks as if the gods might be involved, just as in epic they rescue their favorites in battle or help them reach their goals without being seen. Here, however, the external audience can only share in the wonder of those who see a stranger suddenly before them. No omniscient narrator clarifies the event. If the gods have helped Antigone in reaching the body of Polynices, their failure to help her later is even more striking.

Homer provided the basic canon of verisimilitude and the rules of what makes narrative sense. Homer and tragedy share a rule, for example, that prophecies and predictions by gods are always true, but may be imprecise. In Homer, characters' versions of the narrator's story, whether anticipatory or retrospective, are never too accurate, because the character's point of view infiltrates them. Prophecies are a special case, and serve simultaneously to inform the audience of what will come without abandoning the possibility of surprise. Inaccurate details by Zeus or a prophet, however, do not limit the speaker's overall authority. The prologue of Euripides' Hippolytus implies that Theseus will curse Hippolytus after learning of his wife's love. The events that actually transpire clearly fit what Aphrodite intended, but not what she says. On the other hand, in Euripides' *Ion*, Athena explains at the end that Hermes' prediction in the prologue that Creusa would recognize her son after they had returned to Athens was not just a misleading detail. Apollo was wrong about what was going to happen.

In the *Odyssey*, the same prophet, Theoclymenus, interprets the same omen slightly differently in different passages: first he tells Telemachus it means no family will be more "kingly" than his (15.531–4), but later he tells Penelope it means that Odysseus is nearby, preparing death for the suitors (151–61). These interpretations are different aspects of the same essential message. Similarly, in Sophocles the same prophecies are

quoted in different forms in different circumstances – most strikingly in *Women of Trachis*, since Deianira emphasizes that the oracle is written down.

Tragedies approach epic most directly in messenger-speeches. The convention of the tragic messenger is not primarily a way to avoid representing violence before the audience. Messenger speeches allow epic scale and actions impossible within the narrow dramatic space. Narrative allows for movement, summary, the description of silent actions and of masses of people. The messenger in Agamemnon describes a storm at sea, the messenger in *Persians* an entire battle. The old man in Sophocles' *Electra* delivers a false, but splendidly detailed account of Orestes' death in a chariot-race at the Pythian Games. Narrative has further positive advantages: above all, because the messengers of tragedy are ordinary mortals, it allows for ambiguity and mystery about divine intervention.

The tragic messenger speech develops the first-person narrative of epic – not the reports of messengers, but autobiographical narratives. Here, as in other ways, epic's conventional allowances are very useful for the tragedian. Homer's first-person narrators stay generally within the limits of what they know, but not entirely. Although they typically use mostly "experiencing" focalization, they are prone to add not only hindsight, but knowledge they could not have at all. They are held strictly only to the restrictions limiting human awareness of divine interventions. Eumaeus, for example, tells the story of how his nurse abducted him from home when he was a child (*Odyssey* 15.403–84). He includes events at which he was not present, and throughout he remembers far more accurately than a small child could have. Epic characters tell their own versions of stories, and these are always self-interested – but sometimes they seem to have borrowed some of the epic narrator's basic fairness, his sense that everybody has a point of view. Eumaeus is the victim of the story, but his narrative seems to sympathize with the nurse in her longing to return to her home. Similarly, tragic messengers are simultaneous eyewitnesses, whose knowledge is confined to what they personally saw, and quasi-epic narrators, whose sight is greater than any individual's could naturalistically be. The messenger in Aeschylus' *Persians* sees the entire battlefield and hears what the Greeks call to each other. Unlike Homeric narrators, tragic messengers are not significant participants in the events they describe. They always have a particular, clearly defined sympathy and their reports are emotionally colored, yet their facts are always correct.

Only rarely does a messenger express hesitation in his reporting or differentiate his observations from his inferences. Usually messengers avoid transgressing human knowledge of the divine. So the messenger in *Oedipus at Colonus* conveys the boundary precisely in his inability to say what happened to Oedipus (1656–6). At the end of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, however, the messenger seems to know not only that Poseidon has caused a powerful current to force the Greeks' ship back against the shore, but that he is acting from hatred of the Pelopidae (1414–19) – although he cautiously adds "so it seems" to his statement that Poseidon will give Orestes and his sister to the Taurians. He also refers to Iphigenia as "forgetful" of the help Artemis

gave her at Aulis. A moment later, Athena appears to explain the future of Artemis' image and of Iphigenia as Artemis' priestess. The messenger is not wrong, exactly, but his knowledge about the gods is incomplete. Euripides loves to play messenger-narrative, action, audience knowledge and inference, and omniscient narrative against each other: in *Ion* we hear how the hero is saved from being poisoned when doves drink the wine he has poured in libation (1196–208; did Apollo send them? Probably). We suspect Apollo's intervention when the Pythia enters to stop Ion from killing Creusa (1320–3); then Athena says that Apollo feared Creusa would kill Ion and Ion Creusa, and saved them "by contrivances" (1565).

Tragedy constantly adapts and transforms epic methods. On the large scale, epic provides not just stories, but models of plot. The tragedians use it as a repertory of the possible. Frequently, tragedy seems haunted by the epic poet's omniscience. Homer already plays with the distance between what he can tell the external audience and what his characters can know. Dramatic form, with its fewer opportunities for presenting divine knowledge, invited the poets to play with the audience's uneasy position between the characters' limited knowledge and the full information only epic promises.

Tragedy into Epic

The passage of story, technique, and sensibility from epic into tragedy did not go all one way. In Homer, characters faced with difficult decisions sometimes speak to their own hearts. These are practical decisions: they set out the reasons for each side and make up their minds. Tragedy did not at first adapt this epic convention, but it fully developed speeches by perplexed characters who reason acutely even while expressing intense emotion. Sophocles' disgraced Ajax considers his alternatives, while Euripides' Admetus realizes how lost he is without the wife who died for him. Euripides finally used the Homeric form for Medea's great speech in which she hesitates between murdering her children and giving up her revenge (1021–80). This speech became a model for later epic. The monologue became a powerful vehicle for Apollonius of Rhodes' Medea. Her descendents, in turn, are Virgil's Dido and the tragic women of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – Iphis, Byblis, Myrrha, Procne. Epic, having created tragedy, re-created itself on the model of its creation.

If tragedy became an important source for epic, it has been just as important in directing readers of Homer. Even without Aristotle's influence, we would see Achilles and Hector as tragic figures. Thanks to the *Poetics*, it is often impossible to distinguish what tragedy took from Homer from what we see in epic because tragedy, and the history of the criticism of tragedy, has directed our vision. Epic and tragedy are inextricably entangled.

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