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The Troublesome Reign of King Oedipus: Civic Discourse and Civil Discord in Greek Tragedy

MICHAEL X. ZELENAK

Greek tragedy was created under a unique and very unusual set of circumstances. What we today call Greek tragedy was not really 'Greek' but specifically Athenian. It articulated Athenian values, celebrated Athenian institutions, debated Athenian problems. Despite the undisputed artistic achievements of the great tragedians, the primary motives behind the creation and production of classical Greek tragedy were not artistic or literary, but social and political. Greek tragedies were contemporary and topical civic spectacles, and a central component of Athenian civic life and political discourse. Aristotle identified this 'political' aspect of classic Greek tragedy as its distinguishing feature by noting that 'the earlier poets [Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides] made their characters talk "politically" [*politikos*], the present-day poets rhetorically'.¹

Athenian tragedy reached its cultural ascendancy at the precise time that Athenian political ideology reached its social ascendancy in the Greek world. The Athenians were justifiably proud of their two greatest creative inventions—tragedy and democracy. Under the radical democracy of Athens, tragedy became the official state-funded vehicle to celebrate the greatness of Athens and its political-social system. Theatre and politics remained closely intertwined throughout the fifth century BC.

We should not confuse Athenian democracy with late twentieth-century western democracy. To the established political orders in the classical era, like the oligarchy (rule by the few) in Corinth and Thebes, the aristocracy (rule by the best) in Sparta and the tyranny in Sicily, democracy was a revolutionary and dangerous political ideology. The very names of Themistocles, Ephialtes, Pericles, Cleon inspired fear throughout the

Greek-speaking world. Democracy (rule by the many) was a radical ideology invented by the philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras during the sixth century BC and spread by disciplined and fanatic secret sects. It was introduced into practical politics when Cleisthenes overthrew Hippias the Peisistrad (son of Peisistratus, the great tyrant) in 511 BC and established the Athenian democracy in 508 BC.

For the next century civil discord inside Athens between the wealthy aristocratic families and the newly-enfranchised middle class (and later, lower-class) citizens would be the central axis of Athenian politics. Initially, most aristocrats had sided with the democrats since they had ended the autocratic anti-aristocratic tyranny of the Peisistrads. Cleisthenes was himself a member of the aristocracy. But more radical democrats quickly gained power. In 493 BC, Themistocles was elected *archon*, becoming the first leader of Athens not born from the aristocracy. He was ostracized and exiled in 471 BC, and his position of leadership supplanted by the right-wing Cimon. About 465 BC, Cimon's pro-aristocratic and pro-Spartan policies were challenged by the left-wing radical Ephialtes. Pericles, an aristocratic descendant of Cleisthenes, threw his support behind Ephialtes, and he himself eventually became the dominant figure in Athenian politics for the next 30 years. His legacy to the democracy was the Periclean Citizenship Law of 451 BC, which expanded the electorate to include all free-born Athenian males of the lower classes. Pericles not only secured his own political power with this reform, he also politicized the lower class rank-and-file sailors in the Athenian navy, which would become the backbone of his imperialistic foreign policy. Pericles led Athens into the

Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) with Sparta. As the war dragged on, civil discord in Athens tore apart the fabric of society. In 411 BC, right-wing extremists seized control of the government and outlawed the democracy. Athens was on the verge of full-scale civil war, when the navy toppled the right-wing *junta* and restored the democracy.

The establishment of democracy in Athens had challenged long-standing social structures and values. Tragedy helped to shape and explain the new civic ideology by staging the spectacle of values in transition alongside familiar icons of continuity. Tragedy integrated the heroic figures and legends of mythology into the values of the new democratic Athenian *polis*. Because Greek religion contained no sacred text, the entire body of myth was open to reinterpretation. Every tragedy enacted a revision of a myth, and the Greek playwrights were as free with their myths as Shakespeare was with English history.

The aristocracy depended on extensive family and kinship ties for its power base, and all political power in the aristocratic or oligarchic city-states rested in the hands of a few closely-knit families, as in Sparta, Athens' main ideological opponent during the classical era. The three-decade Peloponnesian War, which ended Athenian political hegemony, was not a battle over economics and territory, but a fight to the death between two diametrically opposed political ideologies: the conservative aristocracy of Sparta and her allies and the revolutionary democracy in Athens. Both the Athenians and the Spartans, through a network of agents (*proxenoi*), tried to undermine friendly governments by spreading propaganda, fomenting discontent, arming insurgents and financing rebels. The Athenians understood that defeat meant not only economic and territorial loss but the end of their political system and way-of-life. Perhaps this partially explains some of Athens' more brutal actions during the war, such as the Melian massacre, attacked by Euripides in his antiwar play *Trojan Women*.²

Athenian democracy broke up the political monopoly of the upper class families and lessened the importance of the traditional family structure. The basic political unit of the democracy became the individual male citizen and his household (*oikos*), not the large extended family. Simply put, under the democracy, the state

attempted to replace the family. It is no accident that Greek tragedy repeatedly staged the conflict between state and family, between public duty and private obligation. The Athenian democratic *polis* assumed many duties and responsibilities that had previously been the domain of the family and blood kin, such as housing and educating orphaned wards of the state and staging the funerals of important Athenians or citizens who had fallen in battle.

The Greeks delighted in intellectual oppositions and the dialectical play of ideas, whether in tragedy, politics or philosophy. But, every Greek knew that there were two different types of conflict. One spurred men to greater achievement, the other was destructive. Hesiod explained this in the opening of *Works and Days*:

Strife is no only child. Upon the earth
Two strifes exist; the one is praised by those
Who come to know her, and the other blamed.
Their natures differ; for the cruel one
Makes battles thrive, and war; she wins no love
But men are forced by the immortals' will,
To pay the grievous goddess due respect.³

Of the evils caused by the 'cruel' kind of strife, civil war was the most dangerous to fifth-century Athenians. The democracy had been born out of revolution and civil warfare, and politics in Athens remained a messy business. Civic discord and political crises, including political murders, assassinations, acts of revenge, torture, civil disobedience, ostracism and exile of major figures—these were both the realities of Athenian political life and the stuff of her tragic drama. It is not surprising that the most popular myths in tragedy were the two prototypes of the dysfunctional family in Greek mythology: the House of Laius/Oedipus and the House of Atreus. In each the *polis* is visited by or threatened with every possible civic and political peril

Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* was the concluding tragedy of his *Oedipodeia* trilogy (467 BC). In the first place, the oracle had forced Laius to choose between the family and the city ('dying without children you save the city').⁴ The sins of the father are visited on the children. Each member of the family confronts the same choice, with disastrous results, until Eteocles finally chooses the city above his family. The fight to the death between the two brothers

ironically fulfils the oracle, and the city is saved.

Polyneices was exiled from his native city just as Themistocles recently had been in 471 BC. Also like Themistocles, Polyneices turned to a foreign army for aid in regaining what he considered his legitimate claim. However, possibly because of the sensitive and potentially dangerous political implications, Aeschylus focused solely on Eteocles and excluded Polyneices from the action. Whatever the justice of Polyneices' claim, to fight against one's native city was treason. Aeschylus does not explore the causes or nature of the civil conflict; rather he glorifies the patriotic defence of the city-state.

The chorus of women is a greater threat to the safety of the city than Polyneices and his army. They point up the danger of internal strife within the *polis*, here panic and mass hysteria:

Thus, the enemy's cause is well advanced
while we're ruined from within by our own.
That's what one can get, living with women!⁵

This raving, hysterical female chorus tells us more about Aeschylus and his fellow male citizens' attitudes toward women than it does about the women of Athens. Characteristically, the female characters in Aeschylus conform to narrow stereotypes of gender. The women of Eteocles' Thebes behave the way Aeschylus and other Athenian husbands believed their wives and daughters would react in such a civic crisis.

The self-assured patriotism of the *Seven Against Thebes* is evidence that Athens felt politically secure and socially stable. Soon, however, that sense of stability would be severely threatened. The *Oresteia* (458 BC) was written during one of Athens' most serious political crises of the century. In 462 BC the radical democratic revolutionary Ephialtes had attacked the most prestigious and respected holdover-institution from pre-democratic Athens, the supreme court of the Areopagus. Ephialtes reduced the Areopagus, the last vestige of aristocratic power in Athens, to little more than symbolic status by limiting its jurisdiction to the crime of murder alone. Athens was thrown into political turmoil. The assassination of Ephialtes in 461 BC probably caused Aeschylus to begin work on his great masterpiece, in an attempt to heal the

wounds opened by the civic crisis, to end the bloodshed and to bolster the threatened democracy.

In the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus took the idea of civil discord to an entirely new level—the struggle in the final play is not between rival armies or political factions, but between conflicting deities. The *Eumenides* pointedly takes place in Athens, where human destiny was attempting to embark upon a new course. The play pits the Furies—primitive female deities, born of the pre-Olympian earth-mother Gaia—against the modern, rational masculinized godheads of the Athenian *polis*, sired by Zeus, defended by Apollo and personified by the goddess Athena, the patron deity of Athens. Not only the social, sexual and political orders, but theology itself, are threatened by the escalating conflict. The Furies defend the old matrilineal notion of parenthood and the traditional values of family represented by blood-kinship, whereas Apollo is the unabashed spokesman for the masculine values of the new democratic patriarchy.⁶

Aeschylus' 'masterpiece of masterpieces', to use Goethe's description, was not written as an abstract work of art, but as a poetic *Lehrstück*, responding to the immediate civic crisis facing Athens and exhorting his fellow citizens to rally behind the democracy and avert anarchy and full-scale civil war. In the *Oresteia* Aeschylus marshals all his grand poetic energies to mythologize and celebrate the ascendancy of the democratic patriarchy in Athens. The *Oresteia* bids a respectful but firm farewell to the Areopagus, the last great symbol and institution of the pre-democratic era. The goddess Athena symbolizes and clarifies all the social, moral and political themes of the play, and through her Aeschylus poetically empowers the patriarchy, imaginatively sanctifies the democracy and gives his audience a lecture in civic responsibility:

Hear now my ordinance, people of Attica . . .
In this place shall the awe
of their citizens and their inborn dread restrain
injustice, both by day and night alike,
so long as the citizens themselves do not
pervert the laws
by means of evil influxes; for by polluting
clear water
with mud you will never find good drinking.

Neither anarchy nor tyranny shall the citizens
defend and respect, if
they follow my counsel;⁷

do not . . . plant in my citizens a spirit of war,
of civil war, making them bold against each
other!

. . . I do not approve of battle with the bird
within the nest.⁸

For Aeschylus, plays were not aesthetic exercises, but the most profound expression of his civic, political and moral values. His childhood was spent under the tyranny. He had seen the birth and growth of democracy in Athens. He had also seen his beloved homeland ravaged by the Persian army. He had fought for democratic Athens with his spear at the great battle of Marathon in 490 BC and had seen his brother fall and die on the battlefield. He also witnessed Athens' great naval triumph over the Persian fleet at Salamis in 480 BC, which he celebrated in his mytho-patriotic drama *Persians*, mythologizing and celebrating Athens and the democratic *polis* as the logical and necessary culmination of human social and political history. His patriotism was religious in its fervour. For Aeschylus, the state and the community gave the individual meaning and possible fulfilment and were more important than the individual himself.

In Sophocles the focus of the action is not on the community but on the individual. Sophocles does not celebrate the state or communal values, he is suspicious of them. His protagonists are great heroic individualists trapped by society or fate or circumstances. As the options for individual choice narrow, the Sophoclean hero becomes more defiant, inflexible and unbending.

Sophocles' *Antigone* even in its first production seems to have seized the imagination of its audience. It was so popular that the playwright was swept into office in 440 BC, along with Pericles, as one of the ten popularly elected generals. On the surface *Antigone* appears to be an overtly political drama centring on civil disobedience and civic responsibility. However, despite the play's twentieth-century revolutionary cachet and Antigone's status as an icon of heroic resistance to tyranny, the play is not a political drama, but the battle of wills between two family-members—the uncle Creon and his niece Antigone. After initiating a potentially subversive discourse with Antigone's civil disobedience,

Sophocles moves quickly to neutralize the political implications. He never allows Antigone to articulate any specific philosophy or ideology. Instead he isolates and distances her while gradually but relentlessly foregrounding Creon's character and privileging his perspective. Antigone sets the tragedy in motion, but by the end Creon has usurped the tragic action and displaced Antigone as protagonist.

Antigone, like Ibsen's *Ghosts*, could accurately be called 'a family drama'. Despite Creon's protestations to the contrary, the play's action does not threaten the community or the state but the family. It presents a struggle over who will control the values and define the responsibilities of the family. As is often the case in Greek tragedy, the axis of the play's conflict is gender. Antigone and Creon represent two opposite gender-determined readings of the institution of the family. Antigone, the female, stands up for the traditional values of the family and the home, where burial of all family members was a sacred responsibility. Creon is one of the new *machismo* Athenian techno-democrats for whom the state has replaced the family as the ultimate arbiter of social relationships and responsibilities. What would have been portrayed with heroic reverence by Aeschylus is presented by Sophocles as narrow and arrogant *hubris*:

CREON. Whoever considers a personal relationship more important than his country, I consider worthless.⁹

Creon does not lose his city, he loses his wife and his male heir—the two most important commodities for a citizen in mid-fifth-century Athens.

Tyrant Oedipus was written early in the Peloponnesian War amid the great plague of 430–29 BC, which Thucydides tells us killed at least 25% of the population of Athens. Oedipus' Thebes suffers from a similar plague, but the play's opening civic crisis rapidly fades into the background so that the playwright can focus on Oedipus' individual tragedy as emblematic of the fragility of the human condition. Even the play's title, which at first glance seems one of the most overtly political titles in Greek tragedy, is used ironically. A tyrant was a non-hereditary ruler of a city-state, which is what Oedipus believes himself to be at the beginning of the play. His tragedy is that he discovers himself to be not a

tyrant (*tyrannos*) but the lawful hereditary king (*basileus*).

Sophocles was a close friend and political supporter of Athens' most famous democratic leader, Pericles. Pericles pursued an openly imperialistic foreign policy and led Athens into the Peloponnesian War. His massive public works programmes and expansion of government services 'created amazement among the rest of mankind', as Plutarch put it. Some have suggested that Oedipus and/or Creon were inspired by or modelled on Pericles. Whatever their genesis, both Creon and Oedipus are parables of the limitations of political/rational man. Creon thinks he has found salvation in the state. Oedipus, whose very name in Greek is a pun on the verb 'I know' (*oida*), also believes he has found the key to life's riddle with his answer to the Sphinx: 'Man.' Protagoras, the great sophist had declared: 'Man is the measure of all things!' Likewise, in Aeschylus, man could break free and choose his destiny and his identity. In Sophocles, however, man is condemned to his destiny and identity.

In 415 BC, after fifteen years of almost constant warfare and with the military situation in stalemate, Athens again rejected peace and decided to gamble by expanding the Peloponnesian War. They undertook the boldest venture in the two-and-a-half-decade conflict—the Sicilian expedition and the invasion of Syracuse. Thucydides recorded the momentous debate at the Athenian assembly where Alcibiades played to the masses with his sophistic war-mongering oratory:

The state, if she remain at peace, will, like anything else, wear herself out upon herself, and her skill in all pursuits will grow old; whereas, if she is continuously at conflict, she will always be adding to her experience, and will acquire more, not in word, but in deed.¹⁰

Alcibiades' pro-war faction carried the day, and, as Thucydides put it: 'And *eros* afflicted them all alike to sail forth.'¹¹

In June, 415 BC, the doomed armada with 30,000 men set sail. None would ever return. The reckless Sicilian expedition was the greatest disaster that would befall Athens. When news arrived of the destruction of the invasion army and fleet, including the large relief force, Athens plunged into civic and political chaos. In 412 BC,

with much of Attica occupied by Spartan troops and the major Athenian allies and colonies in open revolt, right-wing anti-democrats inside the city seized the moment to attack the democratic government. A Committee for Public Safety was established and given veto power over the democratic assembly. The 85-year-old Sophocles was called upon to serve his country again as a member of this emergency committee.

A few months later, a right-wing *coup d'état* removed even this thin pretence of democracy. The democracy was abolished and replaced by the oligarchy of 'the Four Hundred'. Amid street fighting and anarchy, radical democrats were rounded up and executed by right-wing death squads because, as Thucydides matter-of-factly records, the new government 'thought it convenient to have them out of the way'.¹² However, the rank-and-file sailors of the Athenian army refused to fight for a government in which they no longer had the rights of full citizenship. The Athenian navy rallied behind the deposed democracy, and in April 410 BC the right-wing government was toppled and democracy reinstated.

With civil disorder and political terrorism tearing apart the fabric of society. Sophocles sat down to write the *Philoctetes*, produced in the first City Dionysia following the restoration of the democracy in March, 409 BC. Sophocles won first place for the eighteenth and last time. His *Philoctetes* is a deeply personal statement—the tragedy of a dying culture, Sophocles' swan song of the Athenian political and civic experience. It is a desperate work written in political shorthand and addressed directly to his fellow citizens amid the contemporary civic crisis, and an uncompromising examination of the moral-political premises of the Athenian democratic *polis*.

The *Philoctetes* legend was popular among the tragedians. It was Sophocles' second treatment of the story, and at least five other playwrights, including Aeschylus and Euripides, had also staged versions of the myth. *Philoctetes* was the best friend of Heracles, and he was the only man who would light the hero's funeral pyre. His reward was Heracles' famous magical bow. During the Trojan War, *Philoctetes* had accidentally committed sacrilege and as punishment was afflicted with an excruciatingly painful foot wound that never healed. Disgusted by the stench and unable

to bear his constant screams, his fellow soldiers led by Odysseus abandoned him on the uninhabited island of Lemnos. Now, ten years later, an oracle reveals that only with Philoctetes and his Heraclean bow can the Greeks defeat the Trojans and end the war. Odysseus returns to the island to bring the bitter and brooding Philoctetes back to the Greek army.

Previous versions of the myth had played heavily upon the theme of patriotism to convince Philoctetes to relent and return to the Greek camp. But Sophocles' Philoctetes remains defiant and inflexible. He sees Odyssean *realpolitik* as the antithesis of the ancient heroic code that is his very identity. Sophocles added another major character to the story—a young military cadet on the verge of manhood. Neoptolemus, the son of the great hero and paragon of honour Achilles. Neoptolemus finds himself caught between the conflicting codes of the two older men and is forced to choose. After wavering, he decides to throw in his lot with Philoctetes. Philoctetes and Neoptolemus refuse to give in to Odysseus or to historical necessity or patriotic duty. It takes a *deus ex machina*, the demigod Heracles, to order Philoctetes to 'do his duty' and return and save the Greek army.

Several contemporary playwrights have adapted Sophocles' play for their own political purposes. In Heiner Müller's *Philoktet* (1968), Philoctetes' extreme individualism makes him a decadent bourgeois individualist, an enemy of the common good. Odysseus shoots Philoctetes through the head, and Neoptolemus picks up the dead man's bow in order to use it for the good of the masses. Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1990) is a parable about the Irish Civil War. Philoctetes' wound is emblematic of the wrath and hatred that he refuses to give up, thus making civil peace an impossibility. His wound that never heals—the hatred caused by past injustice—has become his very identity and *raison d'être*. Sophocles' text is no less political, and it deals directly with the civil strife Athens was confronting. Philoctetes is Sophocles' Prometheus. The enemy, however, is not the fascist running mount Olympus, not even the Trojans threatening to defeat the Greeks on the battlefield, but the slick and smooth-talking politicians like Odysseus and the self-serving demagogues inside the *polis* who were using the war and the civil

conflict to further their own careers and interests.

What is the cost of moral compromise? Could Odysseus' logic of placing pragmatism over morality save Athens? Is a city where such logic rules worth saving? These are the questions posed by Sophocles in the play, and the dialogue often echoes exchanges that may have taken place in the assembly or the streets of Athens:

NEOPTOLEMUS. You do not think it shameful, then, to lie?

ODYSSEUS. Not if the lie brings deliverance.¹³

Sophocles, like Philoctetes, had become a moral-cultural dinosaur, displaced in the values of contemporary Athens. Victory was no longer the reward for self-sacrifice and heroism, but for deceit and opportunism. Philoctetes/Sophocles refuses totally and absolutely to compromise or capitulate. He will not leave his hovel, he will not embrace the values of Odysseus, he will not even negotiate with the ruling *junta* of the Atreidae.

In the Athens of 409 BC, heroism had become empty and hollow. The difference between victory and destruction seemed no longer distinguishable. Right and wrong, moral and immoral, were not obsolete terms, all replaced by—in the new language of Odysseus-speak—the necessary and the unnecessary. Philoctetes/Sophocles rejects the claims of the *polis* and turns his back on necessity and his 'civic duty'. This absolute refusal to capitulate completes the tragic design of the play.

Sophocles, however, introduces another perspective with the appearance of Heracles. Once again, Sophocles rejects the solely human perspective. Man is just a part of the equation, he is not 'the measure of all things'. Within the cosmos, man is minuscule. Philoctetes/Sophocles has retained his heroic dignity and tragic stature by his act of refusal. But, finally, confronted with a higher power, he resigns himself to the will of the gods. Heracles tells him that he must accept history, accept reality, accept the role destined for him. This also means that he must accept the brutality and the slaughter, the treachery and the deceit, he must even accept Odysseus and the sons of Atreus. Sophocles was desperately seeking a moral, political and spiritual *catharsis* for his fellow citizens. Somehow Philoctetes and Odysseus must find a new synthesis that goes

beyond mere ideological extremism. Athens needed a miracle—not a military or naval miracle—but a miracle of the imagination. Sophocles was attempting the type of spiritual-political synthesis that Aeschylus had achieved half a century earlier in the *Oresteia*.

The frenetic and desperate tone of the political discourse of *Philoctetes* is matched by the plays that Euripides wrote during this intensive period of civic crisis: *Helen* (412 BC), *Phoenician Women* (411 or 410 BC), *Orestes*, (408 BC) and *Iphigeneia at Aulis* and *Bakkhai* (405 BC). These works bear witness to the last frantic gasps of the collapsing Athenian culture: Euripides confronts the deepest anxieties of the Athenian experience in an attempted communal *anagnorisis*. The premises and actions of these plays become more incredible, the plot twists more outrageous, the reversals more rapid and more extreme, the theophanies more ironic, the resolutions more paradoxical. These works represent some of Euripides' most savage assaults on the values of the democratic patriarchy as well as his most desperate attempt to reconfigure and save those very values.

In the year of Euripides' birth (480 BC), Athens had saved Greece with her glorious naval victory at Salamis. The miraculous *peripeteia*, from catastrophe to triumph in the Persian Wars, became the central legitimizing myth of Athens' democratic patriarchy. With the destruction of the Sicilian expeditionary force, Athens experienced another great *peripeteia*—this time from patriotic euphoria to despair. The resulting civic crisis and civil warfare—complete with conspiracies, terrorism, treasons, demonstrations, civil disobedience, assassinations, death squads, and several *coups d'état*—must have made day-to-day life in Athens resemble the scenes of a gruesome tragic drama. For the themes and inspiration for tragedies, playwrights need look no further than the streets of Athens.

Each of these final plays by Euripides treats familiar legends, and to each Euripides gives his distinctive twist. He presents the promiscuous Helen of Troy, the most reviled and denigrated figure in Greek literature, as chaste and faithful, the victim of a cruel hoax. In his almost Pirandellian *Helen*, by consciously manipulating reality and blurring the boundaries between truth and fiction, Euripides hoped to reveal to his fellow

citizens that Athens too was living a fantasy life where truth and fiction, the moral and the immoral, had become inverted.

In the *Phoenician Women*, which could aptly be titled *The Troublesome Reign of King Oedipus*, he dramatized the entire Theban cycle in a breathtaking series of civic crises. The exiled Polyneices would be right at home with the exiled Philoctetes. Perhaps the words of the similarly exiled Athenian leader Alcibiades was the inspiration for both:

I have no love for my city when it does me wrong, but only when it gives me my rights. Indeed, I do not consider myself to be attacking my own country, but rather to be rewinning a country that is mine no longer. The man who really loves his city, if he loses it unjustly will not refrain from attack; on the contrary, desire will lead him to try anything to get it back.¹⁴

Both Eteocles and Polyneices appear on stage to argue their cases. In a clear allusion to contemporary events, the peace negotiations between them break down. In a new twist added by Euripides, the death of Creon's son, Menoeceus, is demanded to save the city. Foreshadowing Euripides' *Iphigeneia*, Menoeceus turns to fanaticism and proudly embraces his destiny of dying to save the city.

Euripides' *Orestes*, opened at the City Dionysia in March 408 BC with the following lines:

There is no form of anguish with a name—
no suffering, no fate, no fall
inflicted by heaven, however terrible—
whose tortures human nature could not bear
or might not have to bear.¹⁵

Plutarch tells us that Socrates was so moved by these lines that he stood up in the theatre, stopped the performance and asked the actor to repeat them. Even for Euripides, the world of *Orestes* is extraordinarily gloomy and nihilistic. In his final version, he strips away even the slimmest pretence of morality or justice and turns the heroic myth into a shameless battle for self-serving political power.

Euripides' *Orestes* and *Electra* are dim shadows of the heroically pious creations of Aeschylus. *Orestes* is mentally deranged, while *Electra* stalks around as one of 'the living dead'.¹⁶ They do not

waste their breath in attempting to defend their matricide in terms of morality or justice. With Pylades, they have become fanatic political terrorists. Orestes, the ringleader, is a foaming ideological extremist of male supremacy. The assembly of the people has been reduced to an unruly mob. They vote the death penalty for the gang of matricides because 'Orestes' example was dangerous for parents'.¹⁷

Salvation for the matricides comes not through appeals to justice, or the gods, or a higher morality. Athens is past such logic. Pylades makes the brilliant ideological leap by realizing that the most outrageous crimes can only be justified by greater crimes. The terrorists murder Helen, seize Menelaus' daughter as hostage and threaten to burn down the palace. In a grim parody of a *deus ex machina*, the horrified god Apollo intervenes to save Helen and restore order.

Tradition tells us that shortly after the production of *Orestes*, in 408 BC, Euripides left Athens and went into voluntary exile. He died in 406 BC, in Macedonia. In March, 405 BC, his *Iphigeneia at Aulis* and *Bakkhai* were posthumously produced at the final City Dionysia before the surrender of the city. His fellow citizens awarded him the first-prize that they had denied him so often during his lifetime. Both plays continued Euripides' savage critique and questioning of Athenian values and the Athenian experience.

In *Iphigeneia at Aulis* Euripides asks the question 'Can the war be stopped?' The answer is no. Each character in the play attempts in vain to stop the murder of Iphigeneia and prevent the Trojan War. War has a momentum that transcends and subsumes logic, morality or individual will. In a fittingly outrageous Euripidean reversal, Iphigeneia steps forward and, in a remarkable speech, demands to be killed:

It is hard to hold out against the inevitable . . .
I have made up my mind to die.
I want to come to it
with glory, I want to have thrown off
all weak and base thoughts . . .
All the people, all the strength of Greece
have turned to me . . .
Because of me, Greece
will be free, and my name will be blessed
there.¹⁸

In less than 70 years, Greek tragedy has travelled full circle from the naive and sincerely felt

patriotism of the *Persians*. Iphigeneia becomes another casualty of the now empty patriotic jingoism and war propaganda. The male ritual of bloodlust and warfare demands the sacrifice of the body of the unstained female. But, a miraculous exchange occurs. At the moment the sword falls upon her neck, Iphigeneia is whisked away by Artemis and a deer is put in her place. Artemis transforms this final act of violation into pure ritual, evoking the ritual of Dionysus, where an animal was substituted for the god, and thematically linking the play to *Bakkhai*, part of the same trilogy.

Iphigeneia at Aulis is not Euripides' deathbed conversion to macho war-mongering. Iphigeneia does not simply die for the state; she dies a fanatic, embracing the crazed masculine bloodlust of the army. The Greeks demand a martyr, so she plays the part to the hilt. Euripides knows that no ethics are left. No morality is left. No free will is left in Athens. The events are manipulating the people. The demagogues are correct in asserting that whatever sacrifice is necessary, the people of Athens will make it. In the logic of ideological fanaticism, feelings such as moral qualms are selfish and extravagant. Euripides has created an aesthetic equivalent to the Athens that he fled, a city where only crimes or meaningless gestures were possible, where only nihilism or blind patriotism remained. Iphigeneia's self-sacrifice is not heroism; it is a gesture in a void. This ironic and cynical reversal is all that is left for Euripides—it is his response to Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.

Bakkhai dramatized what was probably the oldest myth in tragedy, and it included another ritual sacrifice where a substitution takes place. In *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, an animal was substituted for a human; in *Bakkhai*, a human (Pentheus) is substituted for an animal. In *Bakkhai*, Euripides stages the final nightmare of the Athenian experience: the literal dismemberment of the body politic. Pentheus represents political-philosophical man, the self-confident symbol and creation of the urban *polis*. He is the purest and most extreme example of the rationalist point of view toward religion and the gods found in Greek tragedy. *Bakkhai* presents a confrontation between Greek philosophical rationalism at its most sophisticated and Greek tragic wisdom at its most terrifying.

Dionysus makes a simple but absolute demand of Pentheus: Worship me! This he refuses to do, but he nevertheless finds himself part of the Dionysian rituals of *sparagmos* (tearing apart the sacrificial animal) and *omophagia* (eating the animal's raw flesh), a celebration not where he eats, but is eaten. Just as in the hyper-masculinized Athenian *polis*, Pentheus has sought to deny and repress an essential component of the human being. He views the feminized Dionysus as his antithesis, not the part of himself that he actually is.

The Dionysian ritual is gruesomely celebrated. As the chorus goes from ecstasy to horror, there is no reconciliation between god and man, man and nature, male and female. The mother has killed and mutilated her son. The Dionysian ritual of rebirth and fertility is transformed into one of death and destruction. Pentheus is offered neither a life-affirming choice nor an act of defiance. No act of refusal remains. Euripides has deconstructed the social-political text of Athens into perfect and absolute paradox. Rational synthesis or logical understanding is no longer possible.

Gender warfare had polarized the worlds of Aeschylus and Sophocles, but at least we knew what a man was and what a woman was—and what a god was. Sexuality may have been extreme, but it was at least stable. In *Bakkhai*, the boundaries of gender and sexuality totally blur. In an instant Pentheus, the spokesman for male rationalism, is turned into a drag queen worrying about his make-up and the hem of his skirt. In this particularly terrifying moment, Euripides dramatizes and visualizes the darkest psychosexual-political nightmare of Athens. The world is turned upside down and inside out. Not only does the mother devour the son, not only is the patriarchal order of the *polis* destroyed, but the body of the male monarch is mutilated and dismembered by crazed, bloodthirsty women.

The historical moment of Greek tragedy was brief. The extant plays cover a period of less than 70 years, from 472 to 405 BC. Even at the time, the Athenians were not unaware of the significance of their drama. Throughout all the sufferings and hardships of the Peloponnesian War, including the protracted sieges of Athens, rationing and shortages, the civil warfare and internal strife, economic collapse, massive civil

disobedience, terrorism, a *coup d'état* and a counter-revolution, the city never cancelled its drama festivals. In the closing days of the war, with Athens cut off and encircled by Spartan armies, Aristophanes in the *Frogs* exhorted his countrymen to rally and save the city—not to preserve the empire, not for the honour of the city, not even to save their democracy, but so that Athens could continue to produce plays. Athens' greatest achievement, Aristophanes knew, was not her military or naval prowess, not even her unique political system, but her drama.

Shortly after the production of *Bakkhai* and *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, the Athenians suffered their final defeat at Aegospotomi. The Spartan army closed their stranglehold around the city, and Athens surrendered and was occupied. On the stage of history, the city of Athens acted out *Bakkhai*, not the *Oresteia*. At Spartan spearpoint, the democracy was abolished. The aristocratic Court of the Areopagus was re-empowered with its privilege and jurisdiction. Freedom of speech was abolished. The outrageous political satire of old comedy was outlawed. The Spartans established the reign of terror of the thirty tyrants. Hundreds of outspoken democrats and radicals were rounded up and given swift 'revolutionary justice'.

The Athenians eventually overthrew the thirty tyrants. They also re-established a less extreme but more stable democracy and regained some of their power and influence in the Greek world until Macedonia again abolished the democracy later in the fourth century BC. But, with the waning of the radical democracy of the classic era, tragedy too lost its political and aesthetic moment. The much safer and more easily controlled form of philosophy succeeded tragedy as the central forum of civic discourse. The comfortable and providentially controlled world of new comedy replaced the blasphemy, obscenity and political questioning of old comedy. Within a few decades—by the middle of the fourth century—the production of new Greek tragedies had become a rarity.

Notes

1. *Poetics*, 1450b. Gerald F. Else, trans., *Poetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 28.

2. Athens offered the island of Melos a chance to join her as an 'ally' in the Delian League. When the Melians refused,

Athens' response was a brutal invasion that killed or enslaved all the island's inhabitants. See Thucydides, V.84ff.

3. *Works and Days*, 12–18. Dorothea Wender, ed. and trans., *Hesiod and Theognis* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 59.

4. *Seven Against Thebes*, 748–9; literal translation.

5. *Seven Against Thebes*, 193–95. Christopher Dawson, trans., *The Seven Against Thebes* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 50.

6. Athens was not merely a democracy, it was a patriarchy in its most extreme form. All the benefits of citizenship were reserved for men. Women could not vote, own property, testify in court, perform in the theatre or attend the assembly. They were probably banned from attending the theatre festivals, as they were from attending other male events such as the Olympic games.

7. *Eumenides*, 681–96. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, trans., *Aeschylus: Eumenides* (London: Duckworth, 1979), pp. 53–55.

8. *Eumenides*, 861–6. Lloyd-Jones, pp. 64–5.

9. *Antigone*, 182–3; literal translation.

10. Thucydides, VI, 18.6. Charles Foster Smith, trans. *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), III, p. 221.

11. Thucydides, VI, 24.3; literal translation.

12. Thucydides, VIII, 70.2. Smith, IV, p. 313.

13. *Philoctetes*, 108–109. R. G. Ussher, ed. and trans., *Sophocles' Philoctetes* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1990), p. 35.

14. Thucydides, VI, 92.4. Peter Burian and Brian Swann, trans., *The Phoenician Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 8.

15. *Orestes*, 1–5, trans. by William Arrowsmith. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., *Euripides IV* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 113.

16. *Orestes*, 200.

17. *Orestes*, 893.

18. *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, 1369–80. M. S. Merwin and George E. Dimock, Jr., trans., *Euripides' Iphigeneia at Aulis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 85.