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Preface

Volume 13 of Animus is dedicated to studies of Greek tragedy.

One of the most striking things about the extant works of Greek tragedy is their broad accessibility and ongoing popular appeal, both as literary texts and theatrical art; Antigone, for example, is a staple of high school literature classes, while Medea remains a coveted acting role for seasoned professionals. Perhaps no works of imaginative literature from the ancient world, with the possible exception of Homer, have sustained such a powerful reputation for universality, relevance, and ‘modernity.’ There is a widespread conviction that these works express trans-cultural, trans-historical insights about the cosmos and the human condition. Indeed, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and, perhaps most of all, Euripides – ‘public intellectuals’ in their own time – remain ever-fascinating contemporaries. In the long and fruitful engagement between philosophy and tragedy, for example, the focus on universal form and content in tragedy is persistent, and many compelling insights about the continuity of the tragic tradition, the tragic spirit, the tragic vision, and the tragic sense of life have emerged in philosophical reflection on fifth-century tragedy.

Nevertheless, the hunt for universal themes can be an interpretive dead-end, causing us to read reductively by ignoring the stubborn historical and cultural particularity of the texts. These dramas bear the marks of their originary contexts in manifold ways, not least in their civic and religious functions vis-à-vis the City Dionysia. Written during the tumultuous period between c. 472 and 404 BCE, the extant plays are the product of a trio of dramatists from a single Greek polis; in fact, they represent only a small fraction of fifth-century tragedy as a whole, indeed only a small portion of the dramatic output of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Furthermore, these writers do not merely differ significantly from one another, but their own works are remarkably diverse. In other words, generalization, though inevitable, is always a perilous business because we know so much less than we want to know. And yet, even if possessed of such comprehensive knowledge, we, as historically-situated readers, could not pretend to read or watch the plays with fifth-century Athenian eyes, innocent of the epistemological revolutions of the intervening millennia or the moderating effects of a rich history of interpretation, production, and appropriation.

From what standpoint, then, ought we to read Greek tragedy? Certainly, philosophy has a kind of pride of place among the theoretical and critical discourses the plays have generated, a conversation that includes Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Kitto, Jaspers, Lukacs, de Unamuno, Santayana, Burke, Frye, Steiner, and Krieger, to name just a few. In particular, the Poetics has retained an astounding currency down to the present day; despite innumerable attempts to unseat him, Aristotle remains the one indispensable tragic theorist, supplying a critical terminology – peripeteia, anagnorisis, hamartia, catastrophe, katharsis – that continues to illuminate
tragic structure and effect. Yet the Poetics itself, despite its considerable explanatory power, is itself in need of elucidation, as illustrated by several of the essays in this volume. Nor is Aristotle infallible in his judgments, even on his own ground; unlike the neoclassical theorists, we generally recognize today that the Poetics constitutes not the last word on tragedy but the first. Tragic poetry, as Aristotle remarked, may be more universal than history, but Greek tragedy itself cannot be reduced to philosophy by other means. Such is the rich complexity of the material that even the most powerful and authoritative readings leave behind an unexamined remainder, and the only reasonable response to the plays is a glorious hermeneutic pluralism. We believe that this is amply demonstrated in the variety of standpoints and approaches evinced by the authors in this volume of Animus.

C. Michael Sampson, in “Universals, Plot and Form in Aristotle’s Poetics,” re-examines Aristotle’s conception of plot, clarifying the famous comment that poetry speaks of universals (τὰ καθόλου) as opposed to particulars. He contends that the universals of which Aristotle writes are not general or metaphorical principles, but rather plot itself, understood as the universal form in a poetic substance and essential to tragedy’s telos and self-realization – the arousal of pity and fear. Thus, instead of treating the Poetics as a key to the interpretation of the genre, the argument resituates it within the framework of Aristotelian ontology and teleology.

Anitra Laycock argues in “Poetry & Polity: Tragic Perspectives on the Nature of Political Association” that the decline of the Athenian polis – from an ideal harmony of reason and feeling expressed in justice and friendship to an unstable, disorderly, fatally divided “heap” – is discernible in fifth-century tragedy, specifically in a comparative reading of Aeschylus’ Eumenides, Sophocles’ Antigone, and Euripides’ Bacchae. Collectively, these plays question the essential nature of political association in a manner that anticipates and informs the like explorations of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Dana LaCourse Munteanu proposes, in “Timing Recognition: From Aristotle’s Comments on the Iphigenia in Tauris to Gluck’s Opera,” to illuminate Aristotle’s references in the Poetics to the shadowy figure of Polyidus, whose version of the Iphigenia myth is presented as an alternative to Euripides’ Iphigenia in Tauris. In particular, Aristotle praises Polyidus’ handling of the recognition scene as an alternative to Euripides’ method. The author argues that Aristotle’s interest in Polyidus signals an implicit recognition of the importance of dramatic timing, which is not formally broached in the Poetics. The author supports this contention with a brief reading of the recognition scene in Gluck’s eighteenth-century opera, Iphigenie en Tauride, whose librettist appropriated Polyidus’ recognition scene.

Julen Etxabe, in “Antigone’s Nomos,” offers a solution to the crux contained in lines 904-15 of Sophocles’ Antigone in which the heroine, defending before her fellow citizens her burial of her brother Polyneices, claims she would not have disobeyed Creon’s edict in the case of a husband or child, and refers to her defense twice as a nomos. He contends that Antigone’s speech deserves to be taken seriously as a legal argument promulgating a socially validated norm. The justification for Antigone’s
disobedience, he argues, is rooted in ancient Greek conceptions of the family; the death of Polyneices, the last male in the Labdacid line, constitutes the extinction of Antigone’s family and therefore demands the ritual of burial. The argument aims at re-framing Antigone’s gesture – often understood as explicable in terms of necessity, heroism, or equity – as the conscientious act of a citizen attempting to redefine the normative boundaries of the polis.

Sarah Nooter makes the case, in “Uncontrollable Consciousness in Sophocles’ Ajax,” that the heroes in Sophocles’ plays, notably Ajax, can be illuminated through Mikhail Bakhtin’s study of characterization in Dostoevsky’s novels. Specifically, the writer challenges the commonplace about the provenance of dramatic irony in Sophoclean tragedy, proposing in its place dramatic indeterminacy vis-à-vis the protagonist’s consciousness. The much-maligned and objectified Ajax, she argues, always exceeds the audience’s comprehension and is thus granted autonomy of consciousness, as confirmed by Odysseus at the end of the play.

Paul Epstein, in “Aristophanes on Tragedy,” contends that the comedies Thesmophoriazusae and Frogs constitute both serious explorations of the nature of tragedy and the fullest development of Aristophanes’ comic art. In both plays, the protagonist – Euripides and Dionysus respectively – discovers the telos of tragedy, which is the education of the spectators in their civic duties. Epstein argues that, while all Aristophanic plays portray the comic hero’s alienation and eventual reconciliation to Athens and its institutions, the two comedies in question – with protagonists who directly represent the spectators and whose activity is grounded in the divine-human relation of religious festivals – succeed to a greater degree than the other plays in radically unifying the elements of spectator, comic hero, polis-institutions, and the gods. Because Dionysus is the main character of Frogs, the latter play unifies these elements even more thoroughly than Thesmophoriazusae.

Aryeh Kosman, in “The Divine in Aristotle’s Ethics,” argues that the divine in Aristotelian ethical reflection is a regulative principle of human good; it does not legislate the nature of the good, underwrite morality, or otherwise abrogate the naturalism and human agency which inform Aristotle’s ethical thought. In the Ethics, god is figured as both the principle of reason (which permits humans to attain virtue and, subsequently, happiness) and that which governs the realm of moral luck and thus the site of the distinction between happiness and blessedness. He goes on to consider the Poetics as a complementary sequel to the Ethics, one which explores the uncertainty and frailty of virtuous action as the realization of proper deliberation and the achievement of happiness. Tragedy, he contends, explores the pathology of action, in which the deliberations and choices of vulnerable human agents are frustrated by a world outside their control. Finally, he characterizes the divine as thought itself, the good of human awareness.

We hope you find these essays as challenging and stimulating as we did. Enjoy.
UNIVERSALS, PLOT AND FORM IN ARISTOTLE’S
POETICS∗

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In the ninth chapter of the Poetics, Aristotle draws a sharp distinction between the
genres of tragic poetry and history:1

διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ εποικοδιότερον ποίησις ἱστορίᾳ ἐστίν· ἢ
μὲν γὰρ ποίησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἢ δὲ ἱστορία τὰ καθ’ ἑκάστου
λέγει (1451b5-7).2

For this reason poetry is more philosophical and serious than history: poetry speaks more
of universals, while history speaks of particulars.

Despite the facts that both the syntax of the μὲν/δὲ construction and the contrast it draws
are transparent, Aristotle’s meaning in this passage is not entirely clear. For if (as he
defines it elsewhere) tragedy is “the representation of an action” (μίμησις πράξεως,
1449b24), how can any single tragedy, as a particular representation, nonetheless

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Association of the Middle West and South in Madison, WI (3/31/2005). I am grateful to
the audience of that session, as well as to Richard Janko and the three anonymous Animus
referees, all of whose comments have greatly improved the argument. Any errors which
remain are my own.
1 Since Aristotle’s particular focus in the Poetics is on tragic poetry, I will use the terms
‘tragedy’, ‘poetry’ or ‘tragic poetry’ more or less interchangeably in my discussion. Epic
similarly falls under the category of “more serious” poetry (σεμνότεροι, 1448b25;
1448b34-6; 1449b9-10), and while it is true that comic plots are also relevant to the
argument (1449b7-9; see p. 14, infra), the genre at stake in the Poetics is tragedy, and any
assertion about poetry in general must therefore reflect Aristotle’s ideas about tragedy in
particular.
2 All references to the Aristotelian corpus will be to the following editions: R. Kassel, ed.,
Aristotelis de Arte Poetica Liber (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1965); W.D. Ross,
Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1894); W.D. Ross, ed.,
parties des animaux (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1956); D. Harlfinger, ed. “Edizione critica
del testo del ‘De Ideis’ di Aristotele” in W. Leszl, ed., Il ‘De Ideis’ di Aristotele e la
teoria platonica delle idee (Florence: Olschki, 1975), 15-39. Unless otherwise noted,
translations are my own.
constitute or speak of universals (τὰ καθόλου)? The remark has puzzled critics, who attempt to explain it in various ways: the universals in tragedy are ‘generalized’, ³ ‘action-types’ or ‘event-types’ in the plot, ⁴ ‘general principles’ instantiated in the plot in accordance with necessity and probability, ⁵ or not real universals at all, but rather the more nebulous ‘weak universals’ established by “a causally lucid and powerfully unified plot-structure” that have a “metaphorical presence.”⁶ These interpretations largely agree that plot structure is important for Aristotle’s notion of universals, but exactly how or why remains open to debate.

The present investigation is concerned with this debate over tragedy’s capacity to ‘speak of’ universals, specifically vis-à-vis the concept of plot as it is presented in the Poetics. Its first principles are straightforward and distinguish it from other scholarly attempts to elucidate the generalized idea of tragedy’s universals: the Poetics belongs to the Aristotelian corpus and is not only consistent with his philosophy, but also illuminable by it. In the case of tragedy, it speaks of universals because, like other substances both animate and inanimate in Aristotle’s philosophy, it is compounded of a universal form and matter. I will argue that the universals of which Aristotle writes are not abstract or distinct principles created out of the construction of the plot and possessing metaphorical presence, but are rather bound up with plot itself—understood not simply as the dramatic action, but also as the essence and telos of each particular tragedy. Plot is the form of tragic poetry, and the proper construction of a plot is, accordingly, crucial for a particular play’s achieving the end of the genre, which, for Aristotle, lies in the arousal of pity and fear as well as the catharsis which follows.⁷ Tragedy, therefore, is more philosophical than history because it operates on philosophical terms and becomes comprehensible within the framework of Aristotle’s teleology.

In seeking to clarify the role of universals in the Poetics, this examination supplements two recent studies that similarly begin from the assumption that one can interpret Aristotle’s Poetics on Aristotelian terms. Elizabeth Belfiore has treated the

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⁷ This is the end of the genre as advanced in the definition: “accomplishing through pity and fear the catharsis of emotions of this kind” (δι’ ἐλέους καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν, 1449b27-8). I will not open the scholarly Pandora’s box pertaining to catharsis in this study, as my argument only requires that it is involved in the end at which tragedy aims, realized more clearly (for my purposes, at least) in the arousal of pity and fear.
analogy between poetry and living things, with particular reference to the Poetics’ concern for the end and function of tragedy,\(^8\) and similarly, Martha Husain has demonstrated in detail that the Poetics is consistent with the larger framework of Aristotelian ontology.\(^9\) I lay particular stress on this methodology because the difficulties in interpreting the universals of which tragedy speaks stem (as I see it) either from a Platonizing error or a resistance to treating the Poetics and plot on Aristotelian terms. This argument serves to correct the error, and to this end, it consists of two parts. In the first, I discuss the ideas of plot and the telos of the genre in the arousal of pity and fear as they are presented in the Poetics; in the second half of the discussion, I turn to plot as form and the thorny matter of poetry’s universals. While it draws on Belfiore and Husain, the analysis will focus primarily on interpreting the arguments put forth in the Poetics before reflecting on their Aristotelian framework. Yet comprehending that framework remains imperative: understanding tragedy in terms of Aristotle’s ontology not only clarifies the former’s relationship to universals, but also situates the idiosyncratic character of the Poetics’ analyses within the Aristotelian system.\(^10\) The Poetics is as much an exercise of Aristotelian thought as it is a work of literary criticism, and Aristotle’s view of tragedy is wholly his own.

**Plot and the Telos of Tragedy**

The haste with which Aristotle focuses on the construction of plot (μῦθος) at the onset of the Poetics stands out.\(^11\) For, vis-à-vis the other general topics outlined in the treatise’s first sentence—namely, poetry’s potential (δύναμις), its kinds (εἴδων σύμμετρα) and the number and kind of its parts (ἐκ πόσων καὶ ποίων ἐστὶ μορίων)—the prime factor in determining the quality of poetry is quickly established as the construction of the plot, which is crucial for the play turning out well.\(^12\) To be fair, none would argue that plot is not central to the Poetics; over a third of the chapters treat it in one form or another, including (most significantly) the arguments and taxonomies at the heart of the treatise.\(^13\) Nonetheless, its importance, especially as pertains to the success of a poem, warrants some stress. For, so essential is the concept of plot to Aristotle’s conception of

\(^10\) Aristotle’s lack of concern for the parts of tragedy beyond plot have long posed problems for scholars who bristle at the lack of attention paid to spectacle (ἤψις) and song (μελοποιία)—not to mention the centrality of the chorus to the genre!  
\(^11\) Po. 1447a8-13. Lucas (*op. cit., ad* 1447a9) points out the position of plot at this point as well.  
\(^12\) “[Our concern is] how plots must be constructed if the poem is going to turn out well” (πῶς δὲ εὐνόησα τοὺς μύθους εἰ μέλλει καλῶς ἔχειν ἡ ποίησις, 1447a9-10).  
serious poetry that distinguishing them is nigh impossible. In his definition of tragedy (1449b24-28), for example, Aristotle asserts that tragedy is the representation of an action (μίμησις πράξεως, 1449b24). In short order, however, he says precisely the same thing about plot; like a tragic poem (of which it is only ever one of six parts—1450a7-10), plot is also the representation of an action (1451a31; 1452a13). The repetition is significant: for Aristotle, plot is not only primary to the craft of composing poetry, but is also so closely identified with a composition as a whole that when he subsequently writes that “________ is the representation of an action and because of this most of all of agents,” ‘plot’, ‘poetry’, or ‘tragedy’ could be inserted seamlessly as the grammatical subject of the phrase without any distortion of its meaning. The idea operates as a kind of pars pro toto: like a form that is identifiable with its substance as a whole, plot is identified with tragic poetry.

So extensive is Aristotle’s identification of plot with tragedy that plot and the actions it represents comprise the sine qua non of the genre. For despite the fact that there are five other parts of tragedy (1450a9-10), they are (compared to plot) largely expendable:

\[ \omega στε τά πράγματα καὶ οἱ μῦθος τέλος τῆς πράξεως, τὸ δὲ τέλος μέγιστον ἀπάντων. ἐτι άνευ μὲν πρὸ ἀξέως οὐκ άν γένοιτο πράγματα, ἀνευ δὲ ἠθὼν γένοιτ’ άν (1450a22-25). \]

As a result, actions and plot are the telos of tragedy, and the telos is the most important of all. Without action there could not be tragedy, but without character there could (my stresses).

The significance of this point cannot be understated: there is no tragedy without plot, or, put another way, the category ‘tragic’ is wholly dependent upon plot. In light of the way that Aristotle defines both as the representation of an action, this makes good sense: plot is synonymous with tragedy as a whole, and, as the representation of an action, is essential both to the genre and to Aristotle’s understanding of it. The quoted passage, however, indicates a further point: not only is plot that without which tragedy cannot exist, but it is also somehow the goal of tragedy—the telos (or final cause) towards which a particular composition is directed. The nature of this telos appears elsewhere: in the definition of tragedy, Aristotle describes it as the arousal of pity and fear, and the

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14 In addition to stating this in the definition of tragedy (1449b24), this formula appears at 1449b36, 1450a16-17, 1450b24-25 and is present as well at 1452b1. I exclude for the moment other aspects of the definition.

15 ἔτι περὶ τῆς μίμησις πράξεως καὶ διά ταύτης μάλιστα τῶν πραττόντων (1450b3). The grammatical subject is unclear: Lucas (op. cit., ad loc.) understands this passage as implying ‘tragedy’ (looking back to 1450a16), but given the proximity of plot (μῦθος) four lines above and the reference to agents (τῶν πραττόντων), there is no reason that Aristotle could not have elided ‘plot'.
resulting catharsis. I will turn to the matter of pity and fear shortly, but for the moment two related points appear. First, the framework of causality marks the discussion as peculiarly Aristotelian: true knowledge is, after all, the knowledge of causes. Second, it is therefore significant that plot is the telos of tragedy in the Poetics. For, in light of its status as the sine qua non of tragedy, plot’s further role as goal makes it essential to the ‘tragic’ quality of the genre.

Inasmuch as it constitutes the telos of tragedy, the matter of plot warrants further elaboration. For although the definition of tragedy suggests that the arousal of pity and fear constitutes the telos of poetry, how this telos actually lies in plot is not immediately clear: getting from plot to pity and fear to the telos of tragedy requires deeper analysis of the Poetics. The problem is that Aristotle’s idea of plot is a bit difficult to pin down: over the course of the treatise, it denotes both the particular actions that constitute a given play’s contents as well as the more abstract structure of the play, and the combination of these two things relates it to the goal of the genre as a whole. Plot is not simply the representation of an action (1450a3-4), but is, more specifically, also the construction of events (τὴν σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων, 1450a4-5): as a construction (τὴν σύνθεσιν), it is formal and abstract, but as the construction of particular events (τῶν πραγμάτων), it is also poetic content—the stuff that happens in a particular tragedy. The latter notion of plot is more prominent in our contemporary parlance, but for Aristotle the twofold significance of plot as both form and content is integral to the argument. On the one hand, at the level of content, his analysis treats the kinds of action represented in a plot. The list is well known: tragedy is not a representation of any kind of action, he stipulates, but rather of a “complete and serious action having some importance” (ἐστὶν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως επούδαιας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐξουσίας, 1449b24-25). Particular kinds of action, as we will see, fulfill these criteria differently. On the other hand, at the level of form, Aristotle’s analysis also categorizes the parts of plots, and ranks the forms they potentially take in an elaborate taxonomy. For Aristotle, the two

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16 For the definition’s reference to pity, fear and catharsis, see n. 7 (supra). The idea that tragedy has a goal (and can be more or less successful) appeared already in the treatise’s first sentence with reference to plot structure (1447a9-10).

17 “Our inquiry is concerned with knowledge, and we do not suppose that we know something before we grasp its ‘why’, (and this is grasping its primary cause)” [ἐπεὶ γὰρ τοῦ εἰδέναι χάριν ἡ πραγματεία, εἰδέναι δὲ οὐ πρότερον οἰόμεθα ἔκαστον πρὶν ἀν λάβωμεν τὸ διὰ τὶ περὶ ἕκαστον (τούτῳ δ’ ἐστὶ τὸ λαβεῖν τὴν πρώτην αἰτίαν), Ph. 194b17-20]. See also Metaph. 993b23-4.

18 So Janko (op. cit., ad loc.) translates τὴν σύνθεσιν as ‘construction’, while Lucas (op. cit., ad loc.) glosses the term as “structure.”

19 One can compare the idea that the soul, for Aristotle, is the form of the body, but also situated in the heart—that is, in a material body (Juv. 469a5-7; Metaph. 1035b14ff.). See W.F.R. Hardie, “Aristotle’s Treatment of the Relation Between the Soul and the Body” Philosophical Quarterly 14 (1964): 53-72; T. Tracy, “Heart and Soul in Aristotle,” in J. Anton and A. Preus, edd., Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy, vol. 2, (Albany: SUNY, 1985), 321-339.
aspects of plot as form and content go hand in hand, so much so that he makes no distinction between them.

The complexity of plot as both form and content is integral to much of the discussion. For, although the seventh chapter announces structure as its topic, the composition of plot depends in large part upon having the proper kind of action, which is to say that the proper form of a tragic plot depends in part upon its having the proper content. To this end, Aristotle qualifies his earlier definition that a plot’s action be complete and have magnitude (1449b24-25) by adding that the action must also be ‘whole’ or ‘united’ (ὅλη, 1450b23-26). This qualification serves to clarify further the earlier definition; because it has a beginning, middle, and end, a ‘united’ action includes the idea of a complete action within it. The beginning, Aristotle states, follows nothing prior by necessity, but is itself followed by something else (1450b27-28). Likewise, the middle is both preceded and followed by something else, and the end follows something prior but is itself not followed (1450b29-31). All of these arguments are structural, but at no point does the main idea—that at issue are the structures of particular events (i.e., the play’s contents)—fall from sight. An action must be whole and complete, but wholeness and completeness are determined by the connections between the beginning, middle, and end of a plot’s actions.

The connections that unite a plot lie in probability and necessity (τὸ εἰκός/τὸ ἀναγκαῖον), and these principles cement Aristotle’s idea of plot as denoting not just the content of a tragedy but, more importantly, its structure as well. The poet’s task (ἐργον), Aristotle tells us, is not simply to relate things that have happened, but the sort of things “which might happen and which are possible according to the principles of probability and necessity.” In this statement, the distinction between poetry and history becomes important: as a simple succession of particular events, things that have happened (τὰ γενόμενα) are the concern of history, whereas the poet is concerned with

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20 “[Let us discuss] what sort of construction of actions there should be” (ποίαν τινὰ δεῖ τὴν σύστασιν εἶναι τῶν πραγμάτων, 1450b21-22).

21 “The action that has a beginning, middle, and end is united” (ὅλον δὲ ἐστιν τὸ ἔργον ἀρχήν καὶ μέσον καὶ τέλευτην, 1450b26-27).

22 “It is necessary, then, that well constructed plots neither begin nor end at random, but to employ the aforementioned ideas” (δεῖ ἀρα τοὺς συνεπτῶτας εὖ μῆλος μῆθ’ ὑπὸ δὲν ἐτυχεὶν ἄρχεσθαι μῆθ’ ὅπου ἐτυχεὶ τελευτᾶν, ἀλλὰ κεχρῆσθαι ταῖς εἰρημέναις ιδέαις, 1450b32-34).

23 “according to probability or necessity” (κατὰ τὸ εἰκός ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον): see, variously, 1451a12-13, 27-28, 38; 1451b9, 35; 1452a20, 24; 1454a34-36. In chapter seven, he uses slightly different terminology, labeling the connections as that which “occur [or arise] by nature” πέριπετα εἶναι [ἡ γίνεσθαι] (1450b28, 29) or that which happens “necessarily” ἐξ ἀναγκῆς (1450b27, 30).

24 οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν… ἀλλ’ οἷα ἤν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκός ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον (1451a36-38).
the kinds of things that might happen (οἶα ἄν γένοιτο, 1451b4-5). Yet the poet’s concern lies not simply with the kind of events at issue, but, via the principles of probability and necessity, his aim of representing a complete and whole action is also bound up with how these events fit together. The construction of a plot (and not simply the quality of its contents) is essential to a tragedy’s success; while Aristotle allows for the possibility that a poet would compose plots that are not determined according to probability or necessity, he ranks episodic plots of this kind as “worst” (χείρισται, 1451b34).

The criticism of episodic plots is a significant moment in the Poetics, and not simply because it is bound up with the distinction Aristotle draws between history and poetry. For because episodic plots (like history) lack the principles of probability and necessity, they fail both in the criterion of poetic unity and in achieving the primary function of tragedy—arousing pity and fear:

ἐπεὶ δὲ οὐ μόνον τελείας ἐκτὶ πράξεως ἢ μίμησις ἀλλὰ καὶ φοβερῶν καὶ ἐλεεινῶν, ταῦτα δὲ γίνεται καὶ μάλιστα [καὶ μᾶλλον] ὅταν γένηται παρὰ τὴν δόξαν δι’ ἀλληλαζ’ (1452a1-4).

Since the representation is not only of a completed action but also of frightful and piteous [actions], these things occur most of all when they happen through one another [but] contrary to expectation.

At last the relationship of plot to the telos of tragedy in pity and fear starts to emerge. Even though episodic plots may represent possible actions occurring by mechanical succession, a plot that occurs in accordance with necessity and probability more fully reflects the aims of tragedy in arousing pity and fear through the representation of a complete action. The effectiveness of the drama depends, in large part, on the plausible organization of its events: the most amazing events (θαυμασίωτα), Aristotle states, occur not by chance (ἀπὸ τύχης) or spontaneously (ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτομάτου), but as though by design (ὡσπερ ἐπίτηδες, 1452a5-7). For this reason, an impossible but

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25 Aristotle distinguishes history and poetry by means of this difference between actual events (τὰ γενόμενα) and possible events (οἶα ἄν γένοιτο, 1451b4-5). For history writes solely of actual events—i.e. “what Alcibiades did or suffered” (τὸ Ἀλκιβιάδης ἐπραξέν ἢ τὸ ἐπαθέν, 1451b11)—which lack a principle of probability: as Aristotle puts it, it is evident that actual events are possible since they could not have occurred if they were impossible (1451b17-19). I will shortly discuss how probability and necessity are not only the mark of a poetic plot, but also essential to its capacity to speak of universals (pp. 19-20, infra).

26 This agrees with the definition of tragedy: δι’ ἔλεου καὶ φόβου περαιώνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν (1449b27-28). At EN 1105b21-23, Aristotle lists fear and pity among the passions (πάθη), and at 1106a4-6 he makes clear that people are moved (κυνεῖσθαι) with respect to the passions.

27 One can compare the way in which the pleasures which accompany the activities of the virtuous individual are those proper to mankind (EN 1176a2-29).
believable turn of events is superior to the possible but unbelievable; the plausibility or necessity of the poetic action supersedes other concerns.

In chapters 10-11 and 13-14, the argument becomes increasingly structural and taxonomical, as Aristotle discusses the parts of plot and the ways in which they can be utilized within the framework of probability and necessity for the purpose of arousing pity and fear. Here again, the relationship between plot, telos, and both pity and fear is at stake. These parts of plot are suffering (πάθος), recognition (ἀναγνώρισις), and reversal (περιπέτεια, 1452b9-10), and Aristotle’s discussion of them is well known. Concerning reversal, he argues that the best change of fortune involves neither an excessively good nor an excessively bad man (1453a7-8), but one who suffers a sudden change from prosperity to misfortune “through some error” (δι’ ἀμαρτίαν τινά, 1453a8-10). The taxonomy of recognition is similarly straightforward: the best kinds of recognition involve an individual’s intention to harm a philos and recognition of the relationship before taking action (1453b34-36), or an individual acting unknowingly against a philos and recognizing the relationship after the fact (1453b29-31). The presence of recognition, reversal, or both makes a plot complex (1452a14-18), and when they occur simultaneously with one another, they are most effective in arousing pity and fear (1452a32-33).

While Aristotle’s classification of recognition and reversal is unambiguous, the subtleties of the taxonomy are intriguing. For while it is clear that the primary criterion for an effective tragedy is the arousal of pity and fear, which Aristotle believes to be produced by crimes among philoi (as well as the recognitions and reversals attendant

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28 “With respect to the composition, a believable impossibility is more choice-worthy than an unbelievable possibility” (πρὸς τε γὰρ τὴν ποιήσιν αἱρετότερον πιθανόν ἀδύνατον ἢ ἀτίθανον καὶ δυνατόν, 1461b11-12). See also 1460a26-27: “it is necessary to prefer impossible likelihoods rather than possible unbelievabilities” (προαιρεῖσθαι τε δεὶ ἀδύνατα εἰκότα μᾶλλον ἢ δυνατὰ ἀτίθανα).

29 Aristotle cites the example of the statue of Mitys in Argos, which fell on the man who had murdered Mitys as he looked up it (1452a7-9). For Aristotle, this is not simply random chance, but happened as though on purpose. The impossibility—that a statue would deliberately fall on a man—is ignored in light of the plausibility of the scenario.

30 The use of reversal and recognition distinguishes a complex (πεπλέγμενος) plot from a simple (ἀπλοῦς) one (1452a14-18). Aristotle is clear that reversal and recognition must involve probability and necessity: “it is necessary that these things happen from the construction of the plot itself, so it occurs from the preceding that they happen either by necessity or probability” (ταύτα δὲ δεῖ γίνεσθαι ἐξ αὐτῆς τῆς συστάσεως τοῦ μύθου, ὡστε ἐκ τῶν προγεγενημένων εἰμιθαίνειν ἢ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἢ κατὰ τὸ εἰκός γίγνεσθαι ταύτα 1452a18-20).

31 In chapter sixteen, Aristotle describes such recognitions occurring out of the actions themselves (ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων, 1455a16-17) as the best. I will not discuss the two further scenarios Aristotle describes (1453b27-28, 1453b37-38) as neither involves recognition (as well as being dramatically inferior to the examples cited).
Pity and fear are social emotions in Aristotle, which is to say that they presuppose an emotional connection. Aristotle illustrates this relationship in the *Rhetoric*: “whatever people fear for themselves, they pity when it happens to others” (ὅσα ἐφ’ αὐτῶν φοβοῦνται, ταύτα ἐπ’ ἄλλων γιγνόμενα ἐλεοῦσιν, 1386a28-9). These emotions are essentially two aspects of the same relationship an individual has to any given experience of suffering, but crucial to Aristotle’s argument is the kind of individual whose sufferings one can relate to. In the *Poetics*’ classification of reversal (περιπέτεια), the ideal protagonist excels neither in virtue nor in wickedness (1453a7-12) but suffers on account of an error, and the reason for portraying protagonists of this kind is so that they will neither be so virtuous as to be an object of admiration for the audience, nor so wicked as to be an object of contempt. According to Aristotle, the audience must be able to identify with protagonists in order to feel pity and fear on account of their suffering: “pity is for the undeserving [person], fear for the similar one.” In order to feel pity, one must be capable both of identifying with another’s suffering and of imagining it happening to oneself or to one’s family and friends, and in order to feel fear, one must similarly be capable both of imagining a person’s suffering and of seeing it happen to oneself or to one’s family and friends.

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32 “For such a recognition and reversal will involve either pity or fear (for tragedy is assumed to be the representation of such actions)” [ἡ γὰρ τοιαύτη ἀναγνώρισις καὶ περιπέτεια ἢ ἐλεοῦ ἔξει ἢ φόβον (οἷς πράξεως ἢ τραγῳδία μίμησις ὑπόκειται), 1452a38-b1].
33 Rh. 1386a27-28.
34 ἐλεοῦς μὲν περὶ τόν ἀνάξιον, φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὁμόιον, 1453a5-6. The *Rhetoric* also discusses undeserved suffering: see 1385b14, 1385b34-1386a1, 1386b7ff.
35 So M. Nussbaum, in “Compassion: the Basic Social Emotion,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13 (1996): 35, points out that Aristotelian pity is anticipatory; to feel pity is to be “aware both of the bad lot of the sufferer and of the fact that [the suffering] is, right now, not one’s own.” Aristotle says something similar in the *Rhetoric*: “let pity then be a certain pain... [at what] befalls an undeserving person, which an individual might expect either himself or one of his friends to suffer, especially when it seems to be nearby. For clearly the individual who is on the verge of pitying the occurrence of such a thing supposes that he or one of his friends might suffer some [similar] misfortune” (ἐπεὶ δὴ ἐλεοῦς λύπη τις... τοῦ ἀνάξιου τυχάνειν, ὃ κἂν αὐτὸς προεδοκήσειν ἂν παθεῖν ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ τιμά, καὶ τούτο ὅταν πλησίον φαίνεται δήλου γὰρ ὧν ἀνάγκη τὸν μέλλοντα ἐλεήσειν ὑπάρχειν τοιούτῳ οἰον οἷον ἀνέθεσα παθεῖν ἂν τι κακὸν ἢ αὐτὸν ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ τιμά, Rh. 1385b13-18).
able to imagine those sufferings befalling oneself.\textsuperscript{36} When a protagonist is unlike the audience, however, the result is that neither emotion is aroused (1452b34-1453a1).

Aristotle’s idea of likeness is not only central to the emotional nexus of tragedy, but also has consequences for the kinds of suffering that are appropriate to it. Here we return to the idea that pity and fear are aroused specifically by crimes among philoi. As Elizabeth Belfiore argues, the idea that a tragic protagonist be ‘alike’ is loaded for Aristotle, since, for him, philia is essential to human life.\textsuperscript{37} Because the only thing piteous or fearful about a catastrophe wrought among enemies or individuals with no specific relationship to one another is the suffering itself (1453b17-19), only plots that depict suffering amongst philoi arouse the pity and fear that are proper (oikeia) to tragedy.\textsuperscript{38} Belfiore explains the mechanism well: “loss of philoi or harm to them is, because of our nature as political and philial animals, the most terrible and pitiable thing humans can suffer.”\textsuperscript{39} For Aristotle, pity and fear are aroused in the first place because the protagonist’s suffering is undeserved (ἀνάξιος, 1453a5), but furthermore, because the protagonist is also ‘like’ the audience both in terms of the proportion of virtue and vice, and in terms of the suffering experienced at the hands of a philos. In a well-constructed and complex plot whose actions transpire through probability and necessity, the suffering—or even the threat of it—produces tragic pity and fear in its audience by virtue of the circumstances surrounding it. Everyone has philoi, after all, and the bonds of philia operate in relationships both private and public, both in the polis and the oikos. Thus, however impossible its events might appear, a well-constructed plot depicting the harming of philoi according to necessity and probability arouses, for Aristotle, the strongest feelings of pity and fear in its audience, since its members can easily imagine themselves in such a situation. It is for this reason that plot “as a whole is the intrinsic telos of a tragedy”:\textsuperscript{40} the achievement of the telos in arousing pity and fear depends both upon the proper construction of plot and on the appropriate kinds of action within it.

Universals and the Form of Tragedy

The idea that the structure of plot is essential to a tragedy’s achievement of its telos prepares the way for the second half of the discussion. For, not only does tragedy’s final cause (that is, its telos) come into focus via plot’s aim of arousing pity and fear (not

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} “It is necessary that frightful things of this kind are those which seem to have a great potential of destroying us or of hurting us to the point of great pain” (ἀνάγκη τά τοιαῦτα φοβερά εἶναι ὅσα φαίνεται δύσαμιν ἔχειν μεγάλην τοῦ φθειρεῖν ἤ βλάπτειν βλάβας εἰς λύπην μεγάλην συντεινοῦσας: Rh. 1382a28-30).
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Belfiore (op. cit., 75-79). She refers to EN 1155a4-6, 16-22 (amongst other places).
  \item \textsuperscript{38} “For one ought not to seek all kinds of pleasure from tragedy but that which is proper to it. And since the poet must provide through representation the kind of pleasure that arises out of pity and fear, it is clear that this must be worked into the actions” (οὐ γὰρ πάσαν δεῖ ζητεῖν ἡδονήν ἀπὸ τραγῳδίας ἀλλὰ τὴν οἰκείαν. ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν ἀπὸ ἔλεος καὶ φόβου διὰ μιμήσεως δεῖ ἡδονήν παρασκευάζειν τὸν ποιητήν, φανερὸν ὡς τούτο ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐμποιητέοι, 1453b10-14).
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Belfiore (op. cit., 79).
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Husain (op. cit., 52).
\end{itemize}
to mention our understanding of it), but by the same token, so too does its formal cause. We have already seen that plot is synonymous with tragedy for the purposes of definition, but, in the following discussion, we will also see the extent to which plot is the universal form of tragedy, providing the terms by which Aristotle is able to classify and understand the genre at all. For, we must recall that, without plot and the actions it represents, tragedy cannot exist (1450a23-25).

The references to universals (τὰ καθόλου) within the Poetics reveal Aristotle’s concern for plot structure, but also demonstrate that he considers plot the essence—that is, the form—of a tragic composition. The term only occurs seven times in the treatise, but its meaning can be carefully traced as denoting the form a plot takes. In the fifth chapter, Aristotle describes how Crates was the first to “let go of particular iambic lampoon and compose generalized dialogue and plots” in his comedies (ἀφέμενος τῆς ιομβικῆς ἱδέας καθόλου ποιεῖν λόγους καὶ μῦθους, 1449b8). That the dialogue and plots are described for the first time as generalized (καθόλου) is important: Crates is the first to compose poems with a plot that is sketched out and of a particular, definite form (in contrast to his previous personal invectives). Aristotle uses καθόλου in a similar way in chapter 17, when he recommends that a poet work on his plots first:

τοὺς τε λόγους καὶ τοὺς πεποιημένους δεῖ καὶ αὐτὸν ποιοῦντα ἐκτίθεσθαι καθόλου, εἰθ’ οὕτως ἐπεισοδιοῦ καὶ παρατείνειν (1455a34-b2).

And as for the stories, both the ones already made up and those he composes on his own, it is necessary he set them out as universals, and then introduce episodes and extend them.

Here (as in the case of Crates), καθόλου refers directly to the organization of events in an abstract sense; the plot qua καθόλου is no particular play, but the general form of any number of dramas. The subsequent plot summary of Iphigenia among the Taurians (1455b3-12) confirms this sense of καθόλου as the form of the plot; Aristotle’s description excludes specific episodic details such as names and places, and is so concerned with the abstract organization of events that it even posits that the brother’s

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41 I will only discuss six of these, as the meaning at 1450b12 concerns διάνοια and not plot.
42 Crates’ status as a comic poet does not contaminate the discussion of tragic poetry, as the point pertains to the meaning of καθόλου vis-à-vis plot. Comedy, like tragedy, has a structured plot, but the difference lies in the plot structures’ respective goals: comedy does not aim to arouse pity and fear as tragedy does.
43 Cf. Lucas (op. cit., ad loc.). Lucas’ point on καθόλου as ‘generalizing’ would be appropriate were λόγοι the only thing in question; the inclusion of μύθοι here can only refer to the form of plot.
44 Again, Lucas (op. cit., ad loc.) reads καθόλου as “generalizing” as opposed to 'general.'
arrival can happen for some reason outside the plot (διὰ τινα αἰτίαν ἔξω τοῦ καθόλου, 1455b7-8).  

Aristotle’s desire that the poet get the form of the plot right before filling in the particulars is tied up not only with the sense of καθόλου as a universal form, but also with identifying this form with the telos of tragedy. For, as he puts it, the most effective plots are so well put together that, even without a performance, they can succeed in evoking pity and fear from an audience:

δεῖ γὰρ καὶ ἄνευ τοῦ ὀρῶν οὕτω συνετάναι τὸν μῦθον ὡστε τὸν ἀκοῦσαν τὰ πράγματα γινόμενα καὶ φρίττειν καὶ ἐλεεῖν ἐκ τῶν συμβαίνοντων (1453b3-6).

For the poet ought to construct the plot so that even without watching [a production], someone who hears the events which occur would bristle and feel pity for the outcome.

This assertion is the single most important indication of the value Aristotle places on plot structure for the success of a tragedy. Plot itself, independent of the spectacle of a staged performance, is sufficient for the achievement of the genre’s telos, and by this Aristotle means that, when the poet gets the form of his composition right—namely, when he constructs a complex plot incorporating suffering among philoi, reversal, and recognition—the realization of that form achieves the end of the genre.

The idea that the abstract structure of a tragic plot can be sufficient for achieving the telos of the genre in arousing pity and fear fortifies Aristotle’s understanding of plot as the form of tragedy. So when he describes plot, for example, as being like the soul of tragedy (1450a38-9), this is not an empty simile but one with real content informed by analogy from other works. For soul, he tells us in de Anima, is both the origin (de An. 402a6-7) and the form of a physical body with the potential for life, and the same framework holds true in the case of tragedy: plot is the form of tragedy with the potential for a particular end, namely, the arousal of pity and fear. What makes tragedy tragic is its plot, whose construction— when unified and containing the appropriate suffering, recognition, and reversal—actualizes itself and its end in the arousal of the audience’s tragic emotions. As we were told already in the treatise’s first sentence, the construction of plot is the primary criterion for the success of a poem (1447a9-10).

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45 I see no reason for Kassel to bracket this phrase, as its sense is fully appropriate to the sentence.

46 ἀναγκαῖον ἀρὰ τὴν ψυχὴν οὕτως εἶναι ὡς εἰδος σώματος φυσικοῦ δυνάμει ξωὴν ἔχοντος (de An. 412a19-21). See also PA 641a18-21; 645b14-20, cited in Belfiore (op. cit., 56).

47 Husain (op. cit., 64) agrees: “The examples Aristotle gives of such general plot-structure shows that emotive content is embedded in them, for they include not only the causal sequence of actions but also the family relationships that are constitutive of the pitiful and fearsome.”

48 So also Husain (op. cit., 64): “For unless the complex soul of a living animal is itself one, it cannot unify all the parts of its body into one animal. And unless it is the animal’s
I am not alone in considering the reference to plot as the soul of tragedy as a crucial moment in the Poetics; Elizabeth Belfiore similarly notes how Aristotle uses this analogy to portray tragedy as “a craft that imitates nature.” Cit ing the point that plot involves a change (μετάβασις, 1452a16; μεταβάλλειν, 1451a14), Belfiore characterizes a poetic plot as a process akin to that which occurs in an organic substance: both are directed toward a specific telos for the sake of which they exist. The analogy is fitting: on the side of physis (specifically, the case of an animal), the material body exists for the sake of the soul, which (as was noted) in the Aristotelian system is the form of the body with the potential for life. Thus, for Aristotle, soul is not simply the form of the body, but is also its telos (and its efficient cause, as well—de An. 415b8-12). Soul is the “functioning of a living thing,” which is to say that its activity is the function for whose purpose the organism is organized. The same applies for tragedy; just as the activity of the soul in an organism is internal, essential, and aimed at life, so too is the process of plot essential to tragedy and aimed at the specifically tragic telos of arousing of pity and fear. Without plot, a tragedy cannot be tragic, and the difference from the case of the soul is that soul is also the efficient cause, while a poetic plot requires a poet to compose it.

The fundamental quality of Aristotelian form—whether soul or plot—is important to keep in mind: in contrast to the case in the Platonic philosophy, these forms are not separable from matter (e.g. a body or tragic actions), but comprise their respective specific nature as actuality, it cannot actualize the corresponding potentiality of all the parts of its body. As a fish must be one and specifically fishy in its entire being, so a tragedy must be one and specifically tragic in its entire being. And for that to be possible, its action must function analogously to the fish’s soul.” For tragedy as a kind of ousia, see her discussion on pp. 29-34.

49 Belfiore (op. cit., 53.) See also Husain (op. cit., 18-29); and (more generally) Geoffrey Lloyd, The Revolutions of Wisdom. Studies in the Claims and Practice of Ancient Greek Science, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 188, who argues that the philosopher is “extraordinarily free with implicit and explicit comparisons of every kind between the role of φύσις and the τέχναι.”

50 For the telos as the “for the sake of which” (τὸ ὁφέλεια), see the parallel passages in Metaph. 1013a32ff.; Ph. 194b32-33.

51 Belfiore (op. cit., 56); see also Husain (op. cit., 50).

52 Belfiore (op. cit., 55) notes the following “less than exact” correspondence in the process-product distinction between living things and tragedy: “In nature, the process by means of which a living thing develops is different from the product, the completed living thing. This is also true of the craft of house building… In the case of tragedy, however, the plot is both the process of imitating and the product produced by imitating.” I add a further distinction: for while one is tempted to use the analogy of the seed, whose externalization makes explicit what was already present as form without matter, the realization of tragedy’s telos—the arousal of pity and fear—requires the efficient cause of the poet working on plot structure. On the seed as establishing the telos of the process of growing, see Metaph. 1049b14-1050a10.
essences. Uninformed matter is, after all, unintelligible for Aristotle. The distinction between Aristotelian and Platonic notions of form is particularly important because the equation of plot and form for which I am arguing has not been widely accepted by others, and the resistance, to my mind, is due largely to a confusion of the philosophers’ respective ideas. Even leading experts on the Poetics such as Stephen Halliwell struggle somewhat with the distinction, and purport to treat the Poetics’ analysis of tragedy as though it operated without reference to its formal and final causes.

In distancing myself from Halliwell, I am not taking issue with the understanding of Aristotle (Halliwell agrees, for example, that Aristotelian form cannot be detached from its substance), but rather with articulating more clearly how the Poetics operates within that Aristotelian framework. For, when Halliwell argues that the prescriptions of the Poetics’ thirteenth and fourteenth chapters (concerning the best kind of change and suffering) are not limited to the abstract shape of the plot, he implicitly detaches poetic form from poetic matter:

These prescriptions cannot be said to deal with form at the expense of substance, since the plot-structure (muthos) with which they are concerned is not simply the abstract shape of the plot, but the totality of the represented action with all its causal connections and logic of development, as well as the integrated relation within it of action and character [my stresses]. Halliwell focuses on the “totality of the represented action” in arguing that the concern of these chapters is not simply abstract and formal. On the one hand, I am in complete agreement: as I have argued, in the Poetics, plot denotes both abstract form and the particular contents derived from human action. But at the same time, the idea implicit in Halliwell’s argument, that form can be discussed “at the expense of substance” seems to me to assume both that the two are distinguishable and that a substance can be intelligible apart from its form. These assumptions strike me as false and un-Aristotelian.

Aristotelian plot includes a notion of content, but it is the form of those contents that determines the quality of the play: the particular actions dramatized in a tragedy are tragic for Aristotle’s system only to the extent that they are of a particular kind (namely, that they include suffering amongst philoi, recognition and reversal) and only to the

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53 Rees (op. cit.) agrees on the centrality of form, but does not treat the Poetics thoroughly enough to show how such a reading is proper to Aristotle, and so is rightly criticized by Stephen Halliwell [Aristotle’s Poetics, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 5, 23] for such a 'formalist' reading. Lucas (op. cit., ad 1450a38) notes that “Soul is the ‘form’ of man, and plot is of equivalent importance in tragedy” but leaves his discussion at that.

54 See, for example, Halliwell’s criticism of Armstrong’s tentative classification of the universal as a plot-type (2001, 98), and Halliwell’s own tentative treatment of the issue (2001, 100-101).

55 Halliwell (1996, 5).

56 See pp. 8-9 (supra).
extent that they are structured in a particular way, namely, according to the principles of probability and necessity for the purpose of arousing pity and fear. The poetic substance is both unintelligible and, more critically, not tragic without such a formal framework. Thus, when Halliwell asserts that “One cannot, in Aristotle’s theory, pass judgement on the formal aspects of a work of art without a grasp of the substance to which they give a form” he inverts the relation between form and substance in Aristotle’s philosophy;\(^{57}\) one cannot understand Aristotelian substance at all without reference to its causes—especially the formal and final. In the specific case of tragedy (as Aristotle himself argues), even when read (rather than performed), a well-organized plot is sufficient for achieving the end of the genre in arousing pity and fear (1453b3-6). Contrary to the assertion, it is, in fact, the case that one can pass judgment on a work of art without grasping it as a particular representation.

To my mind, the error is understandable and fundamentally Platonic. For in the idea that the represented human actions (qua ‘matter’ of a poetic substance) can be understood without reference at some level to form (or indeed, that they can be distinguished at all from it), one finds implicit the Platonic separation (χωρικώς) of form and matter.\(^{58}\) Such a separation is foreign to Aristotle’s philosophy;\(^{59}\) his substance is a composite of a universal form which is knowable and a material substrate (ὑποκείμενον) that is informed.\(^{60}\) As a so-called hylomorphic compound or concrete universal, one such body contains both matter and form, which are distinguishable logically (but not physically) within it. For, matter has its form within it as a potentiality and cannot exist without reference to form:

\[ \text{ἐτι Ὑ ἐστι δυνάμει ὃτι ἐλθεὶ ἄν εἰς τὸ ἐδοκεῖ ὁταν δὲ γε ἐνεργεῖᾳ ἂν, τότε ἐν τῷ ἐδεὶ ἐστὶν (Metaph., 1050a15-16).} \]

Matter exists potentially because it might achieve its form, and whenever it actually exists, at that time it is in its form.

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\(^{57}\) Halliwell (1996, 5).

\(^{58}\) See, for example, Phd. 67d4-5, 9-10.

\(^{59}\) Cf. the third-man criticisms of Aristotle in On Ideas (84.22-7): “If that which is truly predicated of some plurality is also some other thing besides those things of which it is predicated and is separate from them (for this is what those who propose ideas suppose they prove: for this reason they think Man-itself is something, because Man is truly predicated of the plurality of particular men and is different from those particulars). But if this is so, there will be a third man...” [ἵ τὸ κατηγοροΰμενον τινῶν πλείων ἀνθρώπων ἐλπίδα καὶ ἐστὶν ἄλλο παρὰ τὰ ὧν κατηγορεῖται, κεχωρικέμενον αὐτῶν (τοῦτο γὰρ ἤργονται διεισερχόμενοι οἷς τὰς ἴδιὰς τιθέμενοι δία τοῦτο γάρ ἐστὶν αὐτόπανθρωπος κατ’ αὐτός, ὡστε ὁ ἄνθρωπος κατὰ τῶν καθ’ ἐκαστά ἄνθρωπων πλείων ὀντῶν ἀνθλίδως κατηγορεῖται καὶ ἄλλος τῶν καθ’ ἐκαστά ἄνθρωπων ἐστὶν)—αλλ’ ἐν τούτῳ, ἐστὶ τοις τρίτω ἄνθρωποι (my stresses).

\(^{60}\) Metaph. 1042a25ff.
That one could discuss matter or substance without reference to its universal form is rationally impossible for Aristotle. In light of these ontological and teleological principles, the consequences for a properly Aristotelian understanding of tragedy now come into focus: plot is the universal form which tragedy (and the particular actions it dramatizes qua material) possesses potentially: a good tragedy realizes (or actualizes) its potential form more fully than a bad one, and to the extent that it realizes this form, it achieves its telos in arousing pity and fear. It is for this reason that Aristotle’s theory of poetry is so consistently concerned with both the elements of plot and the best form (or plot) for a tragic composition. The framework for Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy is formalist and consistent with his philosophy: everything hinges on plot as the form and telos of the genre.

Understanding plot as the form and telos of tragedy brings the Poetics under the purview of Aristotle’s larger philosophy, and allows one to get beyond the difficulties posed by tragedy’s capacity to speak of universals. For, as soon as plot qua universal form is understood as essential and integral to tragedy, then the objection that a particular plot “cannot straightforwardly count as a universal” disappears. Particular plays speak of universals inasmuch as the former are aimed at realizing their essential, universal form. So also are we beyond the point of speaking of the universals as ‘generalized’ in one form or another. plot is tragedy itself—its origin and its telos—and, as the form of tragedy, it allows the genre to be understood as analogous to a concrete universal.

With this notion of plot as form in place, we can turn to the final two instances of καθόλου in the Poetics, at the point when Aristotle claims that poetry is more philosophical and “speaks more of universals, while history speaks of particulars” (ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποίησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἡ δὲ ἱστορία τὰ καθ’ ἑαυτὸν λέγει, 1451b6-7). The distinction in terms of plot has already been discussed, while history represents things that have happened (τὰ γενόμενα), poetry involves the kinds of things that might happen (οἷς ἂν γένοιτο, 1451b4-5). The concept of the universal lies in the distinction: in the

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61 Cf. Halliwell, who elsewhere understates the locus of form within a substance; e.g. “For universals are not, for Aristotle, substances…” (2001, 102); “a distinction between form and content is difficult in Aristotelian terms” [“Aristotle on Form and Unity” in M. Kelly, ed., Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, Vol. I, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 103]. Such a distinction is not ‘difficult’, but possible only logically!
62 The fourth cause, the efficient, is the poet himself, as was noted (p. 16, supra).
63 So Husain (op. cit., 43): “What a tragedy must achieve is its own ousia, its own essential being, and central to that is the achievement of the katharsis of the action.” As noted initially (n. 7, supra), I prefer to focus on the arousal of pity and fear as tragedy’s self-realization (given the problems in interpreting catharsis), but Husain’s point is otherwise identical to mine.
64 Halliwell (2001, 98).
65 See nn. 3-6 (supra).
66 See pp. 9-10 (supra).
following lines, Aristotle defines καθόλου as “the sort of thing a certain person will say or do according to probability or necessity” (ἐστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποιῶ τὰ ποίᾳ ἀττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκός ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον (1451b8-9), while the example he provides for the particulars of history is “what Alcibiades did or suffered” (τί Αλκιβιάδης ἐπράξεν ἢ τί ἐπαθεν, 1451b11). Put crudely, tragedy (ideally) has a plot with a complex structure—with reversal and/or recognition, structured according to probability and necessity for the purpose of arousing pity and fear—while history’s particulars resemble the simple episodic plots that are “worst” (χείρισται, 1451b33-4) in the analysis of poetry. The form (or, we could more properly say, the plot) of the former distinguishes it from the latter.

While the understanding of plot as form explains tragedy’s capacity to speak of universals, the final problem at stake concerns the assertion that tragedy is more philosophical (φιλοσοφώτερον, 1451b5) than history. Here it is important to keep in mind the ontological and teleological framework at work in Aristotle’s discussion: while previous scholarship treated the universals as ‘generalized’ ideas and provided one answer to the problem, namely, that poetry is more philosophical “because it gives us a more generalized view of human nature and action,” the Poetics’ analysis of tragedy as a kind of substance suggests rather that ‘more philosophical’ pertains to tragedy’s status as an object of contemplation. For inasmuch as Aristotle categorizes and understands tragedy from within the framework of his larger philosophical system, tragedy is ‘more philosophical’ an object for thought than the simple case of history and its particulars. The Poetics treats the causes of tragedy, especially the final and formal, and true knowledge for Aristotle, as we now, is a knowledge of causes. Tragedy is more philosophical because it invites analysis in philosophical terms.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed an interpretation of the Poetics which situates plot as the universal form of tragedy, and which argues that Aristotle’s prescriptions for the organization of plot are aimed principally at the telos of the genre, understood as the arousal of pity and fear. When Aristotle comments that tragedy speaks more of universals, then, he is referring to tragedy as a poetic substance compounded of universal form (plot) and particular matter (the particular poetic events), which is, as a whole, aimed at a particular end (arousing pity and fear). The universal is essential, and the particular events that might occur in a play lose their tragic quality if not structured appropriately for the telos. Plot structure determines the extent to which a play is more or less tragic and the degree to which achieves its emotional goal.

In this respect, I hope to have framed the argument of the Poetics within the larger Aristotelian philosophy, principally by demonstrating the former’s implicit concern for the causes of tragedy. This Aristotelian framework helps obviate some of the difficulties posed by the Poetics’ analysis, particularly inasmuch as it acknowledges their

67 Janko (op. cit., ad 1451b5).
68 See n.17 (supra).
idiosyncratic character. For the *Poetics* analyses are, above all, uniquely Aristotelian: its concern for form and telos, the disproportionate “obsession” with plot (at the expense of the other five parts of tragedy), and especially the lack of concern for other prominent aspects of the art such as the chorus, all mark the treatise as unusual. What I hope to have shown is that this is not the kind of study of poetry that another figure could have composed. While figures such as Belfiore and Husain have treated aspects of the *Poetics* in terms of Aristotle’s larger philosophy, this study fills a need in subjecting the matters of plot and universals to similar analyses. In the end, what appears is a notion of tragedy as an Aristotelian substance whose universal form is plot, by means of which universal this art of poetry becomes more philosophical than, for example, history. For inasmuch as it has causes, tragedy is, for Aristotle, an object of knowledge, and can be treated philosophically.
1. Introduction

The Greek polis with its simplicity of form and its citizen homogeneity offers a fruitful model for investigating fundamental parameters underlying and determining the ethico-political nature of human association. To inquire into the nature of the polis is in essence to ask how the reasoning and feeling sides of the human psyche are found expressed in justice and friendship in human community.\(^1\) In metaphysical terms, the polis is understood by Aristotle to be an essential unity that is a 'composite whole of parts'; an 'ethical substance' defined by him as the communion of citizens in a polity.\(^2\) Although Aristotle thus gives the polis a logical structure for thought, he is in fact only making explicit the notion of a unifying polis ideal that is present throughout the Hellenic period, one expressed in the great civic festivals, in funeral orations, in myth and in the reforms of legislators like Solon and Cleisthenes.\(^3\)

Since the polis takes form concretely in matter, inevitably it falls short of the ideal expressed through its essential nature. What is most especially the polis is identified with its polity as the rational ruling part that defines the common good. However, demanding a place within the structure of the rationally ordered whole are all those natural distinctions that mark the side of feeling and the private good of individual citizens and their families. In the resultant dynamic interplay between these parts of the political association

\(^1\) In every human association (\(koinōnia\)), Aristotle observes, there seems to be some sort of justice and friendship, Aristotle, \(\text{Nicomachean Ethics}\) 1159b26-27.

\(^2\) A \(koinōnia politōn politeias\), Aristotle, \(\text{Politics}\) 1276b1-2. The 'formal cause', the polity (\(politeia\)), acting on the communion (\(koinōnia\)) of citizens (\(politōn\)) as 'matter', brings into being the 'whole', the polis as a distinct entity. On the ontology of composite objects, see Verity Harte, \(\text{Plato on Parts and Wholes}\), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). It is Aristotle, she notes, who first explicitly sets out the nature of the problem (11). On the polis as an 'ethical substance', see Fred D. Miller, Jr., \(\text{Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics}\), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 151.

instability readily arises with concomitant shifting balances of power. Each 'part' seeks to assert its own ascendancy, its own privileged relation to the good that, in the flux of the sensible world, appears as a 'whole' divided. As a result, the concord (homonoia) that is the mark of the just polis is disturbed. The sides of reason and feeling, no longer ordered together in justice and friendship in relation to a common end as their good, come increasingly into opposition, a disjunction which has at its heart the divided nature of man himself as 'rational animal'.

Fifth-century Athenian tragic drama offers an important insight into the historical decline of the polis, one that offers a rich resource to Plato and Aristotle as they subsequently undertake their own investigations into the essential nature of political association. Over the course of the period of around a century during which tragic drama actively flourishes in Athens, a movement takes place within which modal shifts in tragic understanding can be detected. Driven by the spirit of questioning received values which characterizes the fifth-century enlightenment, the dramatic portrayal of human freedom undergoes significant transformation; whereas in the post-Marathon glory days, freedom is embodied in the ideal of citizenship, it comes increasingly to be seen during the course of the century as the satisfaction of individual ambition and private gain. With the decline in effective power of the objective moral order of the justice of Zeus, which as causal principle has conferred a structure on the 'whole', the examination of the nature of political association focuses less on the ideal than on the perturbations that are destructive of it. The aetiology of this pathological process will be illuminated here through an examination of ethical issues explored in Aeschylus' Eumenides, Sophocles' Antigone and Euripides' Bacchae. These dramas reveal, I will argue, how the ideal of the polis as a 'whole' is disrupted as the 'parts' lose their inner coherence and order, to become by the end of the century no more than what Aristotle would call a 'heap'.

2. Aeschylus' Eumenides

In Eumenides, the political community is examined from the perspective of a unified composite whole in which the forces of necessity and freedom are reconciled and there emerges, under the aegis of Athena as demiurge, a charter for the foundation of the just city in the idealized polis of Athens. Nomos and physis are at one in an objective rational order that is the good of the 'whole'. More than any other extant fifth century tragic drama, the Oresteia trilogy seeks to probe the underlying nature of political association to ask how justice is present within it as the ordering principle of human community. Clearly and consistently throughout the trilogy the language of justice (dikē)

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5 See Aristotle, Metaphysics 1041b11-12.
and its implications resound as the central and sustaining theme.\(^6\) In the development of a charter myth for the foundation of the ideal polis, Aeschylus asks questions about the nature of the just city that Plato will later raise in Republic.\(^7\) This is not of course to assert that the Oresteia is a philosophical treatise, but to note that its political considerations, concretely expressed through the medium of the poetic imagination, are a coherent expression of concerns shared by poet, philosopher, legislator, and historian alike.

As the mythical paradigm for the ideal of the just polis unfolds in the drama, drawn within its orbit is a historical present in which familial and tribal values, traditionally sustained by a justice based on blood loyalty, must respond to the challenge posed by the demands of the new all-encompassing unity, the ethical justice of the polis order. Coming into focus before the watching Athenians are the very dilemmas with which they have grappled in the political turmoil that has punctuated their march towards the democratic polis of the Periclean age.\(^8\) What emerges in the course of the Oresteia is an understanding that humans must be able to contain the beast within if they are to successfully traverse the gap between a world of tribal vendetta and the civilizing sphere of the polis. The irrational and instinctive aspects of human nature are to be subordinate to a new and rational form of justice which originates, not in the particular ties inherent in kin relationships and tribal autocracy, but in the ethical bonds resident in the institutions which assure the collective good of the citizenry as a whole, which are prior to the distinctions they properly contain.

The conflict and contradiction that pervade Agamemnon and Choephoroi are focused, in Eumenides, on a seemingly intractable ethical dilemma in the soul of Orestes where justice is locked in battle with justice, so that to act justly is at once to act unjustly.\(^9\) If the difficulty that is presented here is to be successfully addressed, and justice is to claim its place as a unified and comprehensive principle of cosmic order active in human society, then the drama must show how these contradictory appearances of justice at war within Orestes can be effectively reconciled. In order to move beyond the dividedness of the appearances of justice and seek out the unity which can ground and


\(^8\) Discussion on the political import of Eumenides has been reviewed in a balanced account by Desmond Conacher, *Aeschylus' Oresteia: A Literary Commentary*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 197-222. See also Podlecki, (1999) 81-100.

\(^9\) According to Apollo, the Erinyes will punish Orestes if he does not avenge the murder of Agamemnon, Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 283-4. However, they will also pursue him for committing matricide, *Choephoroi* 924-5.
stabilize their opposition, Aeschylus brings on stage in *Eumenides*, to account in person for their ways towards men, the divine agents that are laying claim to administer justice at Zeus' behest: the Erinyes and Apollo. The division in the soul of Orestes is thus extended to expose a fundamental dichotomy within the order of the divine over the nature of justice. What is yet to be discerned is how there can be a mediation between the natural and instinctual chthonic realm of the Erinyes -- a world in which beast, man and god are conflated -- and the rational order of the Olympians: an ordering of nature and reason that will establish the proper relationship between beasts, men and gods.

With the radical opposition of the Erinyes and Apollo laid bare (198-231), the structure of the problem is in place. Each of these divine powers claims for itself the right to be in actuality the sole principle of just order for the family. The polar contrariety, which immediately divides and sets apart the Erinyes and Apollo, is a dramatic reflection of the opposed interests seen historically to separate the older tribal order centred on the family blood-tie from the emergent polis order. The Erinyes' justice, grounded in necessity, the ineluctable claim of individuals and families to the blood-right of revenge, is confronted by Apollo's position that the integrity of the ethical order, reflected in the complete primacy he accords to the marriage tie, is paramount. The Erinyes cast aside in dishonour the Olympian protectors of marital unions, Apollo claims (213-215). Yet, even while Apollo's justice, as it stands, may already be recognized as an advance in the sense that it offers a means of resolving the dilemma, in this case through ritual purification, it nevertheless remains the case that these two expressions of justice are essentially the same in that they are equally partisan and retaliatory; the anarchy the endless cycle of individual blood vengeance entails is countered by the despotism of an abstract rationality which seeks to equate itself immediately with a collective good.

Yet, taken on their own, the positions of the Erinyes and of Apollo are nevertheless incomplete. Although contrary, the Olympian and the Chthonian are at the same time held in a determinate relation to one another, one in which each side of the opposition contains implicitly that which characterizes the other. Hence, while reason may be distorted by passion in Apollo, it is also the case, as the Erinyes will come to amply demonstrate, that the forces of the irrational are open to being informed by reason. Aeschylus makes clear, in *Eumenides*, a recognition that, if the tension and

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10 Not only Aphrodite and Hera but Zeus himself thus suffer dishonour. Apollo's response to the privileging of the parent-child blood-tie by the Erinyes effects a recognition that the primary bonds which hold together the family as the basic social group are not those of blood but the ethically-based attachments that draw feeling and natural necessity within the sphere of the rational self-conscious.

11 Apollo, the voice of divine reason, is abusive, contemptuous, and dismissive of the Erinyes in his encounters with them, arrogantly disdainful of their status as goddesses (179-197). In marked contrast to the torrent of invective poured upon them by Apollo, god of wisdom and foresight, the Erinyes are, in their response to this outburst, respectful, polite and unemotional, replying to Apollo's vituperative jibes with studied logic (198-231).
opposition which persists between these forces is to be successfully ameliorated, it will
not be by the complete rout of one protagonist by the other, the whole equated with one
of the parts. What is needed is a measure that can comprehend and unify this primary
ccontrariety so that the natural and the rational -- whether in the soul, in the family, in the
city, or in the cosmos -- are not seen as opposed, but as contained within a whole that is
comprehensive of their difference: the differentiated moments of a single activity which
is the justice of Zeus, actualized in the human community as the ethical life of the polis.

Accepted by both sides as moderator, Athena incarnates the unifying measure that
sustains the Athenian ideal. In *Eumenides*, Athena is represented as the idea of Athens
personified. In fact, Athena concludes, the matter is too great to be entrusted to mortals
or god alone for judgement; a decision must be reached in concert (470-472). A
resolution will be worked out between the city's divine patron, Athena (288), as Zeus'
representative, and the best of her citizenry, chosen by Athena herself (487-8). In this
ideal Athens, Athena herself assumes the functions of the ruler of the polis. In this role
she will establish a court of justice to try the case, a mythical charter for the foundation of
the historical Court of the Areopagus which is to endure for all time (483-484), providing
a legal forum in which the arguments presented by opposing sides can be weighed and
judged objectively under law: reason grounded in the justice of Zeus and informed by the
exigencies of particular circumstance. Yet, it is important to recognize that the
appearance of justice established through the mindless mechanical observance of
external forms is not to be conflated with the reality.

The division in the human jury, which accords an equal respect to the competing
claims of instinct and reason, is a further manifestation of the ambivalence already
witnessed in the soul of Orestes himself, and of the polarity which is so patently on
display in the clashes between Apollo and the Erinyes. In the individual, in the
community, and in the divine, necessity and reason have countered their claims. Only in
the person of Athena is this duality finally taken up and overcome in the justice of Zeus,
the ordering principle of the political community as a 'whole'. Athena's casting vote is
not to be seen as a decision unilaterally imposed, but one achieved only in concert with
her citizens and arrived at following the outcome of their own deliberations. In accepting
Athena's ability to lead them out of their dilemma, and direct the course of action, the
citizens accord a priority to the authority of divine reason without effacing that natural
difference that marks them as individuals. Through the practical wisdom that she
embodies, Athena demonstrates that political reason begins with the universal of thought,
the idea of what is good for the polis, and that, as ordering principle, gives form to the
whole. This is the very essence of Athena, the cosmic justice of Zeus made actual in
the life of Athens through the rule of rational law. In becoming the *logos* of the

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13 What Aristotle refers to as *heteron ti*, the 'something else' that must be present to order
the parts into a whole. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1041b 11-48. See also *Metaphysics*
1043b4-14.
14 Podlecki, (1999 63-100), notes Aeschylus' use of the language of the law courts
throughout the *Orestes*. 
Institutions of the polis, exemplified here in the deliberations of the court of the Areopagus, reason ceases to be abstract and the just polis becomes actual.

Nevertheless, even a divinely mandated Justice embodied in the Laws and interpreted by a human tribunal consisting of the best of the citizens, is not of itself sufficient to maintain order and prevent discord (stasis) from breaking out in the polis when confronted with innate individual human desires and passions, ever-threatening to set private interest before the common good. Only when factional strife has been banished from the polis (977-978) does there arise the possibility that citizens bonded to one another in friendship will love and hate as one (a koinophilēs dianoia, 984-986). Athena has demonstrated her statesmanship with her decisive leadership of the court proceedings. Now, in her handling of the anger and bitterness of the Erinyes, she provides an exemplary model of how through, the power of persuasion (Holy Peithō, 885), the successful statesman is able to win over even the fiercest and most obdurate opposition and keep the ship of state on its true course. As she attempts to bring the Erinyes within the civilized order, Athena recognizes and appeals to their unspoken need for a broader recognition and acceptance. Hence she offers them a place of honour in her city and a cult of their own, a chance to be an integral element in maintaining the integrity of the polis.

Gradually, under Athena's wise guidance and persuasive power, the Erinyes are brought from a narrow concentration on blood vengeance to a broad social mandate that encompasses the natural side of human life (930-931). The emotional energy and drive they embody -- which, unfocussed, represents a powerful disruptive force threatening to tear the polis apart -- will, when harnessed in the service of the common good, prove equally potent in catalysing the cohesive bonds of friendship that bind the citizens together as one. Both sides, reason and passion, must be present in a human community. As chthonic powers, Athena indicates, the Erinyes possess not only the capacity for destruction but also a contrary and contrasting potential for beneficence. Henrichs argues that "the Erinyes require the existence of the Eumenides to achieve their full meaning, and vice versa." Understood in this way, the polar contrariety of the Erinyes-Eumenides reveals the goddesses as a dyadic potency capable of being actualized for benefit or harm, pleasure or pain. In Eumenides, this potential is actualized.

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15 Plato and Aristotle will lay great emphasis on the significance of passion (thumos) properly oriented as a cohesive force rather than a potent source of discord (stasis).
16 There is no evidence prior to Aeschylus that the two groups of deities (Erinyes and Eumenides) shared a common function. Sommerstein (1989, 11) suggests that Aeschylus is here "making a startling innovation."
beneficially by Athena, and the goddesses are accorded a meaningful place within the rational order of the polis. Now properly Eumenides, the goddesses urge unbounded blessings, both material and social, for Athens and her people. Nevertheless, Athena reminds them, they retain a potent threat of retribution for those who transgress (932-935, 952-955). Indeed, in Bacchae, Euripides amply demonstrates the disastrous consequences that follow the failure to properly integrate this polar duality of the irrational.

As the Oresteia concludes, the city celebrates its collective identity. Zeus and Moira come together as one in endorsing the peace treaty that has been established between reason and natural necessity (1044-1046). The extension of the rule of Zeus into the human realm provides a rational ethical order for the polis and its institutions, while the goddesses govern the sphere of the natural and instinctual. Reinforced by the positive emotive power of collective cult, the law is taken up into the minds and hearts of the citizens, promoting internal harmony and keeping at bay the menace of political discord as each citizen sees himself actualizing his own freedom objectively in attaining to the common good.\(^{18}\) At the centre of the polis stands the Court of the Areopagus, its divinely given mandate to invoke that reverence and fear for the Laws that is to sustain the just political community. As Macleod remarks, "the parallelistm of city and individual is part of Aeschylus' thinking as much as it is of Plato's."\(^{19}\) For both poet and philosopher alike, the concern is to identify directly the life of human flourishing (\textit{to eu zên}) with the just community.\(^{20}\)

Yet, amid the euphoria that marks the conclusion of Oresteia, there is a note of caution that must be sounded. The natural world is characterised by movement and change. What has been achieved is not the finality of an indissoluble good but the respite of a peace treaty crafted from the primary contrariety of Apollo and the Erinyes, a division of the opposing powers of despotism and anarchy that, through the mediation of Athena, has been overcome in the unity of Zeus. Although reconciled at the close in the justice of Zeus, these powers nevertheless retain the potential to break free, exhibiting themselves in that human recklessness which brings in its train disaster and ruin. To


\(^{20}\) Nevertheless, the differences between the justice of Aeschylus, founded on traditional piety, and that of Plato based on a rationally articulated objective good, will in Plato's view prove defining and will necessitate the removal of even the works of Aeschylus from the public life of Kallipolis.
understand that this is the case, however, is not *eo ipso* to bring into question or to subvert the polis ideal, but rather to bring to consciousness a recognition of the difficulties to be addressed in its realization. In this way, Aeschylus' ideal Athens, Plato's ideal city, and indeed Aristotle's unconditionally best constitution of *Politics* Book 3, are analogous. Thus, amid the overt joy and optimism with which the trilogy concludes, the hope and expectation for the attainment of the polis ideal, Aeschylus clearly remains aware of the inherent fault lines that inevitably persist in human community as it alternately reaches towards and falls away from the just political community that is its end.

3. *Antigone*

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, as in the *Eumenides*, justice clashes with justice. There is an important difference between the plays, however, in the way that they resolve this clash. In *Eumenides*, Aeschylus presents a clearly articulated resolution to the dilemma by establishing the relation of the parts to the whole. In *Antigone*, by contrast, the human mind is no longer content to be held within the bounds of a traditional moral order. Whereas Aeschylus has looked at the political community from the divine perspective of the encompassing 'whole', Sophocles focuses on the human dilemma and on the problematic relation between the 'parts' in a world where divine and human knowing are seemingly incommensurate, and man has begun actively to assert himself as the measure of what is. Yet, the polis in *Antigone* is still the extension of the rule of Zeus into the human realm. The gods remain the ultimate objective arbiters of the validity of human actions. Their presence is everywhere felt in the fatal clash of Creon and Antigone, a confrontation in which "knowledge, or the presumption of knowledge, reflects the limits of human power and man's responsibilities to the areas of the unknown, the uncontrollable, the sacred."**22**

At this critical nexus for 'tragic consciousness' the path for man divides and the fate of the polis as a 'whole of parts' is played out. Faced with the inescapable recognition that the objective good that sustained the older order has fallen into a division in which he finds himself caught between public and private good, man has two choices. He can take the path that historically the Greek enlightenment was to take: the road that leads to an ever-multiplying diversity of conflicting human goods, the worth of which individual human subjects and their chosen allies are the judges. Thus we arrive at the end-stage polis portrayed in the works of Euripides and Thucydides towards the close of the fifth century. Alternatively, man can attempt to find a way of addressing the primary sources of tension and polar opposition within the political community, seeking to bridge the tragic divide by restoring an ordered relation of the 'parts' to the objective good of the 'whole,' a new rational understanding which can withstand the fifth-century

21 A *koinònia politôn politeias* in which the citizenry comes together in a common bond of friendship, a (*koinophílês dianoia*) under the justice of Zeus.
22 Charles Segal, "Sophocles' Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the *Antigone,*" *Arion* 3 (1964): 49.
enlightenment challenge to its integrity. This is the path that the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle will take, their ultimate challenge to overcome a division of reason and feeling that has its source within the soul of man.

Human ingenuity, the Chorus in Antigone tells us, possesses a propensity for both nobility and for baseness (365-7). If mankind is successfully to address ethical dilemmas, such as Antigone discloses, humans must seek to know themselves, their own nature and its limitations. Indeed, it is lack of understanding that is the true human tragedy, the quintessential tragic divide that must be bridged. The problem that results in the impasse manifested in Antigone is not intrinsically insoluble. Sophocles himself shows in Ajax, in the clash between the Atreidae and Odysseus over the burial of Ajax, that it is possible to negotiate a resolution to such an issue of contention. Unquestionably, conflicts arise in which two goods can be identified but, due to force of circumstance, one can only be achieved at the expense of the other. However, if the opposition between rival goods in Antigone is indeed truly irremediable in this way, as MacIntyre argues, then it is not susceptible to ethical deliberation in any meaningful sense. No one deliberates about what cannot be otherwise, Aristotle points out. With goods thus simply opposed and incompatible, any choice that is made must be recognized as being arbitrary. By contrast, the tragic power of the Sophoclean ethical dilemma resides in the fact that, as a result of the inability of humans to understand the nature of their motivations, the good becomes irrevocably divided against itself in a way that is potentially avoidable.

Aristotle conceives of the tragic action as a whole from which all that is extraneous and contingent has been removed, one bound by the limits of the necessary and the probable, expressing thereby the choices that certain kinds of people will make. Tragic action, with its deep intuition into the human dilemma and its emotive power, brings into view the end from which it has fallen away, the good life for man in the stable and well-ordered political community. Through the concatenation of the 'necessary and the probable' in the unfolding of the structure of the tragic action there comes about the possibility of an understanding, not only that the Athenian polis ideal is a fragile one but why it is so. Those who witness the tragedy of Thebes enacted before them may thus learn from the suffering that the city endures. If the implications for human coexistence that the tragic conflict lays bare are to be made concrete in the life of the polis, the citizen audience must themselves fully appropriate the import of the action by taking up and

24 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1112a21-30; Aristotle, Poetics 1451a30-35.
25 When I say 'potentially avoidable' I mean in relation to the essential nature of the problem as it presents, which in this case is the burial. It is not of course avoidable in terms of the structure of the individual tragic plot as a particular concretion of this problem. Aristotle's discussion of voluntary action as a precondition for ethical activity is relevant, Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1109b30-1115a3.
26 We are responsible for the kind of person we are and hence the voluntary choices we make, Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1114b21-23).
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resolving within their own souls the dilemma the poet explores.\(^{27}\)

The ideals of open discussion and citizen participation in deliberations, so prized by democratic Athens, are not those on display in Creon's Thebes as Sophocles portrays it in *Antigone*. In the aftermath of civil strife, with the very survival of the polis at stake, Creon is prepared neither to tolerate the voicing of any opinion other than his own nor to repose any trust whatsoever in those with whom he interacts. In their essence, the ideals that Creon sets forth as his political platform are unexceptional and indeed will even come to be seen as providing a paradigm for responsible political action.\(^{28}\) His policies, he states, are founded upon two basic contentions: first that whoever is to guide the polis should never be deterred by fear from following the best counsels (*ta arista bouleumata*) and second, that a friend should never be considered of more importance than one's own country (178-181).\(^{29}\) Rational purpose (*phronēma*) and friendship (*philia*), virtues that Aristotle deems most befitting the concern of the legislator, are what Creon repeatedly professes to hold most dear.\(^{30}\) However, as Creon proceeds to put his avowed principles into effect under the exigency of civic unrest, we observe him, as Podlecki notes, "in the very act of becoming a tyrant."\(^{31}\) What is already emerging in Creon's first speech, along with his insistence on the absolute priority to be accorded to safeguarding the interest of the polis, is the identification of the common good with the particularity of his own deliberative judgement (191).\(^{32}\) The polis is the only good and is the sole embodiment of

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28 Hence, Demosthenes, 19.246-50 chides Aeschines for not following the guidance Creon offers here in *Antigone*.

29 These are very much the sentiments Thucydides will later attribute to Pericles on the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. See, for example, Thucydides, 2.21.2-2.22.2 and 2.60.1-7, in particular 2.60.2.


32 Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), remarks the predominance of 'I' in Cleon's address
the concept of friendship. Anyone who is to be a friend of the polis must identify completely with Creon as its rational voice, and hence with his edicts. Aware that his decree forbidding the burial of Polyneices is unpopular in certain quarters (289-292) and plagued by constant fear of duplicity and intrigue, Creon is racked by suspicion and mistrusts everyone he encounters. Hence he debar from the decision-making process even those whose loyalty to the state has long been established. The only 'best counsels' (179) to which Creon will now defer are his own.

Creon's equation of the good of the polis, which is to say its safety, with an unquestioned obedience to his dictates as leader is early evident in his description of the proper disposition for the citizenry as submitting rightly to the yoke of his domination (291-292). Whoever is placed in power by the polis must have obedience to even his least command, irrespective of whether he is in the right or not (666-667). No greater evil can affect society than civic disobedience, Creon declares, for, it is through such anarchia that cities are destroyed. The distinction between peitharchia, unquestioned obedience to his dictates as ruler, and anarchia, the breakdown of social order, is for Creon an absolute one, admitting of no mediation (663-676). Creon's sentiments are echoed by the demagogue Cleon, who argues, in Thucydides' account, that the worst political policy is to pass legal measures but not abide by them. A polis having inferior laws that it keeps unchanged is stronger than one having good laws that lack authority.

Aristotle, in considering the nature of political association, looks first to the particular: the good of the individual citizen as he perfects himself in virtue through friendship and justice in relation to family and fellow citizens. Only while such friendship flourishes, he argues, is the just polis is possible. By contrast, political reasoning for Creon begins with the universal, the idea of the polis as a contentless abstraction that is prior to what he, as ruler, determines to be its good: that political arrangement which will preserve it as a stable entity. That the polis is for Creon a purely rational and undifferentiated community is reflected in the emptiness of his abstract formal reasoning in which everything can be absorbed into a rigid relationship of logical

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33 Not just Antigone, but also the Chorus 280-284, Guard 310-312, Ismene 493-494, Haemon 746, Teiresias 1055.
34 The past loyalty of the Chorus of Theban elders (165-169) and the seer Tereisias (995) is acknowledged by Creon.
35 By contrast, it is inferred in his opening speech that Creon has in the past consulted the Theban Elders.
36 Thucydides, 3.37.3.
37 Aristotle makes clear at the outset of a lengthy discussion of friendship, in the Ethics, that the polis is conceived ideally as a community of friends whose common end is the promotion of concord (homonooia), Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1167b2-3. Friendship (philia) is the innate motive force that brings people together by choice in a common concern for the good of the whole achieved in the life of noble actions, Aristotle Politics 1280b17-38.
contrariety, and ultimately reduced to the simple opposition of good and bad.\(^{38}\) In effect, Creon differentiates the existence of the polis from its essential nature: life (\textit{to zên}) from the life in which humankind best flourishes (\textit{to eu zên}). Creon and Aristotle are in agreement on the importance of friendship in holding cities together. However, whereas Creon assimilates friendship directly to justice conceived as unquestioned obedience to the imposed rational order, Aristotle argues that the kinds of friendship that characterize the political community arise from mutual agreement among citizens as to what is just and advantageous for the polis.\(^{39}\)

It is not only the order of the polis that Creon assimilates to his own rational purpose but also the cosmic order of Zeus. Zeus the all-seeing is his proclaimed witness, confirming him in the actions he undertakes on behalf of the polis (184). Secure in the superiority of his own intellectual powers, Creon is blind to signs of disparity between his own knowing and that of Zeus, the overt expressions of his hubris in relation to the gods punctuating disclosure of the full course of his undoing (278-279,1039-1044). Sophocles provides Creon full reign to exhibit the extent to which his blinkered understanding falls short of his own expectations for himself. In successive encounters with Antigone, with Haemon, his son, and finally with the blind seer Teiresias, Creon rejects, in turn, the universal unwritten laws of feeling which bind together the human race (446-525), the role of persuasive deliberation in decision-making for the common good of the polis (635-723), and finally the inspired utterances by which the will of Zeus is conveyed to man (988-1114). The elements constitutive of Athena's polis ideal as a composite whole in \textit{Eumenides} are in Creon's Thebes detached and opposed under the stress of adversity.

The absolute distinction Creon makes between his nephews, Eteocles and Polynices, in terms of 'friend' or 'enemy' to the polis, is challenged by Antigone with an equally unequivocal assertion of the unassailable demands of kinship bonds. Creon's edict forbidding the burial of Polynices, she insists, is of merely mortal contrivance and runs counter to 'the unwritten and undying laws of the gods'.\(^{40}\) Neither Zeus nor that Justice (\textit{Dikê}) which belongs with the gods below has laid down such laws for mankind (450-455).\(^{41}\) On the authority of these ancient religious sanctions, Antigone founds her claim to have an inalienable duty to bury her own kin (\textit{philos}), her beloved brother, in defiance of Creon. For Creon, by contrast, the universal unwritten laws of the gods to which Antigone defers have no standing in comparison to his own determination of what the city is to hold due to a friend as opposed to an enemy. Whereas it is possible for an


\(^{39}\) Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} 1160a8-14, 1167b2-16.

\(^{40}\) On the unwritten laws, see e.g. Thucydides, 2.37.3; Lysias, 6.10-11; Xenophon, \textit{Memorabilia} 4.4.19-20 and Griffith, 201.

astute political friend (philos) of the stature of Odysseus to overcome the opposition of Agamemnon to the burial of Ajax, even if in so doing he fails to convince him that he is wrong, what Creon sees before him is no philos of standing, but rather an irrational hubristic female whose defiance in transgressing his edict is a threat to a rational order identified with male dominance, and who must therefore be broken like a slave. The point Antigone makes is essentially that which Aethra, mother of Theseus, makes in Euripides' Suppliant Women and that Odysseus establishes in Sophocles' Ajax when he tells Agamemnon that it is not Ajax but the laws of the gods (nomoi) he will be destroying in forbidding the burial. Like Creon, Agamemnon has insisted that the good man must be obedient to human authority and that an enemy remains an enemy, alive or dead.

The overt distinction that emerges in Antigone, between the apparently conflicting obligations of the universal unwritten laws of nature and human reason asserted in positive law, is symptomatic of an incipient breakdown of an older ethical order for which 'all human laws are sustained by the one divine law' and human freedom can be found, as at the end of Eumenides, objectively realized in a universal necessity which is one with the divine rule of Zeus. In Antigone, the human sphere of the polis has begun to assert for itself a self-determinate existence distinct from the divine as man brings physis under the dominion of human nomos. Guthrie, commenting on the changing understanding of the intellectual basis of nomos during the fifth century, observes that "so long as religion remained an effective force, the devising mind could be the god's, and so there could be nomoi that were applicable to all mankind." This quest, central to Antigone, for an understanding of the nature of those universal norms considered most constitutive of the human good in praxis, leads Aristotle in his turn to a consideration of the distinction between natural and political justice, and back to the specific question Sophocles raises. There are two kinds of law, Aristotle observes. On the one hand, there are the particular laws, both written and unwritten, which are held by each community, laws which are in themselves conventional; relative to the time, place, and circumstance of their execution. On the other hand, there are the overriding universal laws based on nature that humans everywhere divine in some way. This is what Antigone infers, Aristotle concludes, when she argues that it is by nature just to bury her brother Polynoeices, in contravention of a specific decree of Creon, arguing that 'not today or yesterday, but eternally this [natural justice] lives and no one knows from whence it appeared.'

Ideally, what is just by nature should hold the same power everywhere whether it

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43 Euripides, The Suppliant Women 19; Sophocles, Ajax 1343-1344.
44 Sophocles, Ajax 1352, 1372-1373.
45 Heraclitus fragment 114 (Diels-Kranz 22B114).
appears to do so or not, Aristotle argues. However, while there is a general recognition that there are natural laws concerning just and unjust action that are of widespread applicability, they are not necessarily without exception. Rather, these laws hold with such a high degree of probability that to all intents and purposes they can be said to be true.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} 1134b19-20, 1134b28-32.} This being the case, it has to be recognized that, since no law operative in the natural world of motion and change can be said to be completely without exception, at every level the possibility for division and conflict exists. Hence, while the gods will eventually affirm the burial of Polyneices to be in accord with both natural and polis justice, this does not exclude \textit{eo ipso} the possibility that in other circumstances the matter of burial might be differently construed.\footnote{Cf. the climax of \textit{Oedipus Coloneus}. Here, in the presence of Theseus' calm and measured authority, coupled to his respect for religious sanctions, a healing can take place between reason and feeling which is not possible in Creon's Thebes. See on this, Andreas Markantonatos, \textit{Tragic Narrative}, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 163-165 and Segal (1981) 400-403.} At the same time it must also be allowed, Aristotle argues, that those posited laws which are found to vary widely from state to state are not simply arbitrary, but find their proper origin within the context of an ideal polity, however inadequately this may be realized in practice.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} 1135a3-7.} Underlying all the manifest diversity there is an order to the natural world, albeit only incompletely understood by man. For Sophocles, as for Aristotle, and indeed all of the classical tradition, the polis is an extension into the natural of a divine and unchanging order.\footnote{See Homer, \textit{Iliad} 16.431-458.} Thus the workings of a universal natural justice and the particular laws which organize and safeguard the polis are not to be considered as standing \textit{a priori} apart and opposed but rather to be held in a determinate relation to one another. Nor can the confrontation between Antigone and Creon be said to be in principle beyond the reach of human resolution; the tragedy lies in their inability, being the \textit{kind} of people they are, to bridge the gap that separates them by means of effective communication.

As events disclose, Antigone is undoubtedly in the right to pursue actively the provision of burial rites for her brother in accord with her understanding of the 'unwritten and unfailing laws of the gods' (454-455). However, while she is able to intuit the end, the burial of Polyneices, as the good to be sought in practice, and in so doing presents a noble and pious figure, Antigone is nevertheless unable to articulate within the social context of the polis, the realm of language, an appropriate means to achieve this end.\footnote{Persuasion (Holy \textit{Peithō}), successfully employed elsewhere by Athena, Odysseus and Theseus, is not attempted by Antigone. This is key to her tragic status. It remains the case, even when it is considered that whatever mediation she might have sought would surely have been unsuccessful against Creon. See Charles Segal, \textit{Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society}, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995), 120.} The undoubted 'rightness' of her cause notwithstanding, in the absoluteness of her open and public revolt against the decree of the ruler, she not only backs Creon into a corner from which his pride will allow him no escape, but in the manner of her actions she both
isolates herself irrevocably from her living family and further destabilizes her own polis, the scene so recently of disastrous infighting in the royal household. In the final analysis, despite that fact that they are reduced to tears by the thought of her fate, the Elders of Thebes offer little support for Antigone's actions. It is her independent self-will (*autognōtos orga*, 875) that is her downfall, the Chorus concludes; she goes to her death of her own free choice, a law unto herself (*autonomos*, 821). A self-proclaimed champion of the cause of justice, Antigone, in the eyes of these elders of Thebes, has progressed to the furthest extremes of boldness (*eschaton thrasous*) only to stumble against the high pedestal of the goddess, *Dikē*, Justice herself (854-856).

In the confrontation of Antigone and Creon a parallel can readily be drawn to the stand-off between the Erinyes and Apollo, their clash now alive at the human level.55 The Erinyes, as the disruptive force that emerges when the natural order within the polis is disturbed, find on this analogy their Sophoclean counterpart in Antigone. With the enforcement of Creon's edict, the honours due to the chthonian divinities are overturned. The consequent disturbance of the political order causes the opposed claims of reason and feeling, which in the *Oresteia* are resolved in the concrete unity attained in Athena's polis, to become actual again. The Dread Goddesses, unleashed once more as the implacable Erinys embodied in the fierce human will of Antigone, seek to reassert their allotted due, in the face of reason abstractly imposed. Viewed in this light, Antigone's relation to her sister Ismene takes on an added significance; their actions are related not just in an external and superficial way to show Ismene as a foil for Antigone, but as manifest expressions of the natural order in its determinate bipolarity.56 In the civilized world of the well-ordered polis that is Athens at the conclusion of *Eumenides*, natural difference is contained peacefully within the whole. However, as Athena makes very clear, this state of concord in which the Eumenides are active holds only as long as the chthonic goddesses are accorded their proper due; should this fail to be the case, the dreaded Erinyes will once more exact a retribution (*Eum*. 990-995).

54 In her intractable single-mindedness lies both the source of Antigone's heroic greatness and her error (*hamartia*). The Chorus are willing to agree with Antigone that there is a kind of piety in the reverence she shows towards her brother's obsequies. However, authority, for the one whose concern it is, can in no way be transgressed (872-4). On the surface, the Chorus is taken to be speaking here of the power of Creon, who is present. However, in the larger religious sphere it is the power of Zeus, in whom the ultimate authority resides, that is inferred. No human transgression can withstand Zeus (604-14). In the final analysis, it is not Antigone but Zeus who reveals to Creon the error of his ways.


56 As *Semnai Theai*, the dread goddesses of the end of *Eumenides* encompass a bipolar potency, as Erinys/Eumenides; one that is made actual in the rational order of the polis (*Aeschylus Eumenides*. 930-931). The existence of an analogous relationship between Electra and Chrysothemis in Sophocles' *Electra* argues that the poet did attach a particular importance to this expression of a polarity in the natural.
In conceiving the good of the polis solely in terms of his own abstract rational determinations, Creon has attempted to divorce himself from what it is to be truly human: a rational animal bound necessarily to physis, the sphere of the natural and particular. At the last, he is brought to an understanding both of the limitations of human reason in relation to the cosmic order of the divine and of the poverty of a human life that is bereft of kin bonds. Creon's expressed desire to achieve the good for the city is doubtlessly sincere, and it is evident that he has in the past been amenable to accepting wise counsel (992-994). Nevertheless, Sophocles has clearly shown in his portrayal of Creon that the ideals which hold together the polis as a community of free living citizens may become subverted under the stress of civic life, and that the institution of the polis in its fight for survival can take on a life of its own as an abstract formal entity divorced from the rationale that justifies and sustains it. The polis is a delicate organism thriving only within certain limits and any substantial change to its environment, including the trend to military imperialism to which Sophocles was a witness, threatens it with extinction.

4. Bacchae

Euripides' Bacchae, written in the final years of the brutalizing Peloponnesian War, looks out on a polis world in disarray, beset both from within and without. Against the background of this intellectual and socio-political milieu, as "instinctive forces and primitive drives surge up through the legal and political structure," the conflicts of Bacchae take shape. The lessons to be learned from the actions of Creon pass unheeded as the intellectual enlightenment gathers strength in Athens during the second half of the fifth century. Polis justice, no longer conceived in terms of ancient pieties universally operative, can readily be perceived in terms of a will to power, whether by individual, faction, or state. Hence necessity and freedom come to coincide not as before in the universal order of Zeus, but in the individual subject and, 'writ large', in the will of the assembled masses as a 'tyranny of the majority'. So it is that the sophist Antiphon can declare that whereas laws are imposed, nature is of necessity. Since much of what is just by law is hostile to nature, wherever possible one must follow the dictates of human nature rather than those of law. This is the case both for the individual and for the polis.

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57 It is only once a ruler has been put to the test in demanding circumstance that the full measure of what lies latent in his character will be revealed, as indeed Creon himself has confidently asserted, Sophocles, Antigone. 175-177.
59 Thus, Protagoras is said to argue that whatever each polis believes to be just and noble is for it as long as it considers it so, Plato, Theatetus 167c4-6. Cf. Plato, Protagoras 323a5-328d2d. On the historical Protagoras, see Anthony J. Podlecki, Perikles and his Circle, (London: Routledge, 1998), 93-99.
60 Antiphon, fragment 44 (Diels-Kranz 87B44). See The Fragments of Antiphon the
as a whole: 'the strong do what they can, the weak acquiesce' in what they must. As a result, the political ideal, understood as a 'whole' which is comprehensive of its parts, effectively ceases to exist and what remains in its stead is nothing other than a 'heap', a mere aggregate of parts to be shaped and bent to the will of the stronger. Thus, some fifty years after the production of Eumenides, an Athenian audience, in a very different political clime, watches as once again a powerful divine dyadic force governing the sphere of the natural and irrational sets itself in opposition to an arbitrary dictate of the established rational order, and stakes its claim to a place within the city. With the Athenian democratic polis approaching its own nadir, the citizens see before them how the mythical polis of Thebes, unable to hold within one grasp the conflicting claims of reason and feeling, is torn apart.

The dramatic action of Bacchae inarguably has at its centre the confrontation between Pentheus and Dionysus that culminates in the eventual punishment of a persistent theomachos (a god-fighter, 45). Yet, as the action unfolds, we must always keep in mind that this is more than a conflict between the god and a hubristic individual (39-40, 47-52). Ranged behind the opposed principals, their fate dependent upon the outcome of the contest, are their respective constituencies, the citizenry of Thebes and the Bacchants, in what can be considered the larger clash between culture and nature, city and mountain. As the lawful human ruler of Thebes, Pentheus claims the sole right to pronounce on behalf of the citizens what will provide and maintain the polis order. However, like Creon in Antigone, he equates the defective wisdom of his own individual human reasoning with the good of the polis as a whole. Those who might be expected to advise Pentheus best in reaching a decision on the good for the polis, Teiresias and Cadmus, while they urge the admittance of the god into the city, present a somewhat less than noble picture, a marked contrast to the paradigm offered by Teiresias and Haemon in their efforts to win over Creon in Antigone. Deaf and blind in his solipsism, Pentheus vainly opposes himself to Dionysus and attempts to shut fast the gates of Thebes against the incursion of the irrational. In the ensuing failure of human wisdom to successfully transcend and comprehend the endless cycle of nature, myth offers a telling critique of Realpolitik.


61 Thucydides, 5.891.
The emotional and physical dismemberment that Dionysus instigates as the fate of Pentheus is in its turn reflective of the spiritual dismemberment that has already invaded and taken hold in the Athenian polis. At the very heart of the tragedy of Bacchae lies the question of the nature of wisdom (sophia). The wisdom once recognised as the prerogative of Zeus has been claimed by men. Fallen to earth and shattered, its broken shards are now ends in themselves, pieces of wisdom gathered up by individuals and factions to reflect and serve their own perceived needs. In the sphere of the divine, the eclipse of Zeus' justice exposes to full view a darker force resident in his offspring Dionysus, purveyor of an underlying natural, instinctual universal necessity (656), at once most terrible and yet, it is important to note, also most gentle to mankind (861). The conception of a dyadic potency for benefit or harm, pleasure or pain, which has been encountered in the Eumenides-Erinyes of Aeschylus, and implied also in the relation of Ismene and Antigone in Sophocles, reappears in a particularly potent form in Bacchae, emerging in a tragic world which is without an Athena, a Theseus, or a Pericles standing ready to harness the powers of Dionysus and draw them within the civilizing bounds of polis cult.  

Understanding Dionysus as a dynamic synthesis of polar opposites is generally considered to be the best way of dealing with his ambiguity. Whether he is envisaged as a traditional god, a contradictory flux, or an elemental principle, Dionysus wields power over a world of contrariety, a world which is ultimately resolved into a primary overarching opposition of life and death: 'Hades and Dionysus are the same', declares Heraclitus. In Bacchae, Dionysus is seen to be at once both a new god whom the polis must civilize and accommodate, and at the same time an old god reborn, escaped from the bonds of a bankrupt morality that can no longer contain him. Euripides inverts and confutes mythical and historical understandings in such a way that what belongs properly to maenadic myth appears in the play to be actual ritual practice, while the ethical norms that belong historically to the polis world take on something of a mythic tenor, particularly in the utterances of the Chorus.

66 Heraclitus, fragment 15 (Diehls-Kranz 22B15); Otto, 121.  
67 On the interplay of mythic and cultic elements in Bacchae, see Albert Henrichs, "Between Country and City: Cultic Dimensions of Dionysus in Athens and Attica," in Cabinet of the Muses, eds. Mark Griffith and D. J. Mastronarde, (Atlanta: Scholars
As the dramatic action commences, Dionysus has made the initial move towards asserting his primacy, stinging with manic frenzy the women of Thebes so that they have abandoned their households and the civilized world of the polis to dwell upon the mountain in communion with nature. On stage, the Chorus of Asian followers of Dionysus extol the blessings they enjoy in that communion of soul which is the thiasos, the maenad band engaged in the rites of its holy purifications (64-166). Striking a very different note, the entrance of the two elderly Theban converts, Teiresias, the venerable prophet of Apollo, and Cadmus, the celebrated founder of the polis of Thebes, incongruously garbed as maenads, complete with fawn-skins, thysoi and ivy crowns, could hardly in the context present more of a shock. If the leaders of the polis and its institutions, the upholders of the physical and spiritual integrity of the polis, are thus portrayed and if they do indeed cut a perversely comic figure to the watching audience, this is because what they represent, the ethical order of the polis, is itself now a parody of the noble ideals it once embodied.

Both Theban elders assert that the acceptance of Dionysus conforms to the traditional time-honoured practices for which they are the spokesmen. No argument can cast down these ancestral customs possessed from time immemorial, declares Teresias (200-203). Cadmus, in turn, will urge Pentheus similarly not to dwell outside the bounds of the customary practices (331). The appeal to time-honoured customs, not to be overthrown by any human wisdom, so reminiscent of Antigone, has often been remarked as paradoxical in view of the fact that Dionysus is a new god. However, the anachronisms can be ameliorated, if not completely reconciled, if we see, looming behind the mythical new god and his historical fifth-century congeners, a conscious historical reflection on an older tradition now ‘spent’ from out of which the god has ‘erupted’. Viewed from this perspective, the old men, Teiresias and Cadmus, as they confront the problem of bringing the wild ‘physis-god’ within the bounds of civilization, paradoxically invoke the audience’s memories of Dionysus domiciled within the polis as the god of wine and festivity. Yet even as they echo the beliefs of the older tradition, it is soon
evident that Cadmus and Teiresias are very much men of the late fifth century. Performance of cult is for Cadmus and Teiresias a rational not an emotional enterprise: an expression of self-interest. It is not through divine possession but by mutual agreement (175) that Teiresias and Cadmus have come to a decision to follow Dionysus.

The primary concern for Cadmus (181-183) is the honour that attaches to having a god in the family, something that he shows himself patently eager to exploit (330-342). Even if Dionysus is not a god, they should consider him to be, for they will be telling a lie for the sake of a good cause (334), bringing honour to their whole clan. Clearly, whereas the forms of the older religious piety remain for Cadmus, they no longer carry with them the untroubled convictions they once commanded, nor are they to be divorced from utilitarian considerations of personal benefit, the furthering of individual and family interests. Teiresias, in turn, reveals himself to be of quite a different ilk than the august and fearsome seer whose divinely inspired auguries held sway in Sophocles' Thebes. It is not prophecy that moves him to speak as he does but the facts, as he assures Pentheus (368-369). In the age of enlightenment, a seer needs new skills to maintain his influence, and it is quickly evident that Teiresias no longer looks to divine inspiration as the source of his power but turns instead to rational explication, bringing theology firmly within the bounds of pre-Socratic physics. Myths must be recognized as allegorical, their true meaning revealed to be in accord with accepted scientific belief, their more bizarre features explained away by rhetorical skill. Teiresias' allegorical rationalization of Dionysus parallels that of the fifth-century sophist Prodicus in arguing that the god is to be identified with a primary principle of human nurture (274-285).

Like Cadmus, Teiresias impresses upon Pentheus the need to recognize Dionysus' claims to be a god who must be accommodated within the bounds of civilized life. His exhortation of Pentheus (266-327) is replete with the rhetorical cleverness characteristic of the age owing more to the power of sophistic eristic than to the threat of Zeus' thunderbolts. Confident in his own wisdom, Teiresias remains oblivious to the fact that

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72 On the significance of Teiresias' speech, see Segal (1982) 293.
73 The two primary things (duo ta prōta) for men (274-275), the gods, Dionysus and Demeter, are identified their gifts, wine (284-285) and bread (275-277). The underlying contrariety is that of fundamental elements of Ionian physics, the wet and the dry, which the sophist interprets in terms of utility. On this, see Dodds, 104-105. See also Paul Roth, "Teiresias as Mantis and Intellectual in Euripides' Bacchae," Transactions of the American Philological Association 114: (1984), 61. Conacher (1998, 22-24) usefully compares the relevant passages in Bacchae and Prodicus.
74 Prodicus is reported to have said that the ancients considered everything beneficial to life to be gods and it was for this reason he called Demeter bread, Dionysus, wine (Diehls-Kranz 84B5).
75 For a detailed analysis of elements of the new intellectualism in Teiresias' speech, see Roth. Roth describes Teiresias as a 'theological sophist' (59) and identifies historical parallels among fifth century seers. In particular, he compares Teiresias to the portrayal of the Athenian seer Euthyphro in the Platonic dialogues Euthyphro and Cratylus. Dodds notes that Teiresias gives every appearance of being a 5th century intellectual, "one who
in his rhetorical exposition he actively gives the lie to his earlier pronouncement that "we do not employ cleverness with respect to the gods" (200). Yet, even as Teiresias extols the benefits the god, conceived now in practical terms as a 'culture hero' who brings to man with his gift of wine, the older concept of the civilized polis-god is in spirit invoked.  

All this stands in marked contrast to the new and wild god that has actually arrived at the gates of Thebes, and indeed to the anachronistic figure Teiresias himself cuts in his maenad garb, blissfully unaware of his own perversion of polis ritual. Just as Cadmus very evidently promotes the concerns of his own family, Teiresias, it can be reasonably concluded, seeks actively to further the interests of what Dodds terms "the ecclesiastical politics of Delphi." Neither for Teiresias nor for Cadmus does the good of the polis as a whole motivate their concerns in urging the god be admitted within the bounds of civilized society.

The picture that Teiresias and Cadmus present in their expected role as senior policy advisors to Thebes, when considered in conjunction with what we later learn about Pentheus as the city's self-willed autocratic ruler, illustrates very effectively how the polis of Eumenides has fallen apart. The individual no longer sees his freedom as inseparable from the objective good of the polis in accord with traditional divinely mandated laws. The religion of Delphi, the order of the polity, and the claims of the family, all set themselves up in Bacchae as distinct rational enclaves, spheres of influence which, no longer in ordered relationship to one another and to an overarching principle in Olympian Zeus, are effectually ends in themselves, competing communities in search of the attainment of a particular good conceived in the light of their own self-promulgating wisdom. The question then as now is 'Whose Justice? Which Rationality'? Ranged against these foci of rational interest is found the powerful irrational force of the Bacchic community of Dionysus, echoing through the Chorus the collective voice of a late fifth century populace for whom there is another wisdom, a nomos which is coincident with a universal enduring physis.

In a series of direct encounters, Dionysus attempts to open the eyes of Pentheus to the distinction between the pragmatic determinations emerging from within the narrow confines of his blinkered human reasoning and a larger encompassing divine wisdom that transcends these mortal bounds. It is quickly evident, however, that meaningful communication between Pentheus and Dionysus, purveyors of contrasting wisdoms, is impossible (460-88). Pentheus gives every indication of being educated in the methods


76 For Dionysus as a 'culture hero' see Roth, 61.
77 Dodds, 91.
78 Pentheus has been brought up in the belief that Zeus destroyed Semele and her offspring Dionysus for impiety (242-245). In effect, Pentheus' mother and her sisters deny the mythos of Dionysus' birth to Semele and replace it with a logos (26-31). For Pentheus, the Lydian Stranger must de facto be an impostor. To this premise he holds fast.
of demythologizing, rational explication current in the late fifth century, attempting to define his opponent by categorizing him in terms of determinate empirical parameters that tie him down once and for all (460-490). He remains oblivious to the universal truths contained in the god's utterances, convinced that the Stranger is simply being evasive (475) and manipulative (479). Impervious to Dionysus' repeated charges of ignorance (480, 490) and impiety (476, 490, 502), Pentheus dismisses him as a brash manipulator of words (489). "You do not know what your life is, nor what you do, nor what you are," Dionysus charges (505). To which Pentheus replies, revealing only too clearly the nature of the blindness that binds him fast, "I'm Pentheus, son of Agave. My father was Echion" (506).

A powerful creator of images destined to sway the human mind, Dionysus dons now the mantle of master sophist in an attempt to shake Pentheus' obduracy. Against the background of earth tremors that threaten to topple the palace (605) and fire leaping up from the tomb of Semele, Pentheus endeavours in vain to make the appearances of reality the god conjures up to challenge him, conform to the simple empirical physical laws upon which he relies (624-631). What cannot be subjected to a logical explanation, consonant with sensory experience, has no reality for Pentheus. His inexplicable silences, in the aftermath of the wondrous events he witnesses, are a telling indictment on

79 In the latter part of the fifth century, sophists take over responsibility for the education of young Athenians seeking to attain positions of influence in the city. In place of the Old Education, founded on customary religious beliefs (mythos), they offer the New Education, grounded in rational, natural explanation (logos). Aristophanes' Clouds insightfully exposes the implications of this shift, in the contest between Just and Unjust Logos. The depiction of the youth Hippocrates in conversation with Socrates, in Plato's Protagoras (311b-314c), is also illustrative of the dangers involved when the young uncritically absorb the arguments and methodologies of the sophists. Pentheus too shows evidence that he is a product of the New Education; he is clever at speaking (cf. 395) but does not know what he is saying, as Dionysus points out (505).

80 Like Dionysus, the sophist wields a power that allows him to bring together in images being and non-being so that everything is 'true'. Jean-Pierre Vernant compares the powers Dionysus displays in Bacchae to those extolled by Gorgias in Encomium on Helen: powers that "so bewitch the mind that no human being can resist them," The Masked Dionysus of Euripides' Bacchae," in Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece, eds. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, trans. Janet Lloyd, New York: Zone Books, 1988), 403.


82 Whereas the Chorus react with awe and fear to Dionysus' miracles (600-603), Pentheus sends for water to put out the fire (624-626). Despite all that he hears and sees, Pentheus remains convinced he will be able to recapture the god by locking the city gates on him (653).
the nature and limitations of his wisdom. City and mountain will stand in opposition to the end. For, while his power over the irrational allows Dionysus to effect the destruction of Pentheus, he cannot accomplish his own appointed end, the incorporation of his Bacchic rites within the polis, without the active cooperation of human wisdom.

Fixated in his narrowly pragmatic and rigidly authoritarian stance, Pentheus seals his tragic fate. Only when face-to-face with the inevitability of his appalling death does his mind clear so that in, the end, he comes to recognize his errors and know, too late, that Dionysus is the son of Zeus, a god whose rites must be observed.

The wisdom respectively espoused by Pentheus and Dionysus remains locked in conflict throughout the play. Yet, while they appear completely opposed, Pentheus and Dionysus are held nevertheless in a determinate relation to one another. Thus, Pentheus, the self-declared voice of reason, is from the outset shown as being in a state of both mental and physical agitation, whereas his divine opponent, the god of the irrational and ecstatic, maintains an air of calm, arguing that the part of the wise man is to exercise self-control. Half a century earlier Aeschylus portrayed, in the confrontation of Apollo and the Erinyes, a very similar opposition. In Eumenides, however, it was possible to conceive of a resolution, a higher divine unity that could draw these principles into relation thus avoiding the extremes of anarchy or despotism that must result from the overwhelming of one side by the other. Like the Erinyes, Dionysus, as his prologue and his historical incorporation into the polis bear witness, is ultimately capable of accommodating his irrational ecstatic religion to the rational polis order. Clearly absent from Euripides' Thebes, however, are the wisdom and persuasive leadership skills so eminently displayed by Aeschylus' Athena. Indeed it is possible to argue that in a very real sense the polis conceived as a 'whole' has already ceased to exist in the Thebes of Bacchae even before Dionysus wreaks his vengeance. The polity, as the laws embodied in the rational will of Pentheus, rigidly administers a sterile, lifeless order in which the desiring and feeling side of the soul, the wellspring of friendship and community, is subject to harsh repression, and its traditional foci of family and religion, portrayed in the pictures of Cadmus and Teiresias, are revealed as expressions of rationally calculated self-interest. It is indicative of the ongoing degradation of polis ethos that there is a notable absence of any communal collective voice in Bacchae.

The escaped women of Thebes in their maenad bands form a purely natural association, a communion (koinōnia) in which nomos is identified immediately with physis and all distinctions which demarcate human and beast have been negated. The

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83 Pentheus remains silent on the earthquake damage happening around him (587-589) and on the phantoms with which Dionysus has him contend (616-631). Gregory, (1985) discusses the significance of Pentheus' silences.
84 Dionysus can sting Pentheus to madness but significantly cannot imbue him with the wisdom he lacks.
86 See Rainer Friedrich, 'Medea Apolis: On Euripides' Dramatization of the Crisis of the
first messenger speech (664-774) dramatically evokes for its hearers the full dyadic range of the Dionysiac experience, as it moves from the peace and sheer bucolic bliss of the undisturbed bacchants to the raw violence and savagery they reveal as they are hunted down. The contrary extremes of the delights and horrors portrayed, ranging from life at its most pleasurable (704-11) to death and destruction at their most painful (734-68), are fully indicative of the unlimited nature of the Dionysiac. Like the animals among whom they live on the mountain and with whom they identify (699-700), the Theban maenads, under the power of Dionysus, respond collectively and instinctually to external stimuli; a herd (1022) they feel and act as one (75-76). The complete loss of self they exhibit is a negation of all individuality. But human beings are more than herd animals, Aristotle argues; by his very nature, man is a political being uniquely fitted for life in the political association. Like the beasts, humans are capable of experiencing and transmitting vocally to one another pleasurable and painful impulses. In addition, however, humans through the power of language, can communicate an articulated conception of good and bad, of what is just and unjust, which allows them to assume an ethical responsibility for their actions. Yet, while law and justice are necessary to human association, they are not of themselves sufficient to sustain the appropriate life for a human (eu zên) in the absence of the emotional bonds that draw the citizens together in a spirit of common understanding (koinophilês dianoia); both sides must find their due place in the polis to militate against the internal divisions that lead to civil strife.

By contrast with the women of Thebes who have gone from polis to mountain, abrogating in the transition their distinctly human ethical nature, the Chorus of Lydian Bacchants have made the reverse journey, transposed from the wildness of the Phrygian mountains to the civilized world of Greece with its rationally ordered polities. Like their Theban counterparts on the mountain, the Lydian Bacchants express the full range of the Dionysiac experience, tracing through their choral lyrics, a gradual but inexorable movement from the peaceful and harmonious aspects of Dionysianism as a communal

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Contrary to what Pentheus believes, however, the messenger is quite clear that the Theban maenads behave modestly, being neither drunk nor licentious (685-8). Indeed, it could be argued that to break apart from the unity of the female collective, to move into division by forming individual liaisons with males, is to destroy the emotional solidarity which is its cohesive power, and take that necessary first step towards the natural reforming of the rational and ethical bonds of family and polis they have left behind. Winnington-Ingram notes the homogeneity of the Bacchants (97).

Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a2-8. Indeed, an impulse to political association is present by nature in everyone, Aristotle argues, *Politics* 1253a29-30.

Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a9-18. It is just this kind of association that makes a household and a polis.
religious experience to culminate in a violent, vengeful ferocity.\(^91\) In the course of this movement there is re-enacted an anatomy of the fifth century intellectual revolution. Hence references to traditional practices (71) and to the dances of the biennial festival (132-133) lend, from the outset, very much the air of a cult already established in the polis, as opposed to the initial approaches of the votaries of a new god.\(^92\) Drawn within the bounds of the polis for the first time, the Lydian Bacchants are nevertheless able to awaken in themselves an understanding of the harmonious life of order, limit and moderation that belongs not to maenadism but to the civilized rationally ordered world of a polis at peace. This is paradoxical indeed in wild, exotic barbarian women. Dionysus is invoked, not as the wild untamed nature god of the mythical past in which the drama is set, but in terms of the civilized historical polis god of wine and the patron of the festival that he will subsequently become (375-385, 417-424).\(^93\) Equally unexpected in these adherents of a god of excess and dissolution of social bonds is their exhortation of traditional tenets of Greek moral order.\(^94\) What holds together households, they declare, is the calm life and good sense (390). Dionysus, son of Zeus, loves Peace and hates excessive men (429). The cleverness exhibited by Pentheus is not wisdom but mindless folly (387) as far as the Lydian Chorus is concerned, exceeding as it does the proper bounds of mortal thoughts (395-396). The wisdom the Chorus acknowledges is that simple customary wisdom that the mass of ordinary people (\textit{to plēthos...to phauloteron}) espouse (430-431).

For a sense of how these apparently incongruous utterances of the Lydian Chorus might be understood in terms of the political ambience of the late fifth century, the language employed in Thucydides' Mytilenean debate, offers an interesting insight. In words very similar to those of the Chorus in \textit{Bacchae}, the demagogue Cleon exhorts the Athenian assembly (\textit{to plēthos}) to take a stand. In most cases, the more ordinary men (\textit{phauloteroi}), rather than those who are more intelligent, are better at managing cities, he declares. Ignorance combined with self-restraint is more beneficial to the polis than cleverness accompanied by lack of discipline. In their efforts to outdo one another, clever individuals, who wish to appear wiser than the laws, are more likely to bring about the downfall of the polis.\(^95\) Although he urges moderation and respect for the laws, the laws Cleon invokes are those of feeling, of \textit{physis}, and not those articulated through rational consideration of commonly held polis wisdom. The Athenian assembly must be true to their unmediated, instinctual, emotional response in striking back at the Mytilenians, Cleon insists.\(^96\) When departing from this course, the assembly can be charged with exercising a lack of self-control. While mouthing adherence to traditional political virtues of wisdom, justice and moderation, both Cleon and the Chorus of \textit{Bacchae} invert polis morality, achieving a 'transvaluation of values' that brings with it a

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\(^{91}\) Conacher (1967) 69.
\(^{92}\) Dodds, 71. See also Conacher (1967) 60.
\(^{94}\) Arthur observes that enjoinders to moderation and limit are a constant refrain (147-8).
\(^{95}\) Thucydides, 3.37.3-5.
\(^{96}\) Thucydides, 3.40.7.
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return to the tribal ethic of revenge justice.\textsuperscript{97}

Hence we see in Bacchae how in the course of the action the overt picture that the Chorus has initially presented of a civilized polis cult of Dionysus, in tune with the traditionally established moral order, is rapidly disturbed by Pentheus’ unremitting hostility, to reveal a more primitive and dangerous underlying reality. Arthur notes the similarity between the Lydian Bacchants and the Aeschylean Erinyes in their savagery and thirst for vengeance.\textsuperscript{98} Yet, the course of the action of the two plays sees these representatives of the natural, feeling side of community taking a very different, indeed, opposing courses. Whereas the Erinyes, under the wise guidance of Athena, are finally incorporated as Eumenides (Kindly Ones) into the inner life of the polis and its collective cult, the Lydian Chorus, by contrast, paying only lip service to the civilized life of the polis, is revealed as a purely natural association. Devoid of the measure of a rationally articulated common good, the Lydian Bacchants persist inexorably in unmediated unity with the unlimited dyadic power of Dionysus their divine principle. Thus, as Dionysus prepares to lead Pentheus to his doom, the Chorus, while still professing the tenets of popular morality, simultaneously exult in a fierce natural justice which extols wisdom as ‘holding one’s hand over the head of one’s enemies’ (877-81, 888-91).\textsuperscript{99} Expressing themselves as being of one accord with physis, they assert the power of a divine justice that belongs to the timeless, universal laws of nature (895-896). Like Cleon, the Lydian Chorus insists that one must never think or act above these laws (890-892). They thus move seamlessly from their earlier espousal of what the majority of ordinary people consider normal practice (430-431) to the identification of this traditional morality with the universal natural and instinctual laws of physis. With the central polis virtues of wisdom, justice, and moderation assimilated to the immediacy of physis, now the universal law underpinning and ratifying human action, civilization is overthrown and in its place arises the ‘law of nature’, as Plato’s Callicles defines it.\textsuperscript{100}

5. Conclusion

The final moments of the action of Bacchae depict the human survivors, Cadmus and Agave, painstakingly attempting to piece back together the dismembered body of Pentheus. Symbolically this is significant not only as a recognition of the importance of ritual, but also perhaps in the reflection it offers on the larger order of the polis, whose parts can be reassembled in imitation of what once was but not thereby be brought back to the fullness of a life now departed: a whole that is a unity prior to the distinctions it contains. What has come to light amidst the burgeoning relativism and scepticism of the

\textsuperscript{97} Thucydides argues that the traditional moral vocabulary lost its original force with the spread of civil strife and came to be applied however men saw fit to justify their course of action, 3.82.4.

\textsuperscript{98} Arthur, 162. Cf. in particular Aeschylus, Eumenides 307-96. At Euripides, Bacchae 977-978 the Chorus calls upon the hounds of Lyssa, akin to the Erinyes, Dodds, 199.

\textsuperscript{99} Arthur, 162-163; Winnington-Ingram, 109.

\textsuperscript{100} Plato, Gorgias 483ε3.
fifth-century intellectual enlightenment is the realization that the older morality based on traditional nomoi and customary observances is unable to withstand the challenges mounted against it. Everything in the cosmos, man included, is now understood to be ultimately subject to the primacy of an underlying law of natural necessity, so that nomos is identified not with an objective rational order but with the demands of physis, as a primal instinctual drive. Wisdom and justice reside in obedience to the dictates of nature, and to argue otherwise is merely a device of the weak to thwart the interests of the strong. In perhaps its most cynical and rationally self-serving form, this is found expressed in Thucydides' Melian dialogue where the Athenians, brutally frank as to the necessities of empire, justify their unwarranted attack on the unoffending Melians with the blunt assertion that might makes right; by a necessity of nature wherever men have the power they prevail.101

In Euripides, the human association is brought to the very threshold of a Hellenistic world in which the individual, not the citizen, is primary. More specifically, in the criticisms of the Olympians so many of his characters express, there emerges a recognition that will subsequently become concrete for the Epicurean: if freedom from perturbation for the individual is to be achieved, the gods must be banished from rule in human affairs. Cadmus and Agave, like many other Euripidean characters, turn in their extremity, not to the gods, but to each other, to a fellow human being.102 It is no accident that Euripides, who in his own time achieved only a modest success on stage when compared with his confreres Sophocles and Aeschylus, becomes the tragic poet of greatest renown in the fourth century and beyond, nor that Bacchae comes to be prominently celebrated among his works.103 Yet, even as Euripides was able to project vividly the forces at work in the destruction of the traditional polis ethos, he is not simply to be divorced from the ambience of the polis world of which he was a part. The recognition and charting of forces active in the dismemberment of the polis, which brings with it the questioning of old unexamined assumptions of a patrios nomos, does not thereby eliminate the human requirement for life in a social order.

Aristotle records that Plato was influenced by and drew upon both the Socratic search for definition in ethical matters and the Heraclitean doctrine that all sensible things are in flux.104 In poetic form, it can be argued, the same radical oppositions, with all that is consequently entailed for human society, have been powerfully and ruthlessly laid bare

101 Thucydides, 5.105.2.
102 Cf. Euripides, Hippolytus 1415; Heracles, 1397-8. Euripides shows the gods of Greek myth to lack those values necessary to civilized society, notably friendship and justice. For instance, Zeus, in Euripides is not concerned with moral justice but with right as necessity. Thus Hecuba tellingly invokes Zeus as a 'natural necessity', Trojan Women, 886. In Heracles, Zeus is portrayed as also lacking philia, in marked contrast to the human hero Heracles (574-582, 631-636). Other gods, Dionysus, Hera and Aphrodite are cruel, vengeful and pitiless in their dealings with humans. "Who could offer prayers to such a goddess," Heracles rails against Hera, Heracles, 1307-1308.
104 Aristotle, Metaphysics 987a29-b4.
in *Bacchae* by the imagination of Euripides. So that, while it is possible to immerse oneself in the play's scepticism and negativity, it is also, by the same token, from within this darkness that the 'Owl of Minerva' will take flight and the polis will be given a new and rationally articulated form for thought. Like Socrates, Euripides is acutely aware of the significance of the issues raised by the contention that virtue has no nature of its own so that its 'truth', moving in the sphere of language and opinion, is merely what it becomes for each human individual in the pursuit of his own ends. While it is not the work of the poet to provide a philosophical exegesis, in the contrasting positions his characters adopt on the nature of wisdom in *Bacchae*, Euripides brings to light the problematic nature of current understanding and the need to look beyond these partial conceptions if the problem they present is to be resolved. Further opposed to these conflicting dictates of human reason in *Bacchae* stands the Heraclitean world of appetite and feeling contained within the powerful dyadic flux of opposites which is the sphere of the Bacchants, who in the immediacy of their relation to their principle respond instinctually to the dictates of *physis*, bereft of the light of considered reason and moderation as the civilizing principles of political association.

Central to any understanding of human association will be the role that wisdom and moderation must play in tempering the powerful instinctual animal drives that continually threaten the stability of man's ethical nature and with it the very existence of civilized society. This is the challenge Euripides bequeaths to philosophy: to Plato and Aristotle. A new beginning must be made to the investigation of the essential nature of political community. What is to be sought is the unifying *logos* that is the innate ordering principle determining how the active and passive sides of the soul and society, the sides of reason and feeling, can be brought together in a concretion of unifying form and content so that justice and friendship will constitute the political community.\(^\text{105}\)

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\(^{105}\) I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper for many helpful and constructive suggestions.
TIMING RECOGNITION: FROM ARISTOTLE'S COMMENTS ON THE *IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS* TO GLUCK'S OPERA

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What Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* "teaches" us about Aristotle's *Poetics*

"ORESTE Ainsi tu péris en Aulide, Iphigénie, ô ma sœur."
You have also perished in Aulis, oh my sister!
(Gluck, libretto by Guillard, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, 1779)

No doubt Aristotle considered Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* among his favorite plays.¹ He was impressed by its complex recognition scene to such a degree that he offered it several times in the *Poetics* as an example of how playwrights should compose such scenes. Nonetheless, he must have also admired Polyidus' variant of the recognition between Iphigenia and Orestes, since he mentions it as a valid alternative to the Euripidean version:²

As an example of what I mean by considering the universal, take the *Iphigenia*: A girl has been sacrificed and has disappeared without those who performed the sacrifice being aware of it. Set down in another country, where it was the custom to sacrifice foreigners to the goddess, she becomes the priestess of this rite. It subsequently happens that the priestess's brother arrives (the fact that the god ordered him to go there is outside the universal; so too the reason); on his arrival he is captured, but when he is on the verge of being sacrificed he discloses his identity (either as Euripides did it or as in Polyidus, by saying – quite probable – that it was his lot, as well as his sister's, to be sacrificed). Escape ensues. (*Po.* 1455b2-15).³

We know nothing else about Polyidus or any other detail about his rendition of the myth of Iphigenia.⁴ Elsewhere in the *Poetics* (1455a6), Aristotle adds the epithet "the Sophist"

¹ For Aristotle's interest in the *Iphigenia* and its recognitions, see especially Belfiore: 1992.  
² Aristotle refers to Polyidus' variant of recognition twice in the *Poetics*, here in chapter 17 (1455b9-12) and in the previous chapter 16 (1455a6-8), which I shall discuss subsequently.  
⁴ Galavotti: 1982, 158 deplores the lack of details about the dramatic circumstances surrounding the sacrifice of Orestes in Polyidus. Two assumptions seem relatively safe to make: (1) Aristotle supposes that the contemporary audience of the *Poetics* knows
to the name of Polyidus. The most common interpretation is that Polyidus wrote a tragedy about Iphigenia. Another possibility is that he wrote a piece criticizing Euripides’ play.\(^5\) Regardless of the view that we may adopt, it is important to underline that Aristotle does not call Polyidus' recognition better than Euripides but deems it necessary to mention it as a variant. In fact, in the previous chapter, he ranks the recognition in the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, coming from a logical sequence of events, as "the best," together with the scene from the *OT* (Po. 1455a16-18), and ahead of the recognition of Polyidus' *Iphigenia*, which is labeled "second-best" and is based on syllogism (Po. 1455a4-8). Why does Aristotle need to refer to Polyidus, though he admires Euripides? This remains a legitimate question, to which this essay suggests a possible answer: the timing of Polyidus' recognition is exquisite.

Many centuries later, Guillard, Gluck's librettist, revived Polyidus' variant recognition, apparently because he considered it better able to produce suspense. As Ewans puts it, "Guillard and Gluck adopted Polyidus' suggestion to create the climax of the opera's recognition sequence. Orestes sings 'Iphigénie, dear sister, this is how you died at Aulis' (IV.ii.257ff) at the moment when Iphigénie herself is about to execute him."\(^6\) The myth of Iphigenia as represented particularly in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* fascinated eighteenth century thinkers and artists. The enormous popularity of this tragic myth is reflected by the composition of no less than nineteen plays and opera-librettos inspired by the Euripidean tragedy from the end of the seventeenth century to the last decades of the eighteenth century Europe.\(^7\) Euripides' plot contains several elements that received appreciation during the Enlightenment: friendship (between Orestes and Pylades) surpassing hardships, triumphant fraternal love, and reason replacing violence. Like most of these revivals of the *Iphigenia*, the operatic version of Guillard-Gluck generally follows the plot structure of Euripides' play, but it dramatizes Aristotle's casual

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Polyidus' version as well as Euripides' play and thus does not consider it necessary to explain the circumstances; (2) there is a certain resemblance between the plots: Orestes is going to be sacrificed by his sister.

\(^5\) For this second possibility, see Else: 1957, 509-10, and Belfiore: 1992, 368.

\(^6\) Ewans 2007: 48. Schwartz:1869, 14, notes that Guillard generally follows Euripides' plot, but he prefers the recognition of Polyidus, which is described only briefly in the *Poetics*.

\(^7\) Heitner 1964, 308-09 lists all nineteen. Among the dramatic versions, worth mentioning are, for example, Racine, *Iphigénie en Tauride* (around 1670); Dennis, *Iphigenia. A Tragedy* (1700); Schlegel, *Orest und Pylades* (1737); De la Touche, *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1757); Goethe, *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1779). Operatic versions of the tragedy were composed in Italian, German, and French. Here are a few examples: Minato (librettist and composer), *Il Tempio di Diana in Taurica* (Italian, 1678); Capeci (librettist) and Scarlatti (composer), *Iphigenia in Tauride* (Italian, 1713); Coltellini (librettist) and Traetta (composer), *Iphigenia in Tauride* (Italian, 1763); Verazzi (librettist) and Maio (composer), *Iphigenia in Tauris* (German, 1764); Guillard (librettist) and Gluck (composer), *Iphigénie en Tauride* (French, 1779).
MUNTEANU: TIMING RECOGNITION: FROM ARISTOTLE'S COMMENTS ON THE _IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS_ TO GLUCK'S OPERA

remarks on Polyidus' recognition. This integration of the two plots offers material for an assessment of the probable theatrical effects of the recognition scene in Euripides’ play and the parallel scene in Polyidus, which is adopted in the opera.

"As Euripides Did"

The recognition scene from Euripides' _Iphigenia in Tauris_ receives special attention in Aristotle's _Poetics_: five direct references. To understand this preference, we need to remember that, overall, Aristotle defines plot (mythos) as the "principle" and "soul" (arche and psyche) of tragedy in the treatise (Po. 1450a35-36) and that "recognition" (anagnorisis) represents one of the main components of the plot. The scene from the _Iphigenia_ serves as an example of reciprocal recognition (Po. 1452b3-8). First, Orestes realizes that the priestess of Artemis, who lives in a remote place by the Black Sea, is his sister, Iphigenia, whom he believed dead (sacrificed by his father Agamemnon at Aulis). Second, Iphigenia realizes that one of the men from Greece, whom she is about to sacrifice, is in fact her brother Orestes. This twofold process through which brother and sister reveal their true identities culminates in a reversal of fortune (from adversity to prosperity in this case), since Orestes averts death.

In the _Poetics_, Aristotle comments on each step of the reunion between the siblings according to the criterion of probability. The first stage, the recognition of Iphigenia by Orestes, is, as I have noted, regarded as the best kind of recognition because it derives from a logical chain of events. More specifically, in Aristotle's view, it seems likely that Iphigenia should want to send a letter home (Po. 1455a 18-20). Indeed, Iphigenia instructs Pylades, one of the two strangers from Greece, to deliver to her

8 Others before Guillard tried to dramatize Polyidus as well, such as De la Touche and Verazzi. Ewans 2007: 31-53 offers the most detailed analysis of the dramatic models for Gluck's opera, from Euripides' play to other contemporary versions of the tragedy, particularly Goethe and De la Touche.

9 Five references concern specifically the recognition scene, which I will briefly discuss subsequently; a sixth, which I quoted already, concerns the universality of the tragic plot. For a detailed analysis of each of these quotations, see Belfiore 1992, 367-68.

10 Aristotle signals the importance of recognitions and reversals (Po. 1450a 33-34) and gives details about these two components of the plot (Po. 1452a-b; 1454b). Generally, for recognition scenes in Greek literature, see Perrin: 1909. Recognition in Aristotle's _Poetics_ could be of persons or situations and includes various types, grouped according to the criterion of the probability from worst to best: (1) through tokens, (2) contrived by the poet, (3) through memory, (4) from inference, (5) from false inference, and (5) from the course of events. See Whalley: 1997, 87-91, for an accessible discussion of Aristotle's classification of the tragic recognitions.

11 As Lowe 2000: 184 and note 51 has pointed out, only three extant tragedies (all Euripidean) display the type of tragic action highly-praised in the _Poetics_ (1454a4-9), in which kin narrowly avoids killing kin, because recognition prevents the murder: _Iphigenia in Tauris, Orestes_, and _Ion_.

52
brother in Argos (or so she believes) a letter which explains her fate (IT 782-87). Pylades simply hands the letter over to Orestes. Deeply "shocked" (ekplepegmenos, IT 795), Orestes expresses his joy in having found his sister. This element of "surprise" (ekplexis) certainly added to Aristotle's admiration for the scene. The second stage, the recognition of Orestes by Iphigenia, receives the label of "second worst" from Aristotle (Po. 1454b30-36) because Orestes says what the poet wants him to say (not what the plot requires) in order to prove his identity. Iphigenia infers that the stranger whom she is about to sacrifice must be her brother. Nevertheless, she does not believe immediately that the stranger is her brother — and rightly so. Therefore, she tests Orestes by asking for some kind "proof" (tekmerion, IT 808). He displays knowledge of the history of the family and remembers the design of a nicely woven cloth that Iphigenia embroidered when she was a child (IT 816-19), which convinces her sister in the play but seems contrived to Aristotle. The least artistic kind of recognition occurs "through tokens" (Po. 1454b20-21), which are objects used to prove people's identity, such as a necklace (for example, an object of this sort given to a baby at birth can be recognized later when the baby has grown to adulthood). Second worst are the recognitions "made up by the poet" (pepoiemenai hypo tou poetou, Po. 1454b30-32), such as this recognition of Orestes by Iphigenia. The point is that Orestes refers to a token verbally here, but he might as well have displayed tokens; this, artistically speaking, is not much better than the "worst kind" of recognition.

Although the Poetics does not place the two stages of the reunion on the same level of artistry, Aristotle's fascination with the Iphigenia certainly depends much on this elaborate, twofold recognition scene, an essential part of the tragic plot, which he deems to be of "the best kind" for this play (Po. 1454a4-7). While this statement has often puzzled modern scholars, the careful reader of the Poetics can find reasons for this

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12 The chorus members similarly express amazement after brother and sister fully recognize each other, for seeing such "marvelous" (thaumastoi, IT 900) happenings and not merely hearing them.

13 Po. 1455a 16-19: best recognitions (such as the one from IT) arouse emotion in the audience through surprise (ekplexis), which is produced through probable sequence (dia eikoton). See Belfiore: 1992, 372, for specific details on how the IT leads to surprise (ekplexis) and amazement (thauma). Davies: 1992, 139-41 generally examines the significance of the wondrous element in the Poetics.

14 The stranger who was going to go to Argos may have cleverly fabricated the identity of his friend (i.e. pretend that he is Orestes) in order to save him from being sacrificed. Thus, it seems reasonable that Iphigenia acts with caution instead of accepting immediately that the stranger is her brother.

15 Lucas: 1968, 169 writes on this type of recognition: Orestes "might as well have produced a token"; further in this note, Lucas considers Aristotle's criticism unfair by our modern standards: "it is assumed [by Aristotle] that in all contexts a higher grade anagnorisis is preferred to one of a lower grade. In fact, Orestes' method of showing his identity is the natural one in the circumstances, and anything more elaborate would probably have seemed out of place."

16 Cf. Po. 1455b2-15.
preference. Aristotle expresses particular admiration for a plot that consists of murder between close kin, an unintended fratricide in this particular case.\(^{17}\) Furthermore, the Iphigenia may be singled out because its plot relies on a terrible deed which is about to happen but is barely avoided.\(^{18}\) Yet, if Euripides' composition of this tragedy is so exquisite, why the need to mention twice Polidus' alternative recognition? The concept of timing, I suggest, offers a possible explanation.

"As in Polyidus," dramatized by Gluck-Guillard

Despite his deep admiration for Euripides' Iphigenia in Tauris, Aristotle does not seem to like the end of the play. After discussing the recognition so extensively, he ends his summary of the play with the following remark: "escape ensues" (Po. 1455b12).\(^{19}\) At this point Aristotle loses interest in the rest of Euripides' plot (from around line 900 to 1496), although it contains many interesting adventures, such as a plan to escape from the land of Thoas and the final intervention of Athena as dea ex machina. Why? In addition to admiring the probability of dramatic events, Aristotle praises plots in their ability to produce pathos, particularly pity and fear. After defining two essential components of the plot, recognition (anagnorisis) and reversal (peripeteia) (Po. 1452a22-33), he states that the "best kind of recognition" (kallistē anagnorisis) "occurs together with a reversal," as in Sophocles' Oedipus the King (Po. 1452a38). This combination best arouses the tragic emotions in the spectators. Interestingly, while ranking recognitions according to probability Aristotle labels both the recognition in Oedipus the King and the recognition in Iphigenia in Tauris as "the best" (beltistē, Po. 1455a16). However, when he uses the criterion of emotional arousal, ideally produced by the concurrence of recognition and

\(^{17}\) Belfiore: 1992 argues that Aristotle likes the plot of Iphigenia in Tauris so much because it concentrates on a possibility of a horrific killing among kin. Yet, modern scholars do not understand this Aristotelian preference, she notes, because they often favor characters over plot and see this Euripidean play as dull and not tragic. Furthermore modern critics compare this play to the Helen, for example, which seems to have a similar story line, but does not deal with siblings and presents no interest to Aristotle. See also Belfiore: 2000, 21-38, for more details on the significance of "averting fratricide" for Aristotle's dramatic theory and ethics.

\(^{18}\) As Halliwell: 1998, 180-81, remarks, Aristotle places other plots of catastrophe averted in the last moment in the same category with IT, which he deems excellent — and perhaps above those in which suffering is irreversible —, such as Cresphontes (in which a mother is about to kill her unrecognized son) and Helle, probably because they arouse fear in the audience.

\(^{19}\) Belfiore: 1992, 373, notes that for Aristotle the end of the play appears to be more an episode than part of the plot, so he disregards it, whereas modern scholars consider the end very important. My suggestion is that Aristotle does not give any consideration to the rest of the plot after the major scene of recognition because for him the play culminates with this recognition between brother and sister and the reversal of Orestes' fate.
reversal, he names only the scene from the *Oedipus* as "the best" (*kallistê*, Po. 1452a32). In addition to Sophocles' *Oedipus*, nevertheless, recognitions occur with reversal in other tragedies (e.g. Euripides' *Ion*). Moreover, in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, recognition also causes a reversal of fortune: Orestes is no longer in immediate danger of being executed after the reunion with his sister. Thus, this recognition ought to produce a strong emotional effect as well. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the dramatic effect of the recognition scene in the *Oedipus* and in the *Iphigenia*. In Sophocles' *Oedipus*, all the events that occur after the recognition and reversal, such as the suicide of Iocasta and the self-blinding of Oedipus, relate directly to this moment of recognition. More exactly, the scene combining the recognition and reversal causes all the subsequent dramatic events in the *Oedipus*. Conversely, in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the events occurring after the recognition between brother and sister do not directly relate to it. The *Oedipus* culminates with the recognition, whereas the *Iphigenia* does not, and this difference probably made the Sophoclean scene Aristotle's absolute favorite. Therefore, the notion that the best type of recognition occurs together with a reversal as a temporal climax of a tragedy is strongly suggested by the example offered (Sophocles' *Oedipus*), although this point about timing is only implicit in the *Poetics*.

What happened in Polyidus' version after the recognition? Polyidus' alternative may have appeared intriguing to Aristotle — although he never says this directly — because it delayed the moment of recognition until before the moment of sacrifice and, perhaps, until the very end of the play. Indeed, it does so in Guillard's libretto for Gluck's opera, in which Orestes exclaims right at the moment of being sacrificed directly by Iphigenia,

"ORESTE Ainsi tu péris en Aulide, Iphigénie, ô ma sœur.

IPHIGÉNIE Mon frère! Oreste!"

(Orestes: You also have perished in Aulis, oh, my sister

Iphigenie: Oh, my brother! Orestes!)

Guillard imitates Polyidus' recognition scene (as transmitted through the *Poetics*) by transferring a passage from indirect speech to direct speech in the libretto. Aristotle observes: "there is also the recognition which Polyidus the Sophist suggested for

20 Remarkably, Aristotle uses different forms of the superlative to classify the most satisfying type of recognition *emotionally* (occurring together with the reversal) and the most satisfying type of recognition *intellectually* (from the probable sequence of events): only the scene from the *Oedipus* is given as an example of both.

21 Both Iphigenia and Orestes could have tried to escape independently, even if they did not recognize each other.
Iphigenia: he said that it was probable for Orestes to infer that *his sister had been sacrificed and so it was now his turn to be sacrificed* (Po. 1455a6-8). In the operatic version Orestes says before the moment of sacrifice: "you also have perished in Aulis, my sister" (*ainsi tu péris en Aulide, Iphigénie, ô ma sœur*). While we do not know exactly the dramatic context in which Polyidus' recognition may have occurred, Guillard provides an interesting possibility. Gluck's opera is resolved very quickly, with a rapid succession of events: the killing of Thoas and the brief appearance of Diana who condemns the human sacrifice. It is impossible to refashion an entire "plot" for Polyidus' version of *Iphigenia*. Whether or not Aristotle's mysterious author, Polyidus, would have placed the recognition toward the end of a play, as in Gluck's opera, remains uncertain. It is certain, nevertheless, that Polyidus' recognition increases the dramatic tension because it occurs *right before* the sacrifice. And while Aristotle in the *Poetics* insists on the criterion of the "probability" of events in ranking the recognitions, he intuits the importance of the timing of the events without formally classifying it as a criterion.

Aristotle shows an awareness of the importance of dramatic timing in the *Poetics*, so much so that he emphasizes that the plot should deal with terrible things that are *about to (mellein)* happen, because those elicit the strongest emotions. Nevertheless, he does not emphasize specifically the importance of the time frame of the recognition scenes, which he ranks chiefly in accordance with the probability of events. After seeing Gluck's opera, one may guess why the *Poetics* keeps referring to Polyidus' version of the recognition. The scene conforms to the criterion of the probable, if a little less skillfully than the corresponding scene in Euripides' tragedy. But Polyidus' staging of the events, by placing the recognition closer to the moment of the sacrifice, which likely compels Aristotle to refer to it, makes the fratricide seem more imminent than Euripides' version.

According to the criterion of probability in the *Poetics*, the first stage of Euripides' recognition scene (Iphigenia by Orestes) ensues from the events themselves, which is classified as the best (Po. 1455a16-20). The second best form of recognition, which comes from inference, is attributed to Polyidus (Orestes by Iphigenia): when Orestes mentions his sister being sacrificed at Aulis, Iphigenia deduces that he is her

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22 The presence of Athena at the end of Euripides' tragedy must have been easily understood by the ancient audience in connection with the myth of Orestes; furthermore Iphigenia refuses to kill Thoas, who in turn spares her and her brother. In an effort to simplify the opera for his audience and to eliminate "unnecessary" supernatural intervention, Guillard brings Diana-Artemis on stage, the goddess linked to Iphigenia's priesthood, thus more relevant to this specific story, and the goddess blames Thoas for the human sacrifice.

23 This observation occurs six times in the treatise: 1453b18, 21, 34, 38; 1454a 6, 8, and 1455b9 (the last reference concerning specifically the *IT*). For more on this idea, see Halliwell: 1998, 225 and footnote 33.

24 In the tragedy the first part of the double recognition (Iphigenia by Orestes) comes from the events themselves, which is the best, whereas in the opera this first step of the recognition (Orestes by Iphigenia) occurs through inference (Orestes mentions his sister's sacrifice at Aulis, therefore Iphigenia deducts his identity), which is the second best way.
brother (Po. 1455a7-10). Alternatively, judged by the criterion of timing, the recognition proposed by Polyidus, which inspired Guillard's libretto for the opera, appears to be better timed than that of Euripides because the recognition occurs only seconds before the moment of the sacrifice, as it does in Crespontes, leading to a last-second salvation. Polyidus' recognition immediately causes the reversal right before a horrible misfortune would have taken place between close relatives, whereas Euripides does not place his recognition so close to the imminent sacrifice.  

Guillard, following Polyidus, reverses the order of the reciprocal recognition used by Euripides, since he places first the identification of Orestes by Iphigenia. What happens next? We do not know how Polyidus designed the other half of the recognition, that of Iphigenia by Orestes, because the Poetics only mentions the first stage of the scene. Yet, Orestes also needs to be convinced of his sister's identity somehow because he believes she has died in Aulis. Perhaps it ought to be so, but it is not so in the opera. In Gluck's Iphigénie, the second recognition takes place immediately and without any complication or test. Orestes acknowledges his sister without much ado:

"ORESTE Ô ma sœur! Oui c'est vous, oui, tout mon cœur me l'atteste!"

(Orestes, "Oh, my sister! Yes, all my heart testifies that it is you!")

This immediate acceptance emphasizes the affinity between sister and brother: Orestes inexplicably feels a connection with the young woman and confesses that he likes the strange priestess throughout the opera. However, something can be said in defense of Guillard, who imagines Orestes' acknowledging his sister without hesitation. It is "probable" that Orestes, relieved that he does not have to die, readily believes that the woman who has been so reluctant to sacrifice him and whom he liked despite the

25 In Gluck's opera Orestes utters the words at very moment when Iphigenia is about to stab him. Certainly, in Euripides' tragedy the bloodshed is also barely avoided, as the characters observe (IT 863 ff.), but the recognition precedes the moment of sacrifice itself. One of the anonymous readers of the Animus has made an interesting suggestion: the "sheer duration of the anagnorisis" is different. Euripides' recognition scene is about 120 lines long, while Polyidus uses dramatic compression. Aristotle may want to acknowledge that the two accomplish the same effect through different means. Although this is an intriguing possibility, the problem is that we do not know precisely how Polyidus may have built the entire recognition scene from the Aristotelian observation. Orestes' exclamation, which the Poetics mentions twice in passing, could be the final point after a long interaction with his unrecognized sister. Overall, Aristotle seems to admire elaborate recognition scenes (IT and OT).

26 As Ewans: 2007, 51, suggests, the strange affinity between brother and sister before their recognition in the opera may be explained as the call of the blood, a favorite idea in the eighteen-century Europe.
circumstances turns out to be his sister. The operatic device suggests that there might be some kind of probability that is not based on the kind of strict logic admired by Aristotle.

Furthermore, in both the Euripidean tragedy and in Guillard's libretto, the twofold recognition contains a first phase, which reveals the identity of one of the siblings, and then a second stage, which reveals the identity of the other. The first recognition, that of Iphigenia by Orestes in Euripides' play or that of Orestes by Iphigenia in the opera, stands out as the most impressive for any audience. The second half of the recognition in both cases (tragedy and opera) seems to be more compressed and less important from a dramatic standpoint, since it results rather predictably from the first discovery. Aristotle criticizes Euripides for saying what he wanted to say instead of what the plot requires in handling of the sequence in which Orestes proves his identity to Iphigenia (Po. 1454b30-36). In Gluck's opera, Iphigenia does need to try to demonstrate who she is because her brother readily accepts her claim. Again, timing seems to be of crucial dramatic importance in our perception of the two halves of the recognition scene in the tragedy as well as in the opera. Once one of the siblings reveals his or her identity, it seems difficult to create a second recognition that could produce surprise for the audience to the same degree to which the first one did. 27 In these examples of reciprocal recognition taking place in rapid sequence, the first revelation of identity always carries more dramatic weight than the second, which, in its turn, becomes predictable.

The skillfulness of the "recognition" depends not only on the much-emphasized criterion of probability in the Poetics but also on timing, a subject whose importance Aristotle intuits without fully exploring. Therefore, to use a biological metaphor, which Aristotle would have endorsed doubtlessly, recognition scenes resemble DNA sequences: the slightest change at a crucial moment will affect the entire dramatic offspring.

Bibliography


27 Unless there is something that might prevent the second recognition from taking place. So for example, it would be interesting in Euripides' tragedy if Iphigenia did not believe that the stranger is Orestes after he recognized her up to the point that she would be ready to sacrifice him (and only then he could prove his identity).
MUNTEANU: TIMING RECOGNITION: FROM ARISTOTLE'S COMMENTS ON
THE IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS TO GLUCK'S OPERA

Heitner, R. R. 1964. "The Iphigenia in Tauris Theme in Drama of the Eighteenth
Oxford.
Wesport.
Leiptzig.
And yet to those
With clear thoughts I did well to honor you.
For I would never have assumed this burden,
Defying the citizens, if it had been
My children or my husband who had died
And had been left to rot away out there.
In deference to what law [nomou] do I say this? —
Were my husband dead, there could be another,
And by that man, another child, if one
Were lost. But since my mother and my father
Are hidden now in Hades, no more brothers
Could ever be born —
This was the law [nomoï] by which
I honored you above all, O
My own dear brother, but Kreon thought that I
Did wrong.¹

Antigone 904-15

At this crucial moment of the play, Antigone addresses the citizens of her native land to defend, for the last time, her burial of her brother.² Despite the fact that Antigone

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² With most recent editors (Lloyd-Jones 2002; Griffith 2003; Gibbons and Segal 2003), I take the authenticity of the passage for granted. For detailed discussions about this issue, see Jebb (1891), Hester (1971), and Neuburg (1990). Articles on this passage that I have found particularly useful, in addition to those already mentioned, are Foley (1996), Cropp

* This article benefited from the suggestions and comments of many good readers. In particular I want to thank James Boyd White, Robert Howse, Bruce Frier, Juha Karhu, Stephan Hartmann, Richard Janko, Vassilios Lambropoulos, Vivasvan Soni, and George Platsis. I am very grateful to the anonymous readers and the editors of Animus for helping me to strengthen my arguments. My special thanks go to Mónica López, the most critical and supportive of all.
refers to her defense twice as a *nomos*, her argument is not often taken seriously as an articulation of a legal argument. Her words are certainly strange: what does Antigone mean when she says that she would not have done the same thing for a husband or child? Can it be that “she suddenly gives up that which, throughout the drama, has been the immovable basis of her action—the universal and unqualified validity of the divine law” (Jebb 1891, 259)? Moreover, why does she make the distinction between brother on the one side, and husband and child on the other, when there is no need for it? In the story of Herodotus from which Sophocles may have borrowed this passage (West 1999, 109-111), the wife of Intaphernes was given the choice of saving the life of one of her family members who had been sentenced to death by the Persian King Darius, and she chose to save her brother (Hdt. 3.119). However, Antigone has no husband and children to choose among, and she cannot save those who are already dead. More generally, Antigone’s appropriation of the term *nomos*, a term most closely associated with Creon and with the public sphere (Ostwald 1986), seems at odds with her apparent desire to sever all ties with the *polis*. Finally, Antigone’s argument in favor of Polyneices does not seem to possess the level of abstraction and generality often associated with law (Butler 2000, 10).

In this essay I offer an interpretation of Antigone’s *nomos* that might help to clarify these puzzles. Let me start with the term *nomos*: by this word I do not mean a formal statute enacted by a legislative body, but a reason-for-action for which the individual claims the binding force of law. In order to function as a *nomos* in this sense, Antigone’s argument must be consistent with the underlying values of the community, even if they are not necessarily evident or recognized at the time. This is not to say that all members of society have to accept her argument as binding (certainly, Creon is not likely to accept it, and we may doubt the chorus would too). However, a *nomos* must be communicated and eventually assessed by the social and political medium in which it is inscribed. Thus, Antigone’s *nomos* cannot be a simple matter of individual preference or the expression of a cultural taboo, for it must have support in her culture. I will try to show that, in this passage, Antigone is formulating what she thinks is (or should be) a socially validated norm that justifies her disobedience, and she does so in the hope that it will be judged so, if not by all the citizens, at least by those with good enough sense to understand her claim.

This is not an easy task for Antigone. After all, she is doing something quite exceptional, perhaps even subversive, for her time and place: as a young woman she is

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(1997), Murnaghan (1986), Sourvinou-Inwood (1987-88), and Machin (1981). Other authors who have dealt directly or indirectly with this issue will be mentioned when appropriate in the text.

3 This contrasts with the centrality of the term *nomos* for understanding the play (Cropp 1997; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988; Ostwald 1986; Harris 2004), and with the attention that her earlier appeal to the unwritten law has received (Ehrenberg 1954; Nonet 2006). For a study of the historical evolution of the word *nomos*, see Ostwald 1969; for a shorter, but excellent overview, Jaeger 1947.

4 This is, to my mind, the fundamental objection to an interpretation of this passage in terms of an incestuous desire by Antigone for Polyneices.
claiming the right to act against the body of citizens and their laws [907], and argues that her audience should accept her reasons for it. The implicit claim behind such a gesture, I will maintain, is a claim specifically for legitimacy, as opposed to other possible grounds suggested to explain her disobedience (namely necessity, heroism, and equity).

To convince the audience of the legitimacy of her action, Antigone must persuade them that her disobedience does not challenge the rule of law generally, and that accepting it does not risk permanent confrontation between the polis and the family. She does so by introducing the contrasting case of a husband or child (the closest analogy she can think of), aiming to show both the exceptionality and the limits of the case she actually presents. Based on culturally specific considerations about the family in ancient Greece, I will suggest that what separates Polyneices’ case from the hypothetical one of a husband and child is the fact that Polyneices is the last brother of a family on the verge of extinction. The extinction of a whole family is a unique and exceptional circumstance, so exceptional in fact that it is the only case that, in her present view, warrants Antigone’s disobedience. If Antigone were to marry and create another family with her husband and child, this second family would not be extinguished if some of its members were to die (the death of a spouse could be cured by marriage, the death of a child by a new birth), but the death of the last male in the line means the extinction of the family-line, which is an entirely different situation. Apparently, the case of the last brother demands a special reverence and the performance of a ritual to honor it, and the citizens should be able to understand that she was justified in her actions.

In offering such an interpretation, I do not claim to solve all difficulties of the passage. However, I want to lay the groundwork for reassessing Antigone’s gesture as the conscientious act of a citizen who wishes to redefine the normative boundaries of the polis, according to principles and values that can be recognized by that very society. This reading would grant Antigone some measure of (tragically ephemeral and distinctly Sophoclean) self-reflexivity, and add a further dimension to her character. In this view, Antigone would still be strong-willed and temperate, but endowed also with social and political awareness that is largely unrecognized in the critical literature. Regardless of the relative success of my particular argument, I think Antigone’s nomos should at any rate remain central in any discussion of the legal conflict at the heart of the play.

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It is clear that the circumstance that triggers the tragic conflict is the prohibition of Polyneices’ burial; without the prohibition, Antigone (or anybody for that matter) could have buried both brothers in peace. In other words, the burial becomes an issue

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5 The closest analogies may be the speeches of Oedipus in Oedipus at Colonus, when he looks back at his life and protests his basic innocence [960-999], and the speech of Ajax, when he recovers his sanity after killing the cattle and before his suicide [649-693]. For a combined reading of these two speeches, see White 2006, 185-89.

6 The prevailing images of Antigone in the Hegelian tradition place her on the side of the family and opposed to the polis (e.g., Ostwald 1986). Postmodern images of Antigone see her as a wild and marginal figure, and hence outside the polis (e.g., Segal 1981).
only because she acts in spite of the prohibition, which suggests that it is her disobedience and not the burial itself which requires justification. This remark appears necessary because Antigone’s words are often interpreted as setting restrictions on the right of burial. For example, Griffith points out that “Antigone’s discussion of the precise circumstances under which she might or might not have buried a family member comes quite unexpectedly at this moment” (2003, 277-8; emphasis added). Framed in this way, some readers find it “disturbing” that Antigone would withhold the burial from a husband or child (Murnaghan 1986, 194), and that she would not even have buried Polyniceis, if she had any more brothers. However, the supposition that Antigone is addressing the issue of who should or should not be buried lends itself to a puzzle: immediately prior to our passage [900-2], Antigone recalls the way she washed and dressed her mother and father after their death, implying that, after all, she performed the proper rites of burial for them as well as her brother.

To acknowledge at this point that Antigone’s nomos addresses the specific issue of her disobedience (and not the absolute right of burial) has important consequences for understanding Antigone’s nomos. Moments earlier, when Antigone is taken before Creon, she makes it known that she does not accept his rule on a matter that is beyond any mortal’s control. For Antigone, the key point is that Creon has overreached his authority and that he has no power to overrule the unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods [453-54]. Consequently, her decision to bury Polyniceis and the principles upon which she defies Creon’s decree appear to her unquestionable, for these are not simply of today or yesterday, but have been there forever, and Antigone calls Creon a fool for not recognizing them too [470]. Antigone speaks as if any sensible person in her culture would necessarily agree with her. In fact, Antigone believes that the elders also see things the way she does, but that they keep their mouths shut because they are afraid of Creon [509]. Therefore, Antigone shows little patience with her uncle’s condescending speech about the toughest irons being easier to crack, his over-bearing remarks about the family, and his threats to her life and that of her sister Ismene [473-496]. “Do you wish for anything more than to take me and to kill me?” [497], she asks disdainfully, and when Creon confirms that death is indeed all he wishes for her, she taunts him once again: “Then why do you delay?” [499]. As far as Antigone is concerned, Creon is no statesman but a tyrant who deserves no respect.

In contrast to her attitude towards Creon, her final song begins by addressing the “citizens of [her] native land” [806], and the “rich men in the city” [842–3], presumably in the hopes of securing their endorsement. Nevertheless, the elders of the chorus do not express unequivocal approval of Antigone. Contrary to her earlier expectations, she now perceives some voices of disapproval: without glory, they say, she now descends to Hades “by her own law” [autonomos, 821], having “stumbled against the altar of Justice”

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7 Thus Jebb (1891, 260) and Else (1967, 109n8). Both Jebb and Else think that this passage is spurious and probably interpolated.
8 I am not arguing that the elders necessarily disapprove, but that Antigone perceives it that way. For the view that the elders are criticizing Antigone, see Hester 1971, 35 (with extensive bibliographical support).
[853-5] and having been destroyed by her own “self-willed passion” [875].9 Suddenly, she faces the prospect that perhaps their earlier silence was not prompted by fear, but was meant to express their genuine lack of support. For the first time, she confronts the possibility of acting not against the arbitrary decree of a tyrant, but against the representative body of citizens, whom she cannot equally disregard. It is not that she now recognizes them as a new source of authority, for Antigone did not hesitate to use their opinion against Creon when she thought it was favorable to her [509]. What is different now is rather her perception (whether justified or not) that they may oppose her on the merits of her case. Antigone can no longer ignore that, while fulfilling sacred duties, she may have transgressed the laws of the political community she respects.10 It is only at this point that her disobedience to the laws of the citizens (not just to Creon’s decree) becomes apparent.11 And to this charge alone she must respond, for Antigone still thinks her action was right in the eyes of “those who think wisely” [904], even though she acted “against the will of the citizens” [biai politôn, 907].12

Antigone’s aim in making her new (and, to modern ears, rather peculiar) argument is to persuade her audience of the legitimacy of her nomos. That is, Antigone here acknowledges that she has acted against the common judgment of the citizens but insists that her disobedience ought to be recognized as legitimate. This claim is to be distinguished from other conceivable grounds for justifying Antigone’s disobedience: necessity, heroism, and equity. In cases of necessity (hardship, compulsion, duress) the usual mechanisms for obeying the law become ineffectual and individuals are forced to act against the law, even though they are not held accountable or blamed for it. The action itself might be voluntary (in the sense that it is performed knowingly), but the circumstances surrounding it are overpowering, leaving the individual little or no choice to act otherwise.13 Thus, the claim of necessity functions as a momentary license to break the law, for, as Thucydides reports, no one can be expected to obey the law under duress.14 In this category we can locate the decisions made under the

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9 This is not all that the elders say, for they also credit her for having a fate like that of the gods [836-37] and praise her noble piety [eusebeia, 872], but Antigone does not seem to hear them and instead feels abandoned and even mocked by them [839].
10 It is not unreasonable to take the opinion of the chorus as a more or less reliable (though contestable) barometer of the values of the political community, considering that they have been prominent actors in Theban politics for quite a long time: not just after the arrival of Creon, but much before, they first honored the throne of Laius, then Oedipus at his height, and after his death, they were also loyal to his children [164-9].
11 Since she denied the validity and legitimacy of Creon’s decree to impose any restriction, in her eyes there was no (valid and legitimate) law to disobey before.
12 The fact that Antigone admits that she has acted “against the will of the citizens,” but that her action is nevertheless right in the eyes of “those who think wisely,” invites the possibility of different kinds of citizen (and judgments) in the audience.
13 For the general discussion between voluntary [hekousion] and involuntary [akousion; unwilling, despite oneself] actions, see Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics book 3.1 (1110a-1111b).
14 In Thucydides’ account of the Athenians’ defeat at Delium, such is precisely the argument of the Athenians when accused by the Boeotians of transgressing Hellenic law
threat to one’s life or to the lives of others, such as the choice made by Intaphernes’ wife (i.e., in favor of her brother above her husband and children) when threatened by King Darius with execution of all her family members. Although the individuals acting upon necessity are not held accountable for their actions, it is important that they should nevertheless accept that they have acted wrongfully, implicitly validating the norm they have infringed.\footnote{The Athenians never dreamt of changing the laws regarding temples just because they could not comply on one occasion (see, above, n14).}

Cases of heroism are different. In his seminal study of the Sophoclean hero, Bernard Knox defines the hero as one who “in the face of human opposition makes a decision which springs from the deepest layer of his individual nature, his physis, and then blindly, ferociously, heroically maintains that decision even to the point of self-destruction” (1964, 5). Once this decision is made, the hero defends it at all cost and refuses to yield, compromise, or listen to advice, and instead remains unchanged. In this view the hero “sets his own conditions for existence” (1964, 42), which often leads to conflict with other men or with society at large.

The third category of possible justifications is Aristotle’s notion of equity (to epieikes).\footnote{See Aristotle, Nich. Eth. 1137a32-1138a3; and Rhet. 1374a25-b23.} This is a correction or rectification of law in the name of general principles of justice, in situations when the law is too general or abstract to cover the particular case. In such cases, the law is corrected or rectified on the basis of principles other than law, but in the spirit of the law, on the assumption that the legislator himself would have enacted it had he been there and aware of the circumstances.

Even though necessity, heroism, and equity might all appear to convey certain aspects of Antigone’s situation, none of them fully captures her claim. First, Antigone finds herself in a situation of hardship, but making the distinction between brother, husband, and child is not a matter of necessity, as it was for Intaphernes’ wife. Moreover, Antigone does not ask for the kind of absolution that the community grants to those acting upon necessity. She is claiming, rather, that she was right to do what she did, and she offers a nomos to prove it. Second, with respect to heroism as an explanation of Antigone’s nomos, Goethe famously protested as “unworthy” of the hero Antigone’s acknowledgement at this particular moment that she would not have done the same for a husband or child (Eckermann 1850/1935, 178). This acknowledgement would also entail that Antigone is renouncing her original claim to be “the champion of the nether gods and of the blood relationships” (Knox 1964, 103-107; Jebb 1891, 259), which is shocking in a hero. Third, equity is not properly present in this case. This principle provides a remedy to a particular situation where the application of law would otherwise be unjust, because the law is too general or the lawgivers have overlooked a particular case. In contrast, Creon’s law does not

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overlook but covers Polyneices’ case precisely, and Antigone is not arguing in the spirit of Creon’s law but flatly contradicting it. In other words, Antigone is not providing a correction to that law, but an alternative to it (in the hope that the citizens will agree with her nomos).

Unlike cases of necessity, heroism, and equity, the claim for legitimacy aims to reach the whole socio-political domain. This claim is not a particular exemption (necessity) or rectification (equity) of the law, whereby the definition of the law stands as before. Nor is it a heroic call to disregard ordinary norms and constraints. Rather, the claim for legitimacy is an attempt to redefine the normative realm by bringing to the public eye what a given society fails to recognize as the law (but nonetheless ought to). This is, in my view, the implicit claim Antigone makes in branding her argument a nomos and submitting it to the scrutiny of the “wise citizens” [904]. Antigone wants the citizens to know that her disobedience is also defensible from their perspective. This expectation is consistent with the general structure and tone of the preceding kommos and the rest of the scene [806-943]. Antigone says that she wants the citizens and the whole city to look at her [806, 842-3, 937] and to witness what she is made to suffer and from what men [940-43], which can be interpreted as an explicit invitation to compare their respective merits.

According to the conventional wisdom of the political community depicted in the play, however, Antigone’s claim to prevail over the laws of the polis is difficult to embrace. A society that has come so close to destruction by fratricidal war [100-154, 199-204] must be assured that breaches of authority will not light the fuse of permanent insurrection. The community may grant a claim like Antigone’s, but only on rare occasions, within very precise limits, and after close scrutiny of its merits. Thus, it is only natural that she will have to present her claim as a properly delimited case. For this she needs an argument—in her words a nomos—that will fit in the subtle interstice between those actions against the laws that are unacceptable and those others that might, in exceptional circumstances, be accepted.\textsuperscript{17} Her purpose is twofold: she must establish the validity of her action while at the same time appeasing the concerns of the good-willed citizens, a double aim that requires her to present her case as both answerable to, and assumable by, the polis. In short, Antigone seeks to engage her audience in a re-examination of her action—not as an ordinary case of rebellion or contempt for the laws, nor as prompted by necessity, heroism, or equity, but as the conscientious act of a citizen who is mindful of both familial and political commitments.

The challenging question now emerges: what makes her disobedience on behalf of a brother more legitimate than if the same action had been performed for a husband or a child? For better or worse, Antigone is quite explicit about it: “Were my husband dead, there could be another, / And by that man, another child, if one / Were

\textsuperscript{17} The need for proper boundaries for actions against the law is consistent with modern theories of civil disobedience; see, e.g., Rawls 1971, 333-391 and Ugartemendia 1999. For a highly commendable article on Antigone as the literary archetype in the social imaginary of disobedience, see Ost 2004.
lost. But since my mother and my father are hidden now in Hades, no more brothers / Could ever be born” [909-13]. Explicitly, the only factor that sets Polyneices apart is that her parents are dead and no other brother could ever be born. In the logic of the argument, the death of her parents and the impossibility of their begetting another sibling are crucial.

There is no need to dig into the mythological tradition to realize that the play deals with a particularly wretched family.\(^\text{18}\) In the prologue, Antigone and Ismene grieve jointly the sorrowful past of the Labdacids—the tragic destinies of Oedipus, Jocasta, Eteocles, and, Polyneices [1-99, esp. 49-57]. As the chorus sings in the second stasimon, it is a family shaken by disaster [583-85, 594-96]. Yet, it is not until the chorus connects Antigone’s suffering to that of her parents that the destiny of the family as a whole is finally addressed. As Antigone admits, “You have touched on a thought most painful for me, the fate of my father… and the whole of our destiny, that of the famous Labdacids” [857-62]. Even though Ismene is still alive and will continue to live, Antigone sees herself as the “last of the Royal House” [941]. This is not just Antigone’s view, for the chorus points out that Antigone is “the last root in the house of Oedipus” [600].

Since both Antigone and the chorus agree on this point about the end of the family of the Labdacids, there may be some culturally specific explanation for it. According to Walter Lacey (1968), in Greek patrilineal society the death of the parents without male descendants could cause the “rooting out” of the parental oikos, because women could not continue the family on their own. This rooting out could be prevented by the institution of the epiklerate, by which the girl who had no brothers would marry her nearest agnatic relative (i.e., relative on the father’s side) and continue the father’s oikos.\(^\text{19}\) However, such a marriage is not possible in this case, because there are no extant family members on Oedipus’ side (if Antigone were to marry Haemon, she would be incorporated to the oikos of Creon, her uncle on her mother’s side). Another legal measure for the preservation of the oikos is the adoption of a male heir from a different family, but the death of the parents precludes this possibility too. Without surviving male relatives on the father’s side and no more brothers to be had (either naturally or via adoption), all measures for the continuation of the house of Oedipus are now exhausted (the survival of Ismene does not necessarily alter this fact, for she would most likely join the oikos of her husband after marriage, rather than continue the oikos of her father). Faced now with the extinction

\(^{18}\) I am using the term “family,” in the sense of both the house and the line with which that house is identified. Despite the wide range of meanings of the word oikos, which “can denote a building, a family, the property belonging to such family, or any of these meanings in combination” (Todd 1993, 204), I am concerned more with its non-patrimonial (i.e. symbolic) side. About the institution of the family in Greek society see, in addition to books 1 and 2 of Aristotle’s Politics, Lacey 1968, Harrison 1968, and MacDowell 1989.

\(^{19}\) The main purpose of the institution of the epiklerate appears to have been to keep the patrimony within the family (see M. Grant 2001, 31 and 49, who attributes the Athenian legislation on epikleroi to Solon).
of the house of Oedipus, Antigone appears to rely on the extinction of the house as the ground justifying her disobedience on behalf of her last brother.

Arguably, Antigone could marry and help to create another oikos, a possibility implied by the husband and children she imagines herself as having [905]. As a woman in ancient Greece, Antigone could neither create a family-line on her own nor continue that of her father by herself, but she would need a husband to do so. How such a new family could be created is demonstrated in a law court speech by Demosthenes concerning the family of Bouselos, who had five sons, all of whom married and had their own descendants (Dem. 43.19). In this regard, Lacey concludes that “it was the fact that they [the sons] married and begot children which brought the five oikoi into existence” (1968, 127).20 This new, second family with her husband would presumably grow free from the fatalities besieging the house of Oedipus, and it could outlive (and this must be noted with care) the potential loss of some of its members. In the picture I am suggesting, the endangered family of the Labdacids should be placed in opposition to another family Antigone could help to create (at least hypothetically) with a husband. The former is led towards an inevitable end; the latter, one might argue, can be renewed. The one is fallen forever; the other could spring to life again. If so, we might be at last in a position to appreciate that, if her husband died, there would be another, and another child, if she lost one [909-10]. That is, I believe, the main thrust of her argument: if she were to constitute a second family with her husband, the death of either husband or child would not bring about its utter extinction, in which case her disobedience would not be legitimate.

I am not arguing that the obligations owed a husband or child are less demanding than those owed a brother (Bowra 1944, 94). Rather, I am suggesting that Antigone’s claim to prevail over the citizens is linked to the fact that her family (the house of Oedipus) can never be revived. In other words, the exceptional circumstance that legitimizes her disobedience is the extinction of her lineage, so distinctive and unique that it demands special consideration from the citizens. The former does not mean that the obligations of burial do not exist towards—or would not have been performed for—husband and child (and certainly not that the members of this second family are simply replaceable [Murnaghan 1986; Neuburg 1990]). It would be more accurate to say that, if she had to perform the burial for her husband or child and if that action entailed defying the legitimate authority of the citizens, Antigone would find fewer reasons to justify an act of disobedience on their behalf. The only case in which her action is in her view fully justifiable is, therefore, the one in defence of the body incarnating that extinction: Polyneices.

Nevertheless, some critics are confused by Antigone’s apparent attempt to frame her conflict with the citizens in terms of another, non-existent one between her birth family and the hypothetical marital family: in the words of Rebecca Bushnell “Antigone signals her duty to Polyneices through a denial of husband or child” (1988, 55). This “denial” can be clarified in connection with the political concerns she is attempting to overcome. The citizens must be assured that the eventual acceptance of

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20 See also the discussion in Todd 1993, 210-11.
Antigone’s reasoning here is logically similar to what rhetoricians call a *a fortiori* argument. If she is able to demonstrate that her claim does not apply to a husband or child, *with all the more reason* she is demonstrating that it does not extend to every conflict between family and *polis*. Consider the case in which the *polis* had forbidden the burial of her husband or child: should her disobedience on their behalf receive the same consideration as she claims for Polyneices? As if anticipating her audience’s reaction, Antigone recognizes why an affirmative answer could destabilize the delicate equilibrium between family and *polis*. If, every time there were a conflict between the laws of the city and of the family, the latter were to claim the upper hand, then, the stability of the *politeia* could be in peril. And thus, using a paradoxical yet meaningful argument, Antigone distinguishes only what the particular situation forces her to distinguish (i.e., if the burial were not forbidden, the distinction would have been unnecessary). Antigone concedes that even if her husband and child had died, the *polis* had forbidden their burial, and their bodies lay rotting in the ground, not even then would she have felt entitled to justify—and ask the citizens to legitimize—the disobedience on their behalf. Within the strict boundaries of her *nomos*, only the imminent extinction of her house—symbolized by the rotten body of Polyneices—satisfies the criteria.22 Simply put, only the case of her brother is legitimate.

Once the crux of Antigone’s *nomos* has been explained, it may be asked how a contingent factor over which she has no control—such as the extinction of the house—can work as the basis for a *nomos* (Benardete 1999, 111). In this regard, two kinds of argument will help to clarify my position. On the one hand, the extinction of the family is only the factual condition that underpins Antigone’s *nomos*. The totality of her *nomos* comprises, first, her action against the citizens (disobedience), second, the normative assessment she expects to accomplish (legitimacy), and third, the validating

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21 On his treatise on persuasive argument, Aristotle says that when the speaker makes a claim that is unbelievable [*apiston*], she should give reasons to support it, as Sophocles does in this passage of the *Antigone* (*Rhet.* 1416a-1417b). This suggests that Antigone’s argument, though unconventional, is itself reasonable. Cf. Sourvinou-Inwood, who argues that the passage is “explicitly and unambiguously and emphatically wrong, in ways that cannot be explained away” (1987-88, 32).

22 A case might be imagined in which husband and child were to die concurrently and no outliving member had the generative capacity to renew the family. Could this situation be said to result in the extinction of the lineage, and all other circumstances being equal, recreate identical justification to act? In the strict formulation of the argument, the concurrent death of husband and child cannot be excluded. However, this would not result in the same exact situation unless their burials were prohibited too, which Antigone has no reason to suspect.
circumstance (extinction of the lineage) that links the other two and must be verified in each particular case. All these elements are required for her nomos to have the force of law. In the case at hand, Antigone subsumes her disobedience on behalf of Polyneices under the enabling circumstance of the extinction, considering that Polyneices is the last brother in the line for whom the burial can be performed.

On the other hand, it is important to realize that the extinction of a family is, more than a fact, an event. Indeed, the utter destruction of a family, as attested in literary and legal sources of the era, is a disaster of the first magnitude and rooted in Greek social imaginary as one of the worst calamities one can experience. It was inflicted, literally or symbolically, on the bitterest enemies both of the individual and of the state. For example, by looking at curses in classical times, it appears that the worst punishment someone could wish upon his enemies was the destruction of his family, root and branch (Lacey 1968, 77). Moreover, the symbolic demolition of a house was imposed as a public form of punishment, upon one whose whole family was expelled from the polis on account of treason or some other high crime (ibid.). Conversely, institutions such as the epiklerate and the adoption of male descendants worked to “ensure that families or oikoi did not die through lack of descendants, and that oikoi which had only female descendants did not disappear” (Lacey 1968, 22). As Isaeus 7.30 (On the State of Apollodorus) bears witness:

All men, when they are near the end, take measures of precautions on their own behalf to prevent their families from becoming extinct … And there is not merely a personal feeling in favor of this course, but the state has taken public measures to secure that it shall be followed, since by law it entrusts the archon with the duty of preventing families from being extinguished. (trans. Foster 1962)

When Antigone brings the end of her family to the attention of the chorus, she is not conveying a simple private experience, but an event of primary legal and political magnitude. The extinction of a family line is an exceptional circumstance not only for her but for the city itself. Antigone argues, in fact, that the imperative to perform the ritual that will honor this loss (i.e., her action on behalf of the brother that signals this extinction) is of an entirely different order from any other case of family burial. Antigone’s disobedience should be recognized as legitimate, for it embodies the values and norms of the society as a whole. In doing so Antigone is not merely expressing her feelings of attachment to Polyneices, but making an argument that the citizens should be able to understand and respect as having the status of a nomos.

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In this essay I have attempted to unravel the line of reasoning Antigone pursues to justify her behavior. Now I would like to confront some of the charges that have been raised against this passage, beginning with the alleged contradiction between this nomos and her earlier pronouncement about the unwritten laws. Realizing that Antigone’s argument addresses her disobedience, and not the matter of who should or should not be buried (her disobedience takes shape in the burial, but only her disobedience requires
further justification), makes it easier to say that the contradiction with the unwritten laws is only apparent. In this passage Antigone does not deny the validity of the unwritten laws she invoked earlier but rather establishes the conditions on which her decision to bury Polynoeices can prevail against the citizens. It is clear from what I said above that Antigone would not have deemed it legitimate to act against the citizens in other circumstances. But to describe this acknowledgment as an abandonment or undoing of her original position (Jebb 1891, 259; Knox 1964, 104; Steiner 1984, 281) is to misrepresent what she does here. When the elders accuse Antigone of being autonomos [821], she responds by defending her original action with reasons that they too might find valid, showing that she is mindful of both her obligations to her family and to the city. Antigone’s gesture can be described as the conscientious act of a citizen who wishes to harmonize various conflicting commitments. This is not the withdrawal from her original position but the enunciation of its true complexity.

In a different vein it is also objected that, contrary to the wife of Intaphernes, Antigone did not have either husband or child among whom to choose, nor could she save those who were already dead. However, only if we consider that Antigone is actually choosing which family members to bury (or to save) do these puzzles emerge. If, on the other hand, we shift the focus to the real political concerns she is to overcome (i.e., to assure that her claim on behalf of the family is not boundless, but reasonable for the city to accept), Antigone is actually pre-empting the objections of the citizens, most effectively, by rejecting the closest of the analogies.

Far from being excessively cold and hyper-rationalistic, her argument is attuned to the emotional tone of the rest of the scene. In her last attempt to awaken the sympathy of the chorus and of the audience in general, Antigone conveys the harsh penalties she faces in order to fulfill what she believed was (and still is) her foremost duty. In her final song among the living, she admits to resenting dying, although she had earlier daringly claimed she would not [71-2, 461-2]. She now confronts the undesired (though voluntarily assumed) consequences of her prior decisions. She is going to die alone, unmarried, childless, and wretched. She must forfeit the prospects of a life, perhaps happy in the company of the sister she loves and in the affection of the husband she will never marry. Still, she finds within herself the strength to vindicate her action, turning to engage her audience in an empathetic understanding of her reasons. Apparently, she would be reassured if her reasons were acknowledged, at least, by the wise citizens.

However, Antigone does not wait for the chorus’ reaction. Losing her hope at last, she gives up also her natural allies and even wonders whether she should look at the heavens anymore [922]. She concludes by hurling at those who have caused her suffering the wish that they suffer as much as she has [925-8], a gesture which is interpreted by the chorus as a blow coming from the same old tempestuous winds [930]. It is as if, by the end of her speech, she no longer expects that her vindication will come from those next to her on the stage, but must come from elsewhere.

The dramatic effect of Antigone’s appeal, which seems to have fallen on deaf ears within the play, is to put the audience in the position of the person who can still hear and
judge what she says and does. Like the original Athenian audience we now are as it were in the play itself, as the collective person who can still be persuaded by Antigone, still understand and approve of her nomos. If we are able to perceive clearly what she says and does, perhaps she will finally receive the judgment she deserves.

REFERENCE LIST

EXTABE: ANTIGONE’S NOMOS

Angeles: University of California Press.
Cambridge and London: Loeb Classical Library.
Sophocles’ Ajax presents a world possessed by the consciousness of its hero. It is not enough to say that all attention is turned upon him or that the world of the play is preoccupied by him. In fact, the entire play is a series of attempts by one party or another to control Ajax, grasp his intentions, reify his significance and, in short, keep him in place. All of these attempts fail, and so too have efforts by audiences and critics to understand completely Ajax’ character. So long as he survives, the play’s very contours are contorted to accommodate the turns of the hero’s ultimately uncontainable consciousness. Even tragic commonplaces, such as the immovability of the chorus from the stage, are overturned by Ajax’ actions. After his death, the drama is taken up with the question of how to finalize the memory and the meaning of Ajax. The question remains open. Ajax always understands himself better than he is understood by anyone else and, in particular, by the audience. Scholars have long acquiesced to the notion of dramatic irony, whereby the audience perceives more than the characters onstage do, but Ajax lays out the opposite model. In this play, the hero outpaces the audience in understanding due to the dramatic indeterminacy of Sophocles’ portrait. Where can we find an explanation for this mode of characterization? In this paper, I argue that a model can be found in the early theories of Mikhail Bakhtin on the novel in general and Dostoevsky in particular.

In 1929, Bakhtin published a monograph on Dostoevsky, his first major work. More than thirty years later, after an intervening period of exile and obscurity, Bakhtin expanded and republished the work. This later version, to which I will refer throughout this paper, is a difficult book to classify: it is about Dostoevsky, but also about existence, faith, communication, and death, among other things. Although Bakhtin uses the term “dialogic” in this work and declares “polyphony” the “artistic key” to Dostoevsky’s novels, he does not present the concept of dialogism with all its implications for

* I am grateful to the three anonymous referees for their helpful criticism and suggestions.

1 This is what Knox, B. M. W., “The Ajax of Sophocles”, HSCP 65 (1961), 1-37, argues: “Ajax, dead and alive, imposes his gigantic personality on every turn of the action, every speech. When he is not speaking himself, he is being talked about; there is only one subject discussed in this play, whether the speaker is Ajax, Athena, Odysseus, Tecmessa, the messenger, Teucer, Menelaus, or Agamemnon—and the subject is Ajax” (1-2). Knox stops short of seeing Ajax’ awareness of his own significance. This awareness makes him more than just a subject of discussion.

2 Bakhtin, M. M., Emerson, C., trans., Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics (Minneapolis 1984), 17; henceforth to be referred to as PDP.
discourse and genre until his later writings. Bakhtin’s statement in this work has much more to do with his view of consciousness. One element of Bakhtin’s theory that is especially relevant to Ajax is his treatment of consciousness (in Dostoevsky) as the facility to experience, process, and react to events:

Dostoevsky frequently interrupts, but he never drowns out the other’s voice, never finishes it off “from himself,” that is, out of his own and alien consciousness. This is, so to speak, the activity of God in His relation to man, a relation allowing man to reveal himself utterly (in his immanent development), to judge himself, to refute himself (PDP 285).

Dostoevsky, for Bakhtin, distinguishes himself from other authors in allowing his heroes full consciousness.

Some of the qualities that Bakhtin attributes to Dostoevsky’s works correspond closely to the qualities Bernard Knox perceives in Sophocles’ plays: the centrality of the hero, his moral recalcitrance, his refusal to be assimilated into the world around him. But Knox’ The Heroic Temper does not probe as deeply as Bakhtin’s literary philosophy. Knox accurately describes aspects of Sophoclean characterization, but does not illuminate its elusive core. He acknowledges the heroes’ “strange success” but does not tell us in what it consists. Bakhtin shows something about Dostoevsky as well as something about the human condition—that individuals strive for release from systems that seek to quantify and define them. In guidelines that Bakhtin wrote when expanding his book on Dostoevsky, he reminded himself that “[a]s major heroes Dostoevsky portrays only those people in his work with whom argument has not yet ended (for indeed it is not yet ended in the world)” (PDP 284). This tendency towards unending argument is found in all of Sophocles’ heroes, but I will discuss only Ajax in this paper. Ajax, one of Sophocles’ earlier plays, offers a stark view of the hero’s uncontainable consciousness and the indeterminacy of his character.

Bakhtin’s interpretation of the heroes in Dostoevsky’s novels can be brought to bear directly on Sophocles’ Ajax because Dostoevsky’s protagonists are similarly

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4 Bakhtin’s project was wholly broad and ambitious. Emerson (1984), xxxi, writes of Bakhtin’s lifelong “philosophical project…[that] constituted a basically religious quest into the nature of the Word.” The truth of this statement is perhaps best illustrated by a passage from Bakhtin’s notes: “Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, in the world symposium” (PDP 293).
5 Knox (1966), 6: “Sophocles pits against limitations on human stature great individuals who refuse to accept those limitations, and in their failure achieve a strange success.”
dominant and, for Bakhtin, similarly impossible to understand or objectify fully. His reading of the protagonist of Notes from the Underground is instructive:

The hero from the underground eavesdrops on every word someone else says about him, he looks at himself, as it were, in all the mirrors of other people’s consciousnesses, he knows all the possible refractions of his image in those mirrors… But he also knows that all these definitions, prejudiced as well as objective, rest in his hands and he cannot finalize them precisely because he himself perceives them; he can go beyond their limits and can thus make them inadequate. He knows that he has the final word, and he seeks at whatever cost to retain for himself this final word about himself, the word of his self-consciousness, in order to become in it that which he is not. His consciousness of self lives by its unfinalizability, by its unclosedness and its indeterminacy (PDP 53).

Ajax also is intensely preoccupied with how the rest of the world reads him. His anxiety on this matter motivates him to perform his two most significant actions: his attempt to murder the generals Agamemnon and Menelaus (which precedes the play) and his suicide. Yet, in the end, it is not Ajax’ acts of violence which keep him from being “finalized,” for these are constantly in danger of being appropriated and interpreted at his expense by his community, by the divine world, and by the audience. Rather, Ajax’ intentions, decisions, and words expose a gap between the audience’s comprehension of him and his comprehension of himself, and keep him from being, in Bakhtin’s phrase, “absolutely equal to himself.” Ajax is not limited to what the audience sees and hears.

I. The World Against the Hero

Ajax begins with Athena’s explication of events. This first takes the form of a monologue addressed to Odysseus, then a dialogue with him, and finally a malicious exhibition of the maddened Ajax. This prologue is exceptional; Ajax is Sophocles’ only extant play with a divine, explanatory figure in the prologue. Yet this divine presence stops short of presenting the drama through an omniscient lens, for Athena’s involvement turns out not to determine of what is to come. Such a determinative perspective would have subordinated that of the hero, as can be seen in certain plays of Euripides, which feature gods whose choices direct the plot. In Euripides’ Hippolytus, for example, Aphrodite spends the prologue explaining the punishments she has devised and predicting their outcome. In the Bacchae, Dionysus, like Aphrodite, uses the prologue to

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6 Bakhtin, M. M., Emerson C. and Holquist, M., trans., The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays (Austin 1981), 34; henceforth to be referred to as DI.
7 Cf. Whitman, C. H., Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism (Cambridge 1966), 69-70: “Athena is a particularly subtle figure…She motivates nothing; she acts through no direct line of events; and the whole latter half of the play is devoted not to a justification of the gods, least of all Athena, who disappears entirely. It is Ajax who is justified, and nothing is said in favor of Athena’s apparent “justice.””

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discuss the punishment he has in mind and then sees his plans through to completion for the remainder of the play.\textsuperscript{8} The human characters in these plays, Phaedra and in the former and Pentheus in the latter, appear ignorant and passive by contrast. There are parallels here with Bakhtin’s view of literary works that eschew dialogism:

The total finalizing meaning of the life and death of each character is revealed only in the author’s field of vision, and thanks solely to the advantageous “surplus” which that field enjoys over every character, that is, thanks to that which the character cannot himself see or understand \textit{\(PDP\) 70}.

Tragedy as a genre is often thought to offer such a totalizing “field of vision.”\textsuperscript{9} In Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus Rex}, the ignorance of the hero—despite his good intentions and sharp intellect—has been read as a declaration of man’s helplessness. The notorious “tragic irony” of this play resides in the distance between the audience’s knowledge and that of Oedipus.\textsuperscript{10}

There is no such distance from the hero afforded to the audience of Sophocles’ \textit{Ajax}. Their foreknowledge of Ajax’ suicide (an essential element of the Ajax story in Greek mythology) is matched through much of the play by Ajax’ own certainty of his end. Beyond this, the audience follows the progress of Ajax’ intent with no help from any external or elevated source: the presence of the divine Athena does not give hints of what is to come, only of what has transpired, and the chorus is generally ignorant and

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\textsuperscript{8} Cf. Foley, H. P., “The Masque of Dionysus”, \textit{TAPhA} 110 (1980), 107-33. Foley aptly labels Dionysus the “stage director” (110) of the \textit{Bacchae}—such is his influence over the plot. Of course, not all of Euripides’ divine prologue-speakers have so much control over the action: Apollo and Death in \textit{Alcestis} and Poseidon and Athena in the \textit{Trojan Women} are portrayed more as privileged participants than omnipotent directors. This perhaps has something to do with the fact that they must share the stage with one another.

\textsuperscript{9} Bakhtin would have been the first to think so. Indeed, he refused drama the honor of “polyphony” or “dialogism,” declaring that “[i]n drama the world must be made from a single piece” \textit{(PDP} 17). I would argue that one of Bakhtin’s significant limitations is his insistence on exclusivity. In \textit{Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics}, he excludes Tolstoy; in \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, he excludes all of epic. Whether genres that are \textit{not} the novel can produce “polyphonic” works remains a matter of debate. Obviously I think that they can.

\textsuperscript{10} The notion of Sophoclean irony was suggested first in 1833 by Connop Thirlwall, who observed, in one instance, that a choral ode allows “the spectator to reflect, how different all is from what it seems” (Thirlwall, C., “On the Irony of Sophocles” in Dawe, R. D., \textit{Sophocles: The Classical Heritage} (New York 1996), 190). Irony, as such, is certainly at work in the first two thirds or so of \textit{Oedipus Rex}, but this interpretation ignores the final part of the play, following Oedipus’ discovery of his identity. In this significant portion of the drama, Oedipus’ character, choices and knowledge exceed our understanding. He too becomes an exemplum of dramatic indeterminacy rather than irony.

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bewildered. The audience, then, is left to depend on its hero in a relationship that is not at all dissimilar to the one Bakhtin describes between the narrator and hero in Dostoevsky’s narratives: “the narrator is literally fettered to his hero; he cannot back off from him sufficiently to give a summarizing and integrated image of his deeds and actions...it is from this maximally close, aperspectival point of view that he structures their representation” (PDP 225). Sophocles similarly provides a claustrophobically close view of his hero and does not undermine this view with other, better-informed perspectives. This unwillingness to undermine Ajax is illustrated by the degree to which Athena, the immortal speaker of the prologue, disappoints the audience’s expectation that she will elucidate the play and its hero, though she appears to promise such elucidation. Her opening speech to Odysseus ends with this statement: “and there is no use any longer in your peering into the gate,/ but rather tell me why you’re going to this trouble,/so that you may learn from someone knowledgeable” (11-13). Athena’s subsequent comment to Odysseus is in an equally omniscient vein: “I knew all this, Odysseus, and for some time I have gone around to keep watch” (36). She thus attempts from the very start to establish her credentials as an expert witness, so as to define the situation and the hero.

When Athena forces the reluctant Odysseus to view Ajax in his delusional and murderous state, she offers not only answers to Odysseus’ questions and an explanation of obscure bits of evidence, but also living proof of her version of events: “but I will even show you this sickness in full view,/so that, having seen it, you can declare it to all the Argives” (66-67). Athena’s goal is to “totally quantif[y], measure, and define” Ajax, not only for the benefit of Odysseus, but also in the view of the whole Argive army. It is hard to imagine a character more thoroughly determined and finished than Athena’s version of Ajax. Even the meanings of his own words are fixed completely by the goddess, for the delusion that Athena has cast on Ajax causes his own utterances to slip from their intended denotations. When Ajax speaks of honoring Athena “in gratitude for this hunt” (93), the word “hunt” does not carry the meaning that Ajax has assigned to it (his intended hunt of the Greek generals), but instead refers to his recent hunting of livestock, and also to Athena’s hunting of him. Bakhtin writes that Dostoevsky’s characters “all do furious battle with…definitions of their personality in the mouths of other people.”

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11 Cf. Burton, R. W. B., *The Chorus in Sophocles’ Tragedies* (Oxford 1980), 6-40, who declares “we shall…find no help from the chorus in understanding the moral issues raised by the play” (7). This is in contrast to choruses in other plays that are positioned at a nearly authorial remove, like the chorus of Sophocles’ *Antigone* which sings the famous “Ode to Man”, delivers a lecture on the wayward influence of Eros, and scolds both Antigone and Creon for their misjudgments.
12 Translations of *Ajax* are from Garvie, A. F., ed. and trans., *Sophocles: Ajax* (Warminster 1998), versified and modified for the sake of literal sense and word order.
13 Athena’s observation that Ajax was once great (“Who could have been found to be more prudent than this man [was]/ or better at doing what had to be done?” (119-20)) only serves to redouble her triumph over the power of the gods to crush the likes of him. Cf. Garvie (1998), 135.
14 Cf. Worman, N., “The Herkos Achaion Transformed: Character Type and Spatial Meaning in the Ajax”, *CP* 96 (2001), 228-52, for how these verbal reversals are reinforced by visual ones.
Ajax is forced to do battle with the finalizing words about him that he himself unintentionally utters.

Yet Ajax, with help from Odysseus, challenges the terminating force of Athena’s definitions. Odysseus exposes the goddess’ small-mindedness through his reluctance to join in her humiliating exposition of Ajax (74, 80, 88, 121-126) and, ultimately, he is the final line of defense in the play that prevents Ajax from being defined and condemned. All of this happens despite the fact that the relationship between Ajax and Odysseus was traditionally portrayed as problematic. In the Odyssey, Odysseus tells the tale of approaching the shade of Ajax and being rebuffed: “Apart from them all, the spirit of Ajax, son of Telamon, stood at a distance…So I spoke, but he answered me not a word and went his way to Erebus to join the other ghosts of those dead and gone” (11.543-44, 563-64). Ajax and his allies believe that this famous antipathy will guide Odysseus’ actions.

Therefore, when Odysseus plays the role of Ajax’ defender, it is a great surprise to all who encounter him (including, one expects, the ancient audience), especially in view of Ajax’ expectation that Odysseus will be only too happy to observe his destruction (379-82). Even Athena seems taken aback by Odysseus’ apparent compassion for her spectacle of humiliation (75-81). The astonishment that Teucer, half-brother to Ajax, expresses to Odysseus (“you have deceived [ἔψευσα] me greatly in my expectation” [1382]) encapsulates the indeterminate aspect of Odysseus. By behaving honestly and honorably, Odysseus has “deceived” Teucer. The very quality that led to the inherently false reification of Odysseus previously—his tendency to deceive (ψεῦδος)—is ironically the instrument (in Teucer’s estimation) of undermining the false quantification of Odysseus. In moving so far beyond the expectations of others and disregarding their easy characterizations, in refusing to “equal himself,” Odysseus exhibits the unfinalizability he affirms in Ajax. By viewing Ajax as a “fully valid ‘thou’” Odysseus himself becomes, to use Bakhtin’s phrase, “another autonomous ‘I’” (PDP 63). In order to do so, he must reject from Athena’s influence, a move that is nowhere anticipated in literature preceding Ajax. In the Odyssey, Odysseus stands by Athena wholeheartedly, and his relationship with her is elsewhere in tragedy portrayed as strong (cf. Ph. 134). In Ajax, his defiance of Athena is subtle and understated, but powerful nonetheless in showing the limitations of the divinity’s authority and a change in literary perspective.

The fact that Sophocles shows the limitations of Athena’s influence in order to give autonomy to his hero(es) exemplifies the need for what Bakhtin calls a “revolt” of sorts. And still more revolts are required; further attempts at totalizing definition await

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17 That the opening lines of the play, spoken by Athena, seem to “reaffirm in a quite particular way the traditionally close relationship between herself and her favorite”, Seale, D., Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles (Chicago 1982), 144, only makes more startling the gap that appears between their perspectives, as Athena seems to misjudge her “favorite” and Odysseus distances himself from the worldview of his patron goddess.
Ajax. They are dramatized through two social institutions: prophecy, an arm of Greek religion, and sophistic debate, an instrument of Athenian democracy. These forces are incarnated, respectively, in the messenger who reports Calchas’ mantic pronouncements on Ajax’ past culpability and present chances at life (748-83) and in the Atridae, who seek at the play’s end to discredit Ajax among the Argives (1047-1162, 1226-1317). Calchas’ prophecies about Ajax are not incorrect, nor does he seem to intend him harm, but his prophetic intervention is one more finger pointing at Ajax, laying blame for his past and constraining his future. This is prophecy with a reifying edge. The Atridae seek more directly to destroy Ajax and try to use the strength of their political authority and the sophistry of their arguments to condemn him.

Not without insight is Peter Sellars and Robert Auletta’s 1987 adaptation of Ajax, in which the play is envisioned as a case of martial law with Athena as the judge and jury, Odysseus as an investigative agent, and Menelaus and Agamemnon as a prosecuting team. In this context, Bakhtin’s view of Dmitry’s investigation and trial in The Brothers Karamazov is illuminating:

The investigators, judges, prosecutor, defense attorney, and commission of experts are all equally incapable of approaching the unfinalized and undecided core of Dmitry’s personality….They seek and see in him only the factual, palpable definitiveness of experiences and actions, and subordinate them to already defined concepts and schemes (PDP 62).

Ajax’ world, like Dmitry’s, is filled with systems that seek to determine who he is and what will become of him. Besides being spied on, defined, and prophesied about, he has also been falsely judged in the competition for Achilles’ arms, maddened, and humiliated.

The deficiencies of the Homeric tradition, divine and prophetic oversight, and political hierarchy are all exposed as inadequate to the audience so that Ajax can escape reification. The value of human consciousness, as exemplified by the consciousness of one man, is at stake. Bakhtin writes of a character who perceives the threat of becoming “something totally quantified, measured, and defined to the last detail” (PDP 58).

Perceiving the “falseness of such an approach,” the hero revolts:

The serious and deeper meaning of this revolt might be expressed this way: a living human being cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some secondhand, finalizing cognitive process. In a human being there is

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18 Rose P., “Historicizing Sophocles’ Ajax”, 59-90, in Goff, B., ed., History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama (Austin 1995), 65-66, perceives a somewhat different courtroom metaphor at work with Sophocles himself as “a brilliant trial lawyer in an apparently open-and-shut murder case” into which “a few mitigating elements are unobtrusively slipped in” which eventually “culminate in a crescendo of defense.” This version of events underestimates Ajax’ role in his own defense, but points to the overarching threat in the play of presumed condemnation. Knox (1961), 7, aptly labels Athena a “minister of justice.”
always something that only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition (PDP 58, Bakhtin’s emphasis).

With this perspective in mind, let us examine the nature of Ajax’ revolt.

II. The Hero Against the World

Peter Rose writes that Ajax “faces the total obliteration of the basis of his identity.” Indeed, Ajax begins and ends with the forces that seek to reify its hero: delusion at the start and dishonor after death. (Death is, for Bakhtin, the ultimate form of reification [PDP 73].) The delusion causes Ajax, according to the account of his concubine, Tecmessa, to converse with a shade (301-2), but, as the audience already knows, the shadow that truly haunts Ajax is the “Ajax” that Athena has constructed, the one who pronounced his words but spoke Athena’s meanings, rather like the “double” portrayed in an early work of Dostoevsky, who follows the protagonist around, aping his tone, movements, and style. When Ajax regains sanity, he must reckon with how he has been made into a double of himself, one that disgusts him. Bakhtin writes of this painful recognition in Dostoevsky’s fiction:

He forces his heroes to recognize themselves, their idea, their own words, their orientation, their gesture in another person, in whom all these phenomena change their integrated and ultimate meaning and take on a different sound, the sound of parody and ridicule (PDP 217).

Ajax is compelled to recognize words and gestures that are nominally his made foreign or other through a sinister ventriloquism: “Alas, the laughter! How insulted I have been!” (367). Sophocles (as Dostoevsky in his later works) has no need for another individual, a true double, to show the “dramatized crisis of [his hero’s] self-consciousness” (PDP 217). Parody and ridicule are pronounced through Ajax’ own ravings.

When Ajax re-enters the scene, he must reckon with an environment that is keenly antagonistic toward him on both the human level and the divine:

For I no longer deserve to look for any help to the race of gods or of men who live but for a day. Rather, the mighty goddess, daughter of Zeus, tortures me to destruction...And the whole army would murder me with sword in hand (397-403, 408-9).

Ajax is immersed in a crisis with his world in every sense: his entire society either advances menacingly or, in the case of his chorus of sailors and his concubine, assails him with entreaties for protection: “on you does my entire salvation depend. Be mindful even of me” (519-20). In Bakhtinian terms, it is entirely appropriate for a character whose consciousness is being fully explored to exist in such demanding surroundings:

19 Rose (1995), 77.
Not a single element in this atmosphere can be neutral: everything must touch the character to the quick, provoke him, interrogate him, even polemicize with him and taunt him; everything must be directed toward the hero himself, turned toward him, everything must make itself felt as discourse about someone actually present, as the word of a “second” and not of a “third” person (PDP 64, Bakhtin’s emphasis).

In terms of Greek tragedy, Ajax’ words are delivered at this point with great emotional impact: they are sung in a lament called a kommos, a song of anguish that is exchanged between the grief-stricken protagonist and the chorus. That the chorus only responds to his lyrics in spoken iambics increases the impression of his pain and isolation. The extent to which this lament demonstrates the depth of Ajax’ crisis is communicated in several additional ways. First, the audience hears of Ajax’ previous view of lamentation from Tecmessa:

And straightaway he broke out into painful lamentations, which I had never heard from him before. For he always used to explain that such laments were the mark of a bad and dejected man; rather, without any sound of shrill wailing he used to utter low moans, bellowing like a bull (317-22).

From this portrait it is understood that Ajax is confronting a catastrophe of self. His clash with the world has upset the tenets of his character and released him from his own standards. The result is a man, previously a fierce, animalistic fighter (“bellowing like a bull”), whose self-consciousness is now bursting forth into the world, fully articulate in the language of lament.

Notwithstanding the mild admonishments of the chorus (386) and the long and thoughtful petition of Tecmessa (485-524), the figures that Ajax argues with exist essentially within his imagination and are relevant insofar as they refract his

As Segal, C., Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles (Cambridge 1981), 129, points out, Ajax’ whole experience with madness has brought him deeply into the world of beasts: “in his madness Ajax not only confuses beasts with men but also enters the beast world.” Yet the experience of mingling with beasts has initiated an unexpected shift in his character, displacing the heroic sort of bestial fierceness with a very verbal kind of consciousness. In this reading, I explicitly disagree with Segal (1981), 134, who misreads line 322 as meaning that Ajax is presently “roaring like a bull”, a reading utterly at odds with Tecmessa’s continued use of the imperfect tense to denote a description of Ajax’ past behavior. I also depart here from Garvie (1998), 155, who does not misread the line but does, along with Segal, interpret Ajax’ loss of a “bull-like roar” with a loss of language. This “bull-like roar” strikes me as starkly inarticulate by comparison to the eloquence of Ajax’ four speeches in the play; this is in fact the first time in literary history that Ajax is given such verbal fluency (cf. Pindar, Nem. 8.24, who labels Ajax “ineloquent” [ἀγλωσσόν]).
consciousness. Even the physical danger of his situation absorbs him only inasmuch as it signifies society’s ridicule (“they laugh at me because they have escaped,/ not with my consent” [454-55]).

When he considers various escape-routes from his dilemma, he does so in the structure of an argument with himself, with each alternative voicing the viewpoint of others, including the gods, the army, the environment itself, his father, and his enemies:

And now what should I do? I who am clearly hated by the gods, and whom the Greek army loathes, and whom all these Trojan plains detest.

Am I to cross the Aegean sea for home, leaving my station where the ships are anchored and the Atridae all alone?

Then what countenance shall I show to my father, Telamon, when I appear? How will he ever tolerate looking upon me, appearing naked of the prizes of valor, for which he himself gained the great crown of glory? To do this would be unbearable.

But then should I go to the Trojan ramparts, fighting one and one and performing some benefit until I finally die? But, by doing thus, I would doubtlessly give pleasure to the Atridae. This cannot be.

Some other way must be sought out, by which I can prove to my aged father I was not born from him a coward in nature (457-72).

Each external perspective is layered with his own, giving his words the “double-voiced” quality that Bakhtin has ascribed to an interior monologue of Raskolnikov, the hero of Crime and Punishment:

…all these future major characters of the novel are already reflected here in Raskolnikov’s consciousness, they have entered into a thoroughly dialogized interior monologue, entered with their own “truths,” with their own positions in life, and Raskolnikov has entered into a fundamental and intense interior dialogue with them, a dialogue of ultimate questions and ultimate life decisions. From the very beginning he already knows everything, takes everything into account, anticipates everything. He has already entered into dialogic contact with the whole of life surrounding him (PDP 74).

Ajax too anticipates every option and objection. There is the phase of his argument in which he plays out his predicament from the point of view of the gods and the entire army, a subsequent phase that deals with his father’s perspective and expectations, a confrontation with the Atridae, and finally a return to his thoughts of his father, which get the closest to the core issue of self with which Ajax is wracked. Indeed, much of Ajax’ anxiety regarding his identity is expressed as anxiety over his father’s past (434-440) versus his present predicament and, later, his present predicament versus his son’s future (“my son, may you be more fortunate than your father, but in other respects like him”.

\[21\] Cf. Seale (1982), 153: “He sees himself as an object of sight, pointing repeatedly to the spectacle of his humiliation.”
Ajax views both his father and son as reflections of himself. The absence of his father and muteness of his son only deepen his engagement with his imagined, reflective images of himself in them.

Ajax is generally concerned with how others affect or determine his identity. His view of all his relationships and hardships is haunted by this preoccupation, which finds expression in his punning interpretation of his own cry “αἰαῖ”: “Aiai! Who would have thought that my name would so correspond to my misfortunes?” (430-31). Thus each bit of Ajax’ social and linguistic environment is drawn into his overwrought consciousness. The world, from the point of view of Ajax, is significant only insofar as it signifies something about himself. In this way, Ajax is well-described in Bakhtin’s account of the dialogic hero:

Consequently those elements out of which the hero’s image is composed are not features of reality—features of the hero himself or of his everyday surroundings—but rather the significance of these features for the hero himself, for his self-consciousness. All the stable and objective qualities of a hero—his social position, the degree to which he is sociology or characterologically typical, his habitus, his spiritual profile and even his very physical appearance—that is, everything that usually serves an author in creating a fixed and stable image of the hero, ‘who he is,’ becomes in Dostoevsky the object of the hero’s own introspection, the subject of his self-consciousness (PDP 48, Bakhtin’s emphasis).

Although it is rarely recognized, Ajax’ penchant for introspection is one of his most constant and compelling characteristics. The result of Ajax’ introspection and arguments is his decision to commit suicide. When Ajax exits at line 595, his mind is apparently made up and his character appears to have hardened through firm resolution. This is the claim he makes to the entreating Tecmessa: “you seem to me to be thinking foolishly, if even now you have it in mind to school my character” (594-95). Here is a moment at which Ajax appears “absolutely equal to himself.” His character (ἦθος), decisions, and forthcoming suicide all seem determined and clear to the audience.

But this is not the end for Ajax. Rather, a sort of sea-change overtakes him. Before the audience’s eyes, Ajax’ character slips from their grasp, and indeed from that of his compatriots when he delivers the soliloquy widely known as the “deception speech.” There is no indication of what has altered Ajax, but when he re-enters the stage at the midpoint of the play, it is clear that he has entered a liminal space, a moment of strange peace and resolve that lies between his tumultuous past and suicidal future. Bakhtin writes that Dostoevsky “always represents a person on the threshold of a final

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24 This aspect of Ajax is usually more pejoratively referred to as self-absorption, as in Seale (1982), 153. Knox (1961), 12, seems to touch on the introspective aspect of Ajax when he remarks that when delivering the “deception speech,” Ajax is “talking to himself.”
decision, at a moment of crisis, at an unfinalizable—and unpredictable—turning point for his soul” (PDP 61, Bakhtin’s emphasis). Such a “threshold” moment has befallen Ajax. There appears a “gap between his authentic essence and its external manifestation” (DI 34) that restores to Ajax the capability of defining himself. His own knowledge of himself exceeds ours. For, in a turn of events that has long fascinated and baffled critics, Ajax reports that he has changed his mind. He declares that he will yield to the gods, to fate, and even to the loathsome Atridae, claiming that he now understands that all things change with time:

Therefore I should know in the future to yield to the gods, and we will learn to respect the sons of Atreus.
They are the rulers, so it is necessary to yield. How could it be otherwise?
For even things that are terrible and strongest
bow down to what is held in honor: there is the snow-tracking winters that give way to summer with its lovely fruits.
The eternal cycling of night withdraws
for day with its white horses to kindle its light.
The breath of terrible winds puts to sleep the groaning sea. And even omnipotent sleep frees that which it has bound, nor does it hold its catch forever.
How then shall I not learn to be of sound mind?
I shall (666-78).

His speech seems to express a renunciation of his previous will to commit suicide. It suggests that he will return to his previous role as protector of Tecmessa, his son, and his soldiers, who are assured by the calm authority with which his lines are invested. But whence arises this authority? Certainly it is not drawn from his function as military leader or from any strength previously associated with Ajax, who is known in the Iliad as man of few and blunt words. Rather his new authority springs from a sort of poetic wisdom that radiates from his language:

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25 No consensus has been reached on how to interpret this speech. The issue is divided between the idea that Ajax is honest but misunderstood and the view that deliberate deception is involved. Bowra, C. M., Sophoclean Tragedy (Oxford 1944), Welcker, F. G., “Ueber den Aias des Sophokles”, in Kleine Schriften Zur Griechische Literaturgeschichte (Bonn 1845), 264-355, Whitman (1966), Sicherl, M., “The Tragic Issue in Sophocles’ Ajax”, Yale Classical Studies 25 (1977), 67-98, and Reinhardt, K., Harvey, H. D., trans., Sophocles (Oxford 1979), and hold the former position, proposing that Ajax intends to speak the truth but unintentionally speaks in obscure ambiguities. Jebb, R. C., Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments with Critical Notes, Commentary, and Translation in English Prose, Vol. 1-7 (Cambridge 1889-1908) and Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, T. von, Die Dramatische Technik des Sophokles (Berlin 1917) argue for the latter position, that the speech is straight, deliberate deception. Moore, J., “The Dissembling-speech of Ajax”, YCIS 25 (1977), 47-66, performs a high-wire act of arguing that Ajax deceives, but does so using “unnatural language” in order to avoid “verbal untruth” (55). This is not an exhaustive account of the vast bibliography on this speech.
Long and immeasurable time reveals 
all that is obscure and, once brought to light, buries them again. 
There is nothing that should not be expected, but even a terrible oath 
and over-strict minds are conquered (646-49).

There is a stark quality of abstraction in most of this speech: it seems to speak past other people rather than to them (until the very end of it when he doles out orders [684-691]). Despite the fact that this soliloquy describes the movement of actions and reactions in the world, it lacks the dialogic structure of argument and counterargument apparent in his earlier speeches. This foreclosure of connections to others in his society suggests that Ajax’ newly acquired authority is derived from a source other than his previous social role, though the audience does not discover the origin of Ajax’ insights or his reasons for stating them. The audience does not even know whether Ajax believes what he is saying. This speech is the epicenter of dramatic indeterminacy in Ajax.

No part of the play is more engaged in the greater dilemmas of the drama than this one. For, throughout this speech, Ajax expresses a grievance with the play itself, as opposed to with one of its characters.26 His descriptions of time and its fluctuations, his acknowledgements of the inevitability of change and the necessity to yield do not apply to him at all.27 Rather, they describe the play as a whole and reveal its outcome. Ajax is taking issue with events that seek to finalize him, chiefly by defining him posthumously. One instance of revelation comes when Ajax begins a section of rumination by noting that even the institution of enemies is not a stable one: “for I only now understand that/
our enemy should only be hated to the extent/ that he will later become a friend” (678-80). This comment does not reflect his own experience directly (all his friends remain friends and enemies remain enemies, insofar as he is concerned), but it corresponds to the experience of the audience, who observes Odysseus’ surprisingly compassionate attitude at the start of the play and soon sees his enmity towards Ajax disappear at the end. Further, when Ajax proclaims in his opening sentence that “there is nothing that should be unexpected” (648), he anticipates his half-brother’s discovery of Odysseus’ unknowability (discussed above), using the same root (ἐλπ-) for “unexpected” (ἀελπτον) that his brother will use for his false “expectation” (ἐλπίδος).

Ultimately, Ajax anticipates the final conflicts of the play. His observations on the power of time, pronounced by a voice not formerly recognizable as his own, are spoken as if applicable to himself, but none of the changes or revelations he promises is fulfilled in a straightforward manner. His words report one thing (his salvation) but allow for the possibility of another (his death):

But in these matters all will be well…
For I am going to where I must journey, but you do what I tell you,
and perhaps you may soon learn
that even if I am unhappy now, I have been saved (684, 690-92).

Is he lying? Or honestly speaking misread truths? The answers to these questions are simply not available to the audience. Ajax’ character has taken wing, and no one except him has access to any final elucidation of his consciousness.

In his final speech, just before his suicide, Ajax returns to an openly dialogic tone. This speech and his suicide seem to contradict the intentions expressed in the “deception speech,” but neither Ajax nor the play makes any apology for this incongruence. Rather, Ajax opens what Bakhtin might call a “loophole” of consciousness:

The loophole makes all the heroes’ self-definitions unstable, the word in them has no hard and fast meaning, and at any moment, like a chameleon, it is ready to change its tone and its ultimate meaning.

The loophole makes the hero ambiguous and elusive even for himself. In order to break through to his self the hero must travel a very long road (PDP 234).

Despite the intensity of Ajax’ arguments with his friends, family, and enemies, he remains free of their characterizations of him and finally disentangles himself from them altogether. His last speech is not an interface with the particular characters of the play but with gods, space, causation, and reality. After personifying the sword with which he will kill himself (“The killer stands…” [815]), he engages in lengthy requests and prayers to Zeus, Hermes, the avenging Furies, the sun, death, and several significant landscapes in an ascending frenzy of address:
Oh light, oh holy soil of my native Salamis, oh foundation of my father’s hearth, and famous Athens, and the race that has grown up with me, these springs and rivers, and the Trojan plains I call on, farewell, my nourishment (859-63).

It is no mistake that Ajax’ farewell includes an apostrophe to Athens and the Athenians: he is carrying on an exchange with the audience. The limits of Ajax’ engagement are not set by the author at the character’s expense. He compels the world to recognize his unfinalized life, even as he paves his way to death. As he fervently addresses the world with “thou,” even the audience cannot help but “thou” him back. Bakhtin’s discussion of the power of address in Dostoevsky is relevant here:

The element of address is essential to every discourse in Dostoevsky, narrative discourse as well as the discourse of the hero. In Dostoevsky’s world generally there is nothing merely thing-like, no mere matter, no object—there are only subjects. Therefore there is no word-judgment, no word about an object, no secondhand referential word—there is only the word as address, the word dialogically contacting another word, a word about a word addressed to a word (PDP 237).

The frequency of address in Ajax’ speeches, particularly this final speech, commands the active participation of everyone and everything called upon.

Ajax’ death, an eloquently prefaced suicide, is acutely demonstrative and dynamic. It is what Bakhtin called a “death-act” instead of a “death”:

In Dostoevsky’s world, strictly speaking, there are no deaths as objectified and organic facts in which a person’s responsively active consciousness takes no part; in Dostoevsky’s world there are only murders, suicides, and insanity, that is, there are only death-acts, responsively conscious (PDP 300).

Bakhtin equates suicide and insanity, but for Ajax these two experiences are sharply opposed. His insanity was imposed. His suicide is his own act of will and is performed according to the dictates of his personality and desires. Although Ajax dies, he is still not finished. His last words before his suicide exemplify how empty he renders the category “last words”: “this is the last word Ajax utters to you;/ the rest, I will tell to those down below in Hades” (864-65). His death does not constitute complete closure or finalizability, for he has not finished speaking, questioning, and arguing. Bakhtin writes of death in Dostoevsky as a departure: “The person has departed, having spoken his word, but the word itself remains in the open-ended dialogue” (PDP 300). Ajax’ words do not stop; his words exceed his life.

Rose (1995), 70, rightly refers to this as an instance of “interpellation” of the audience, with the intention to “evoke for the Athenian audience a very strong identification with Ajax and his followers.”
Homer terminates his version of Ajax in the *Odyssey* with silence, but Sophocles’ Ajax does not agree to be silenced. He is not an epic hero according to Bakhtin, for whom “[t]here is not the slightest gap between his authentic essence and its external manifestation” (*DI* 34). Rather, Sophocles’ Ajax is a product of the playwright’s “multiperspectival presentation” that allows Ajax to “develop…as a fragmented, conflicted image of his epic counterpart.”

Scholars are not successful in putting together the fragments of Ajax’ character, because he is not meant to be made final and complete. Ajax’ decisions are not explained, for his words obscure his intentions rather than reveal them. His thoughts are not ours to judge. Far from being the object of dramatic irony, he alone is able to access the knowledge that the audience is compelled to desire, but cannot have. Only Ajax knows Ajax.

Fifth-century Athenian tragedy opened up possibilities not dissimilar to those Bakhtin exclusively granted to the novel, which he calls the “only developing genre,” adding “[o]nly that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process” (*DI* 7). I have argued in this paper that many qualities attributed by Bakhtin to Dostoevsky are equally applicable to Sophocles. Similarly, many of Bakhtin’s observations about the novel are not limited to this one form of literature and can offer insight to the dynamics of other genres as well. Greek tragedy, like the novel, was a genre that constantly developed and changed with its time. Accordingly, many tragedies from the fifth century are concerned with the intricacies and conflicts of consciousness.

Sophocles made the autonomy of consciousness his subject, as is especially evident in *Ajax*. His hero’s fate is circumscribed, but his character is unbound.

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30 Cf. Vernant, J-P., “Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy”, in Vernant, J-P. and Vidal-Naquet, P., Lloyd, J., trans., *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York 1990), 31: “the tragic consciousness is born and develops along with tragedy. It is by being expressed in the form of an original literary genre that tragic thought, the tragic world, and tragic man are created.”
31 Cf. Whitman (1966), 64: “For Sophocles the character of the hero is the core. Hence the violent acts of Ajax, though not condoned, are not specifically analyzed; they are left to be what they are, while the man himself creates the drama.”
ARISTOPHANES ON TRAGEDY

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Fifty years before Aristotle wrote his *Poetics*, Aristophanes had devoted two comedies, *Thesmophoriazusae* (411) and *Frogs* (405), to the subject of tragedy. In both plays the plot shows the education of the main character in the nature of tragedy. Euripides learns in *Thesmophoriazusae* that he must present noble and not base women in his dramas. His depiction of perverse women in the theatre had moved real-life husbands to keep a narrow watch on their wives, and in order to be free of this tyranny, the women use their Thesmophoria to compel Euripides to change. *Frogs* shows the education of the god who presides over tragedy: Dionysus discovers that the telos of the tragedy-writer’s art is the education of the spectators to a heroic defence of their country. This discovery reverses the god’s earlier assumption that his own taste could judge the excellence of a poet. For both comedies, tragedy is a theoretical activity with direct practical results; what the spectators see in the theatre will determine their activity in the family or the State.

These ‘statements’ about tragedy occur through an argument whose general form

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1 This is an Athenian festival which celebrated Demeter and Persephone as the Thesmophoroi, a term which B. B. Rogers understands as “the givers and guardians of Home.” [The *Thesmophoriazusae* of Aristophanes (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1920), pp. x, xi.] Certainly, the drama concentrates on this particular meaning of the Thesmophoroi, even though the festival also marks the annual cycle of death and rebirth that the story of the two goddesses celebrates. The peculiar way in which the women transform the Thesmophoria into a revolt against their husband makes sense only against the backdrop of a festival that celebrates the marital and familial tie. For a full account of the festival, see Rogers, *o.c.*, pp.ix-xix.

2 Many classicists hold the fantastic dogma that there is not a unified argument in the plays of Aristophanes. It is a dogma because they neither offer nor can they offer an argument for their assertion. Prominent among them is Kenneth Dover, who cannot restrain himself from this outburst against the possibility of a plot in *Thesmophoriazusae*: “It is not difficult to say what the play is about: major parodies of Helen, Andromeda….and at least one play of Agathon, plus minor parodies of some other Euripidean plays and a parody of the proceedings of the assembly, are combined with slapstick, vulgar buffoonery, jokes about adultery and the ways of women, and a foreign policeman’s pidgin-Greek, to present something for all tastes, and the happy ending (happy for everyone except the policeman) leaves us with nothing difficult to think about.” [Aristophanic Comedy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 168-9.] But this is pure fantasy. The commentator cannot find any dramatic unity, whether from lack of wit or the press of time, and instead of admitting his incapacity, he attributes the lack of unity to the author. The idea that a great playwright should write a pastiche is
animates all the comedies of Aristophanes. A central character, who is in some measure representative of the Athenian people, finds himself radically alienated from an aspect of Athenian life or the whole of the city’s life; then he seeks to find his individual well-being in the realm of nature, a non-political community, or his own private concerns. When the hero has reached this extreme state of alienation, it too becomes unsatisfactory to him. The hero then returns to the institutions of the polis and the gods who preside over them. His new adherence to them is not simply identical to the old, since it is now mediated through his initial flight.

Both plays under consideration here follow this pattern. In *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides does not directly understand his own art of tragic mimesis, or imitation. At first he uses mimesis in the form of masquerade, by which his kinsman, dressed as a woman, can infiltrate the women’s festival, the Thesmophoria, and foil their plot against him. Only the failure of this masquerade compels him to the deeper knowledge of Tragedy indicated above. Similarly, in *Frogs*, Dionysus initially thinks of mimesis as that which allows him to dress as his half-brother Heracles, in order to invade Hades and bring back the recently deceased Euripides, whose poetry he adores. When this fails, he then learns

not only unprovable but contrary to the best ancient evidence. In *Symposium* Plato presents Aristophanes as having a definite view about eros, a view that expresses a deep consideration about man’s alienation from the gods and himself and the possibility of overcoming that alienation. Plato could not attribute this view to Aristophanes unless he thought that his own readers could see in his Aristophanes a view they too could recognize. The view that Plato attributes to Aristophanes could not, of course, be expressed in a few sentences uttered between various parodies and vaudeville-like skits, but only in the extended treatment of entire dramas. It is of course true that Plato did not have a Ph.D. in Classical Philology, nor was he versed in the methods developed over the last century and a half for criticizing great works of poetry. This is precisely why his witness is of greater weight that that of Kenneth Dover. The most important matters in Aristophanic Comedy are not susceptible of the categories and methods used by philologists qua philologists. These central questions treat of the hero and his relation to his city and to his gods. To specify this relation precisely belongs to philosophy, theology, and aesthetic intuition.

In his *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), Cedric Whitman says of the play, “…the parody is without venom, and the plot or fantasy, is without reference to very much beyond its own inconsequential proposition: How would old Euripides, with all his supposed subtlety, extricate himself if the women, by solemn vote at the Thesmophoria, should condemn him to death?” (p.217) The terms ‘parody’ and ‘fantasy’ explain nothing. I indicate in my discussion of the second part of the play why the first term does not properly describe Aristophanes’ use of Euripidean texts. The second term means little more than “non-historical” and it is clear that the plots of Aristophanes are largely non-historical. Since, however, all his plays begin with a historical reality, the question for analysis is the relation of the historical to the non-historical. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, the historical reality is the tendency of Euripides to present characters on the stage who are less heroic than those of Aeschylus and Sophocles and more like every-day people of his time. The plot explores the consequence of this important change.
about tragedy by refereeing a contest in poetry between Aeschylus and Euripides.\(^4\)

These two dramas about tragedy, and especially *Frogs*, mark an unsurpassable milestone in Aristophanes’ development. Although all the plays present a similar structure of the hero’s alienation and return, the scope of the hero’s experience is different in each. This includes three elements: the extent to which the hero is representative of the spectator; the particular institutions of Athenian life from which the hero is alienated; and the final relation of the hero to the institutions which he returns to. In the plays before *Birds* (414 B.C.) the hero tends to be only partially representative of the spectators who observe his career. His alienation then is not from institutions *per se* but from their particular working, and his return to these institutions or their ground is found not in his being equalized with them, but in a general dependence on them. A character such as Strepsiades in *Clouds* feels burdened by the debts that his son has run up under the influence of an aristocratic mother. This results first in his embrace of sophistry and a naturalistic atheism. His rejection of these then shows his relation to essential forms of Athenian life, his family, fellow citizens, and the gods. Nevertheless that relation occurs through the filter of an attitude which is common but not universal at Athens.

The plays after *Birds* show a more directly representative hero. Lysistrata represents the desire of her whole sex to put an end to the Peloponnesian War. The dramatic action through which this is accomplished involves both sexes as a whole, the institutions of family and state, and Athens’ relation to Sparta as part of Hellas. The action ends with the praise of Athena, because the women, in acting politically, have protected the well-being of the polis, over whom that goddess especially presides. Their

\(^4\) In “The Character and Cults of Dionysus and the Unity of The Frogs” (*Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* LXV, pp. 207-242) Charles Segal argues that what unifies the play is “the development of Dionysus into a god of communal solidity” (p.217). Because this way of speaking tends to understand Dionysus as a symbol or allegory, it overlooks his real subjectivity. No god of the Olympian order is simply identical with that over which he presides. Zeus is not the thunder or justice, although he presides over both. He is a free subject who within an imaginative polytheism has spheres of reality with which he concerns himself. The plot of *Frogs* is grounded precisely in this two-sidedness of Dionysus. He is both the god who presides over tragedy, and the comic subject who does not understand his own sphere. The drama is essentially about his own self-discovery, and within that the play treats of tragedy, Aeschylus, Euripides, and the city of Athens.

Certain contemporary attitudes made understanding the Greek gods difficult. It is generally assumed that earthly realities, whether natural, institutional, or artistic are primary, and the gods who preside over them, epiphenomenal. One thus has first the polis, and then a god of the polis, or first poetry and then the Muses. Within such a view, one can ascribe various degrees of self-consciousness to those who “invented” the gods. Perhaps these are naïve, or worse, evil priests plotting to control the people. Human subjectivity has nowhere in Aristophanes such an independence. Every hero finds his ground in institutions or the gods who preside over them. Even in *Plutus*, which treats of individuals who live beyond the world of the polis and are concerned with private ends, a god rewards the virtuous with wealth. The god Plutus is the ground even of private ends.
action is the human realization of the goddess.

*Birds* marks the dividing line between those earlier plays such as *Clouds* in which the hero represents a tendency within Athenian life and those such as *Lysistrata* in which the hero represents an entire sex or essential institution. This play of 414 B.C. presents a hero so thoroughly alienated from the polis that he first founds a nature-city with a nature religion, in which birds are at once citizens and gods. When the hero returns from this alienation, he can only be re-integrated into the Olympian order of the state by displacing Zeus himself. The poet posits a new goddess, a Miss Sovereignty, who possesses true dominion over both the polis and nature; Zeus rules only because she is within his control. The comic hero wins her from Zeus, and his marriage to her makes him the ruler of the world.

*Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs* were both presented in the ten years after *Birds*, and they both unite the three elements of the hero’s experience in a novel way. After the revolutionary result of *Birds* even Zeus did not seem a sufficient ground of the hero’s activity and in both *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs* the poet chose religious festivals, in which a divine-human relation is present, as the ground of the hero’s activity. Euripides is compelled to a deeper depiction of women through his collision with the women celebrating the Thesmophoroi, Demeter and Persephone. Dionysus is both a spectator who watches tragedy and the god who presides over it. Further, in both plays, the hero is directly representative of the spectators. Euripides is the poet whose plays have caused men to keep a close watch on their wives. As the patron of tragedy, Dionysus has no end other than the proper education of the spectators.

This paper will first consider the dramatic arguments of both *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*, through which the heroes, respectively a poet and a god, are educated in the nature of tragedy. Then it will seek to show how Aristophanes’ treatment of tragedy advances the argument beyond the standpoint of *Birds*. It will argue that *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*, because they reveal a comic hero’s relation to a divine-human festival, can present a more comprehensive view of the individual’s relation to the ground of his being and action than can the other dramas. It will conclude by arguing that *Frogs* shows the individual’s relation to the whole range of his theoretical and practical interests more radically than even its sister play, *Thesmophoriazusae*, can and therefore is truly the complete comedy.

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5 The coinage is that of B.B. Rogers in his edition of the play (London: George Bell and Sons, 1906), l. 1536.

6 This paper builds on two earlier papers of mine, “Dionysus’ Journey of Self-Discovery in *The Frogs* of Aristophanes,” (*Dionyisius* IX, 1985, pp.19-36) and “Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae* and the Nature of Tragedy,” (*Animus* 9, 2003). The current paper is an advance on the standpoint of both, and in two ways. First, if the comic treatment of tragedy is an important advance in the development of the Aristophanic argument, it is necessary to treat both plays together. Second, I treat *Frogs* in the first paper mostly as the hero’s unification of the upper and lower worlds. Here I expand that idea to emphasize the hero’s fulfillment of the divine-human potential within him from the beginning. The earlier paper on *Thesmophoriazusae*, while by no means indifferent to its
In *Thesmophoriazusae* the poet Euripides learns that he must depict only heroic women in his plays. This results from a severe collision between the poet and the women of Athens, whose freedom of action his plays have adversely affected. Because Euripides has depicted vulgar and criminal women on the stage, their husbands have kept a close watch on them at home. Alarmed that they can no longer indulge their favorite vices, such as stealing the household stores of wine and oil, the women resolve at their Thesmophoria to be rid of the interfering poet. His counter-plot against the women does not succeed, and he must agree to a positive portrayal of women in the theatre.

The constant background to this collision is the women’s relation to their own festival. Their willingness to pervert it, by adding to their celebration of Demeter and Persephone the plotting of their liberation from Euripides, is the occasion for the dramatic action. As they resist Euripides’ counter-attack, they turn their attention to the business of the festival itself without the earlier additions. First they unmask and guard the infiltrator Euripides sends against them, and then they sing the praises of the gods.

The collision between Euripides’ use of mimesis and the women’s resistance to its effects outside the theatre underlies every episode of the drama. In the first half of the play, Euripides experiences the confusion between mimesis and every-day life and in the second part, their gradual clarification. As the play begins Euripides is looking for a way to infiltrate the Thesmophoria. When the tragedian Agathon refuses to help him, his kinsman Mnesilochus agrees to imitate a woman and speak on Euripides’ behalf among the women. Euripides’ wish to use Agathon as his agent expresses well the first stage of his confusion. He imagines that he can use his mimetic arts outside the theatre in order to create a character who will serve his ends. Agathon is both effeminate and committed to the view that if a poet is to delineate a woman he must imitate a woman while writing her part. He feels no obligation to Euripides and therefore refuses to acquiesce in Euripides’ request.

As a kinsman, Mnesilochus feels closer to Euripides than Agathon. Because he is a burly, bearded fellow, Euripides’ mimetic abilities are reduced to those of a costumer in order to prepare him for his masquerade. This fails, both through the content of his speech to the women, and the subsequent investigation of his person. Mnesilochus attempts to dissuade the women from action against Euripides by arguing that while the poet has exposed some, he has not exposed all, their vices. When this proves less than persuasive, Mnesilochus is attacked, and it is revealed that he has a penis. This is not a mere piece of comic ‘business’ designed to elicit a laugh from vulgar groundlings. It shows that the women have a merely physical view of what defines the difference treatment of tragedy, emphasized the relation of Euripides’ activity to the Thesmophoroi. Here I emphasize the comic hero’s ability to educate the spectators.

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7 *Thesmophoriazusae* 383-433.
8 *Thesmophoriazusae* 149-152.
9 *Thesmophoriazusae* 213-263.
10 *Thesmophoriazusae* 473-475.
11 *Thesmophoriazusae* 643.
between men and women. This pre-occupation with the natural then reaches its nadir, when Mnesilochus seizes what one woman has described as her child. It turns out be a bottle of wine, and the woman is enraged when he drinks it. This nadir is also a turning point for the women. Hereafter they do not plot against Euripides but occupy themselves with their festival itself. They are concerned now with the punishment of the invader, and in the second half of the play with the celebration of their rites.

Mnesilochus and Euripides for their part have both failed in their effort to create a counterfeit woman. The former has proven ersatz in both body and sentiments. With his kinsman captured and put under guard, Euripides begins to clarify the relation between his art and life outside the theatre. This has two main stages. First, Euripides tries to extricate his kinsman from trouble by using rescue scenes drawn from his own plays that honour the marital tie. When this fails, he first agrees not to slander women on the stage and then he uses a masquerade to save his kinsman from the guard.

For much of the second part of the play, both Euripides and Mnesilochus assume roles drawn first from the poet’s Helen and then his Andromeda. First Euripides is Menelaos, and his kinsman Helen. Then Euripides takes the role of Perseus, and Mnesilochus becomes Andromeda. In both cases, a heroic woman is being saved from danger by her heroic husband or a man who wishes to be her husband. These scenes advance the dramatic action quite directly. Euripides is bringing his own dramatic poetry to bear on a situation outside the theatre. Earlier, his kinsman had devised his own lines to serve Euripides’ purpose. Now, both use actual poetry for the common purpose of the kinsman’s rescue. By using scenes of marital devotion they draw closer in spirit to the women, who, between the two attempted rescues, celebrate the rites of the Thesmophoroi. The comedy lies in the men’s attempt to directly subsume the everyday under the poetic, and the insufficiency of this to achieve the end desired.

The attempt of classical philologists to explain these scenes as “parody” explains nothing. The identification of passages in the drama as Euripidean, while accurate, is the merest beginning of interpretation. The next, and only real, question is why Euripides and his kinsman are using these passages. There is no dramatic reason why they should want to “parody” Euripides, and if their use of these passages is out of character, then the poet has merely imposed extraneous jokes on his characters. Moreover, one must then believe that a great poet at times decides to break off the dramatic action to have his characters engage in vaudeville skits.

The primacy of poetry, however, cannot be established so directly, and Euripides cannot free his kinsman with scenes from his own dramas. Only a radical change in the theatre, the true locus of mimetic poetry, can free him, and Euripides promises to say nothing bad about women in exchange for his freedom. The rescue scenes have shown that not all his plays are critical of women but that some treat women as worthy of heroic

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12 *Thesmophoriazusae* 846-928.
13 *Thesmophoriazusae* 1010-1135.
14 *Thesmophoriazusae* 947-1000.
15 Whitman, *l.c.*
men. Euripides secures his own familial end, saving his kinsman, by agreeing to depict women in the theatre as worthy of family life.\textsuperscript{16} This accomplishes the primacy of the theatre over the every-day.

While the women agree to free Mnesilochus, they leave it to the poet to elude the Scythian guard who had been appointed to watch his kinsman. This he does by masquerading as a music-woman and promising the delights of a dancing-girl to the guard.\textsuperscript{17} Thus the poet establishes the difference both between the realm of mimesis and that of masquerade, and between the tie which unites married citizens and that which unites a barbarian guard with the object of his desire. The poet thereby shows that he understands the difference between the mimesis of the heroic, which belongs to the theatre, and that of masquerade, which belongs to the contingencies of everyday life. The poet thus undoes his initial confusion of the two realms.

In \textit{Frogs}, Dionysus, the patron of the theatre, is himself educated in the nature of the tragedy over which he presides. He first wishes to snatch the recently dead Euripides out of Hades so that he might again enjoy his plays. When this fails, he co-operates with the authorities there to choose Aeschylus as the poet with whom he will return to Athens. The god has learned that in order to exercise his divinity he must bring back a poet who can educate the citizens in heroic devotion to the City.

His journey involves all the elements of both tragedy and comedy. He knows that he is a character in a comedy, and he is moved as a spectator of tragedy to bring back Euripides from the dead. On his journey to Hades he imitates both Heracles and his own slave, and thus the whole range of human/divine individuality. This completeness of mimetic experience then allows him to realize his own particular divinity. By presiding over a debate between Euripides and Aeschylus, he acknowledges the place of poets and their \textit{techne} in tragedy. By asking them what advice they will give the City, he shows a knowledge of the \textit{telos} of tragedy beyond what \textit{technitai} can know. Finally he decides to bring Aeschylus back, so that he might best make his own divinity actual.

The play begins with Dionysus and his slave conscious of being in a comedy, as they discuss what kind of jokes to tell.\textsuperscript{18} The real comedy occurs, however, when Dionysus gives subjective form to his patronage of tragedy. This appears both in his love of Euripides and what that love leads him to do. He admires the poet’s capacity to make grand things familiar and to emphasize the power of human inwardsness.\textsuperscript{19} Dionysus undertakes an extreme modification of the Olympian religion to achieve this end: he will imitate his half-brother Heracles’ trip to Hades and bring back not Cerberus, but Euripides. Both Dionysus and Heracles are sons of Zeus by a mortal woman, and this divine sonship expresses itself differently in each of them. As the great benefactor of mankind, Heracles is a model of courage and heroic virtue. A depiction of his labours

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Thesmophoriazusae} 1160-1163. In context, his promising never to speak badly of them can have no other meaning.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Thesmophoriazusae} 1172-1201.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Frogs} 1-30.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Frogs} 98-102.
decorated the temple of Zeus at Olympia, where the games originated and athletes sought to imitate his virtue. Dionysus is a more democratic god, presiding over tragedy, comedy, and the cult depicted in *Bacchae* that allowed men and women a mystic union with nature.

Here Dionysus seeks to make Heracles’ virtue his own, so that he might again watch the plays of Euripides. He wears the costume of Heracles, but the action reveals that he does not have the virtue of Heracles. This becomes clear when Dionysus and his slave Xanthias journey into Hades. Dionysus is willing to imitate Heracles only when danger does not threaten. When it does, he persuades Xanthias to ‘be’ Heracles. When they confront a kind of Hades-policeman, Xanthias is happy to play this role and have Dionysus treated as a slave. Even when Dionysus asserts his own divinity, he cannot prove it or show that Xanthias is not Heracles.

Dionysus’ attempt to imitate Heracles has resulted both in the loss of his standing as a god and in the equal ability of both a god and a slave to imitate gods and slaves. Both the imitators and imitated cover the whole range of self-conscious individuals, from slaves to demi-gods. Since Dionysus cannot master Hades, as he had hoped, for the rest of the drama, now obedient to Hades, he gradually regains his stature and a knowledge of what his place in the upper world as patron of tragedy really means. This occurs in four stages, in which progressively his relation to his slave, the poets Aeschylus and Euripides, the State, and finally his own divinity, reveals itself. These relations clarified, he can return with Aeschylus to the upper world in order to save the State.

The first stage in Dionysus’ regaining of his position shows the distinction between him and his slave. Their equal capacity for masquerading as Heracles had made them seem equal, but in the first scene of the second half of the play, their radical difference appears. His slave can learn from a local slave about the dispute between Aeschylus and Euripides concerning who is the best tragedy-writer, but Xanthias has no further part in the resolution of that dispute.

Only a contest between these poets over which Dionysus will preside can resolve this dispute, and it reveals the god’s relation to the *technitai* whom tragedy depends on. Aeschylus and Euripides both think that they are entitled to hold the chair of tragedy in Hades, where excellence in each *technē*, or craft, is acknowledged. The contest between them is one that can be held only in Hades but it can be resolved only on principles that belong to the upper world. In the upper world, poets competed only at a particular festival of Dionysus. Now they compete about who the best poet in general is, and the measure will be their ability to save the city of Athens.

The contest reveals both that poets are necessary to tragedy and why poets are not the patrons of tragedy. In his attempted imitation of Heracles that proved to be a mere

20 *Frogs* 494-496.
21 *Frogs* 615-617.
22 *Frogs* 629-641.
23 *Frogs* 755-813.
masquerade, Dionysus was, as it were, his own poet. He determined the *telos* of the imitation and the form of imitation. Now, he experiences the place of *technitai* in mimesis. Earlier, he had acted out of his love for one poet alone. Now he must hear the opposing views of two poets about what constitutes excellence in tragedy.

Aside from Dionysus’ direction to the poets that they pray before the debate, they themselves determine the *quaestiones disputatae*. The dispute is not systematic, nor can it be. The poets are not in their element, but have become critics of poetry. In the course of their wrangling and cross-examination of each other, they cover several subjects, the relation of tragedy to the spectator, prologues, monodies and general versification, without assigning greater weight to any particular area.

Neither disputes the fact that tragedy has a direct effect on the spectator. They do dispute what that effect should be. Aeschylus argues that his presentation of war-like heroes encourages the citizens to a courageous defense of their city. Against this, Euripides argues that his more democratic poetry depicts humans as they are and thus encourages the spectators to manage their households better.

A dispute between *technitai* on criteria of their choosing does not allow Dionysus to choose between them. Pluto then reminds him that if he makes no choice, he will negate the purpose for which he has come. Although he came originally to bring back Euripides, he now offers a revised account of his trip and its goal, to bring back a poet, “so that the city, having been saved, might lead its choruses.” The whole City and its dramatic festivals are here understood as inseparable.

Once Dionysus has learned that the true end of tragedy is the salvation of the City, he knows that the true measure of a play and of the poet who wrote it is the effect they have on the spectators. The god can now ask what advice each poet has for the city, which at the time of the drama (405 B.C.) was on the verge of losing the Peloponnesian war. The poet who will return with his divine patron to the upper world must, like him, be conscious of the effect that his play has on the spectators.

The answers of the two poets are typical. Euripides would replace the current bad rulers with good, while Aeschylus would have the citizens desert their physical city so that they could fight better. Since both poets have given good advice, this test is not sufficient to allow Dionysus to make a choice. He concludes that he will choose the poet

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24 Frogs 885.
25 Frogs 1013-1022.
26 Frogs 971-979.
27 Frogs 1411-1413.
28 Frogs 1414.
29 Frogs 1419.
30 Frogs 1420-1421.
31 Frogs 1446-1450.
32 Frogs 1463-1465.
whom his soul wishes. Euripides reminds him to remember those gods by whom he swore to bring him back. Dionysus’ response shows that he accepts this reminder as describing his earlier state of soul, and indeed it does. This does not serve Euripides well, because Dionysus has experienced the progressive loss of his independent standing by wanting to bring Euripides back. The scenes since that loss have shown the re-establishment of his status as patron of Tragedy. Neither as a master of slaves, a judge of poets, nor as a political man can he define his patronage of the theatre, but only as a god. To affirm his divinity, he must choose that poet who affirmed the old order, its gods, its institutions and heroism in defence of the State, and that of course is Aeschylus. To release himself from his earlier vow, he now uses a notorious line from the Hippolytus of Euripides, “My tongue has sworn but my spirit remained unsworn.” Dionysus quotes only the first clause, before he says, “and I shall choose Aeschylus,” but this is sufficient. When he had determined on bringing Euripides back from the dead, he had not acted according to his true self, but according to the desires of a particular spectator. His true self is the patron of Tragedy who wishes to save the City and its Festivals; these he affirms by choosing Aeschylus. Dionysus is choosing Aeschylus, but in a manner that is mediated by the experience of what Euripides stands for and the overcoming of it. Having experienced the consequences of following his own personal feelings about tragedy, the god now affirms the telos of Tragedy as that which educates the citizen-spectators to a perfect patriotism.

Dionysus’ search for the true ground of tragedy, a search that ends with himself, unites the realm of Hades with the life of the city. He has not accomplished his original purpose of stealing Euripides from Hades but he can return to Athens with an even greater poet. With the free consent of Pluto, he revivifies the dead to serve the living City. This will be done by the poet’s analogous power to animate the spectators with the spirit of heroism. Aeschylus can be declared the best poet in Hades; but only in the city can he exercise the office of poet by moving the people from their capacity for heroism to an actual heroic defense of their city.

Both Thesmophoriazusae and Frogs treat Tragedy as a festival in which the spectators are directly educated in heroism. In so doing, they both advance the Aristophanic argument beyond even Birds. They do this in three ways. First, because both dramas show the relation of the comic hero to tragedy, the spectator of each comedy from the beginning sees himself playing in the drama. Although the centre of every Aristophanic comedy is a hero representative in some sense of Athenian life, in the plays before Birds, he was representative of a sector only of Athenian life. Even where in Birds the central character represents all Athenians in their general alienation from Athenian life, it belongs to the comic imagination of the poet to devise a facetiously named hero

33 Frogs 1467-1468.
34 Frogs 1469-1470.
35 Hippolytus 612.
37 Frogs 1500-1501.
who embodies this alienation. In *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*, the central character is already in himself, whether historically or religiously, a representative Athenian. In *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides’ plays have made husbands watchful over their wives. As the patron of tragedy in *Frogs*, Dionysus has a relation to all Athenians.

Second, the alienation of the hero and his return out of that alienation are more radically comprehensive of the relation between citizens and the polis than *Birds*. There the representative hero turns first to a natural paradise and then is restored to the City and its religion. This paradise is not in itself an essential part of the life in the city. In *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*, the alienation falls within the institutions of the City and its festivals. The women almost negate the nature of the Thesmophoria by using it to maintain their marital vices, and they then return to a celebration of those gods who protect the marital tie. For his part Euripides first perverts his mimetic skills for a masquerade aiming at personal ends and then comes to know the difference between masquerade and the true end of mimesis. In *Frogs*, Dionysus’ perversion of mimesis leads him to the loss of his status as patron of tragedy in Hades. He can then gradually regain that status as he returns to the upper world.

Third, the human subject is equalized with its divine ground in *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs* in a way that it cannot be in *Birds*. In this last play, the subject can find its ground only in a factitious god, Miss Sovereignty, who is beyond the limits of Zeus. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, Euripides’ whole comic career is praises the family-tie that the Thesmophoroi have given. In *Frogs*, the interest of the god Dionysus is nothing other than that of the human subject himself.

Thus *Frogs* unifies the elements of comedy even more radically than *Thesmophoriazusae*. From the beginning, the hero Dionysus contains all the possibilities of human self-consciousness within himself. Even the situation with which this comedy begins, the death of Euripides, is not outside of him, since the work of poets is included in his presiding over the theatre. The god’s comic career as Heracles, Xanthias, and then finally himself makes actual what is latent within him. When he returns from Hades with Aeschylus to save the city, he unites the realm of the dead with the realm of the living to animate the spectators with heroism. This is the perfection of comedy.
What role does the notion of the divine play in Aristotle’s account of a good life? This is not an obvious question; god appears relatively infrequently, for example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But it might interest us, if only because of the perplexing appearance of the divine in Book 10 of that treatise, as that which appears to underwrite the choice of a contemplative life. The cognate question, what role does god play in Aristotle’s understanding of *being*, is obvious and is more understandable, given *Metaphysics Lambda*. That question yields a variety of answers. Some interpreters see the entire *Metaphysics* as directed toward the discussion of divine being in *Lambda*. Others see *Lambda* as an addendum to the central books of the *Metaphysics*, perhaps the residuum of a youthful view outgrown in the course of Aristotle’s maturation.

In fact, *Lambda*’s discussion of god perfects the analysis of substance. It does so, however, not by revealing something about substance and being that the central books do not see, but by making clear that the principle articulated in those books is divine. I think that the same is true with Aristotle’s ethics: the divine is a *principle* that governs the discourse of the ethical treatises. Stewart put it nicely when he proposed to translate Aristotle’s doctrine “into the language of modern philosophy, and say that Aristotle makes ‘the Idea of God’ the ‘regulative principle’ in man’s life.”¹ That neo-Kantian description (“the language of modern philosophy”) may now seem quaint, but it captures Aristotle’s view of god as a formal principle of our normative lives, and it does so without abandoning our commitment to read his ethics as naturalistic and human-centered.

It’s reasonable not to expect the divine to appear at all in Aristotle’s ethics. The concern of human agency on Aristotle’s view is the human good; it is our welfare and our happiness that are the proper ends of our desire and choice. Practical agency is concerned neither with the satisfaction of some higher good nor with obedience to the will of some higher being, and happiness is subordinate to no alternative good for whose realization we are obliged to strive. And it is human deliberation, with no recourse to divinely delivered code, whose office it is to guide our action. It is therefore appropriate that we think of Aristotle’s eudaimonism as naturalistic, and it is not surprising that the body of the *Ethics* does not refer to the divine. References to god in the *Ethics* would seem out of place (as the perplexing discussion in Book 10 does); they would be embarrassing, like discovering that your favorite hip uncle who regularly smokes weed also regularly attends mass or lays tefillin every morning. And so it’s understandable that we either quietly ignore some parts of the text or deny that the discussion is that of the mature

Aristotle. But perhaps we can save what’s true in Aristotle’s invoking of the divine without reading it as intrusive.

We should begin by being clear about what god is not. God does not ground the notion of the good as legislator, either as source or as underwriter of moral injunction. Here Aristotle is explicit: “God” he writes “is not a ruler who issues commands, but an end in light of which practical wisdom commands.”

That’s not surprising; in a theory based on virtue, what’s central is not the response to external command, but character, the infused skill of virtuous deliberation. Of course, even a theistic ethic might picture god as a principle of agency rather than a source of directives; in a famous Talmudic episode, a rabbi appeals for divine endorsement in a dispute, an endorsement he appears to receive, but he is then reminded that heavenly voices are not authoritative in matters of deliberation. God is pictured as pleased with this outcome, happy that his children have surpassed him; here the divine has become a principle of deliberation, the ἀρχή / of βουλήσις.3

But Aristotle’s view is more general; in the Ethics, as elsewhere, divinity is invoked to mark something as a principle on a scale of goodness, importance, beauty or power: or rather, a principle of that scale and therefore off or behind it. The divine is the principle of the good just as it is the principle of being and of activity. Consider how the activity of thinking comes to be called divine. In Metaphysics 12.9, Aristotle invokes the notion of divine thought but makes clear that he means not the thinking of a god, but thinking as divine, that is to say, as the best. The grammar of ‘god thinks’ is like that of Euripides’ ‘The mind is a god’4; read ‘The mind is divine’. That’s how Cicero read Euripides; in the Tusculan Disputations he offers this description of the soul: “therefore the soul, as I say, is divine or, as Euripides dared to say, is a god.”5 Similarly ‘god is good’ means ‘virtue (like mind) is divine.’ Aristotle explains the homonymy of good in just this way: predication that identifies something as divine predicates the good of that thing in the category that states what it is.6 In all these cases, we can chart the possibility of a move from “____ is a god” to “____ is divine” and from that to “____ is the best.” Similarly, “Natalie Portman is divine” does not signify her literal apotheosis but merely her remarkable beauty: like Tennyson’s description of Helen as “divinely tall, and most divinely fair” or Paul Groves’ nasty little couplet in a poem called “At the Literary Party”: “He’s tousled, teddy bearish, and dependable/She’s human. She’s Divine. And she’s upendable.”7 Aristotle notes this use only glancingly – with respect to the

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2 Eudemian Ethics, 7.15, 1249b14: οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτακτικῶς ἀρχὼν ὁ θεός, ἀλλ’ οὗ ἔνεκα ή φρόνησις ἐπιτάττει.
3 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Metzia 59b.
5 Tusculan Disputations I.26.65: “ergo animus, ut ego dico, divinus est, ut Euripides audet dicere, deus est.”
6 Nicomachean Ethics, 1.6, 1096a20ff.
7 Paul Groves, Qwerty (Seren, 2008).
Lacedaemonians: “σεῖος ἀνήρ φασίν: that man is divine, they say”8 – but it is in Greek, as it is in English, a general if somewhat extravagant use.

In the Ethics the divine is a principle not simply of the good, but specifically of human good. How should we understand this? How does god operate as a ‘regulative principle’ for human life? These remarks are meant to offer a quite general view of what I take to be several respects in which the divine might be thought to figure in Aristotle’s account of what it is for us to live happy lives.

First there is the formal and abstract sense I’ve just noted; the divine is a principle of good in general. This is the least remarkable feature of how the divine is woven into the discourse of the Ethics, analogous to Homer’s ability to speak of a θεῖον ποτόν, a divine Pinot Noir as it were, in relation to oenological rather than human virtues.

The second feature, specifically related to the Ethics, is the respect in which the divine is the principle of what enables us to affect our lives and world by desires and plans. God as the principle of νοῦς informs our capacity for deliberation and agency, our ability to recognize our desires and think about them and to think about and choose what to do, and consequently our ability to shape and be shaped by our virtues. These capacities constitute the ability at once to make our lives and to make our lives in the space of normativity that ethical thinking invokes.

Third, the divine is a figure for a mode of well-being that cannot be explained simply as the result of virtuous action: the principle, as I will suggest, of lives that are blessed. Similarly, the divine is the site of a power not ours that determines whether our actions become what we want them to be; the gods rule the vagaries of moral luck, a moral luck which reveals itself in the always unexpected fall of tragedy. The most comprehensive and pervasive sense of what is divine about a human life, finally, is that god is the principle of our awareness, the consciousness of our goods that happiness requires.

The overall argument of the first two features can be presented quite schematically. God is everywhere the principle of the good. Here in addition god is the principle of reason, and it is reason that shapes our attainment of the virtues and that enables us to exercise them in the business of living; when that works, what is often achieved is happiness. Happiness is the right English for εὐδαιμονία given the fact that in happiness, as in luck, a semantic leaning toward the good is concealed: lucky implies good luck, as happy does good hap. That’s the εὖ in εὐδαιμονία. Human efforts are directed toward achieving happiness through well-thought-out choice; the capacity comes from god, but the activity is ours, which is why happiness is deserving of praise.

Note the force of what I’ve just said: ‘what is often achieved is happiness.’ In this qualification, we can recognize the space between virtue and success. That space may be closed by a cosmic grant, by what Plato refers to as θεία μοίρα or divine dispensation: a gift of the god that later traditions called grace. Or it may not be closed;

8 Nicomachean Ethics, 7.1. 1145a30.
god is often figured as the source of both fortune and tragic misfortune. First note the divine as the site of the distinction between our being εὐδαιμονία – happy – and our being μακάριον – blessed. Some scholars have argued that happiness and blessedness are functionally equivalent for Aristotle. Were this true, the space to which I referred would be simply a space between virtue and happiness, where lives characterized by happiness could be indistinguishably referred to by the pair of terms ‘happy’ and ‘blessed’; we would be concerned simply with the frailty of goodness as a guarantor of well-being. I’m unconvinced by that view; it seems to me there’s a difference not merely between our being happy and the gods being blessed, but also between our being happy and our being blessed.

To be blessed – μακάριον – is to be marked by success that comes from some invulnerability; for the gods, it is to be free from the dangers of mortality and fortune. Humans then come to be called blessed whose lives analogously are (at least partially) immune to certain vulnerabilities: people blessed with good fortune or large fortunes, with a cheery disposition or longevity or good looks, or simply with the good luck that leads to the consistently successful outcome of their projects, by which I mean not merely their financial or political or erotic projects, but their moral projects as well.

These are gifts of the gods. We should not understand the well-being that results from them as though it were roughly equivalent to happiness, only higher on some scale of achievement. It may be true, indeed it is true, that virtue does not guarantee happiness, but it is all that we have with which to cultivate happiness. Some who fail or are anxious about their success may feel inclined to turn to god, thinking that there is a well-being more readily available to those who do so or who recognize that about us which is divine. But it is still virtue that (if we are lucky) can lead to whatever happiness is available to us as humans.

So it is not as though there were a scale of human success in the achievement of happiness ranging from bestial to vicious to incontinent to continent to virtuous and finally to blessed. For success in achieving happiness, only virtue and vice count. Continence, meanwhile, (ἐγκράτεια) is not a stage below virtue, but a way to exhibit virtue contrasting with σωφροσύνη on the one hand and ἀκρασία on the other, as incontinence (ἀκρασία) is a way to go wrong contrasting with ἐγκράτεια and ἀκολοχία.

But the greatest infelicity of this scheme is the placement of the extremes, bestial and blessed. For Aristotle these extremes are not in the spectrum of happiness at all, but outside it, though in different ways. Bestiality is not a bad way of being human; to be bestial is to be subhuman. Blessedness, correspondingly, is not a supreme example of human well-being. The blessed are blessed with something: stunning looks or a strong constitution, natural equanimity or a lightning wit. The only appropriate virtue in relation to such blessing is gratitude, a gratitude appropriately directed to the divine.

The divine figures as well in the economy of a deeper fortune (and misfortune) that concerns not simply the uncertainty of εὐδαιμονία as the realization of virtuous action but the uncertainty of virtuous action as the realization of proper deliberation. In a sense, this concern is situated outside the Ethics; its provenance lies in the world of
tragedy and therefore in the *Poetics*. I’ll explain what I mean by something of an excursus into the theory of tragedy, in particular in its relation to *action*.

Actions are individuated in a variety of ways; that is to say, a particular grouping of my bodily motions may be thought of as any one of a number of actions that I am performing. At one level, this multiplicity follows simply from a general ontological multiplicity central to Aristotle’s thought: an individual may be introduced under a plurality of descriptions, each of which determines one of a plurality of different *beings*. One and the same individual may be at once a book, a collection of pages, some paper, my beloved copy of Keats, and a blue thing. The complex behavior someone is engaged in at a particular moment may be throwing dirt on a corpse, burying her brother, committing an act of treason, or signing her own death warrant. This ambiguity of action – what one scholar has called ‘the doubleness of the deed’ – lies at the heart of the theory of ‘tragic conflict’, a theory of tragedy that takes as its paradigmatic plays those in which the protagonist’s performance of an action under one description entails her choice of it as well under other applicable descriptions. The *Antigone* may be a paradigmatic tragedy on this reading.

But the ambiguity that interests Aristotle in the *Poetics* is not lateral, between coextensive and equally applicable descriptions, but categorical, between fundamentally different modes of capturing and individuating actions. On the one hand, an action is the object of the intention of an agent: what we do is what we are about and take ourselves to be doing. On the other hand we live in the world; *what we do is what emerges as the result of our intentional activity*. Tragedy reveals the ever-present possibility of fracture between these two aspects of action by figuring the rift between actions as expressions of an agent’s character and actions as events in an objective world outside the control of such agents, actions with lives of their own that transcend the intentions of their authors.

The *Poetics* attends to the pathology of action, the ways in which our deliberations and choices may ultimately prove feckless. Acting out of good character, we may, like Oedipus at some crossroad or other, spell our doom by killing a man we mistakenly take to be a brigand but whom the gods know to be our father. The fears occasioned by this possibility may be subtle, but they are in many ways our deepest fears. Good character and deliberation cannot guarantee our happiness because actions good from our point of view as agent may be revealed as bad in the world in which they are enacted. And we are responsible for these actions even though they are not our fault.

The *Poetics* is thus a sequel to the *Ethics*, a sequel that reveals the terrifying frailty of virtue and the vulnerability of the happiness that, correctly and for all the right reasons, we aim at in cultivating virtue. The fear and pity that tragedy occasions concern our vulnerability, born in the recognition that ordinary good character and ordinary good

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9 Recall how this point is mined by G.E.M. Anscombe with respect to someone’s exercising his arm, pumping water, poisoning the household, or beginning the revolution: *Intention*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

deliberation can lead not simply to disastrous consequences but to disastrous actions. The refractoriness to human agency woven into the very fabric of action reveals the depth of our inability as agents to forestall disaster, to guarantee happiness even when we correctly attempt to found it in the cultivation of virtue.

No god, to be sure, appears, in any simple sense, to rescue us from this disaster nor, for that matter, to rescue tragedies’ protagonists from their disasters, except perhaps in Euripides’ fantasies, and about these Aristotle is quite uneasy. But the tragedians’ clear sense that the gods oversee the tragic unfolding of events onstage is, I think, shared by Aristotle, though nowhere made explicit: the sense that the divine, not in any malicious fashion but in its role as figuring what is despite our energetic agency, is often the matrix of catastrophe. This means simply that the divine may be thought to mark for Aristotle, as it did for the tragedians, the uncertainty rather than the force of virtue, the fugitive rather than the available face of happiness. In this sense, Euripides’ fantasies remind us that these matters, like matters of moral luck generally, are, as we say, in the hands of the gods.

Finally, the divine governs our lives as lives of awareness, lives in which we are able to be conscious of our goods and happiness. The fact that happiness without consciousness is no happiness at all can be seen in several arguments of Book 9 of the Nicomachean Ethics, and it’s made clear in Book 10. The concern of that book with human lives lived in the exercise of divine θεωρία is not a concern with the superiority of a contemplative to a political life, or with whether it’s better to be a Ph.D. than to be a C.E.O. It is rather a concern with the fundamental desirability of human awareness, formally thematized as divine thought. Here, as throughout Aristotle, qewri/a signifies the active exercise of conscious mind. In the religious mythology that informs Metaphysics Lambda and de Anima 3, as here in Nicomachean Ethics 10, that exercise is figured as the occupation of a god. But Aristotle makes clear elsewhere that human life in the fullest sense – τὸ ζῆν τὸ κατ᾽ ἐνέργειαν καὶ ὡς τέλος – consists in the active exercise of awareness and knowledge – τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι καὶ τὸ γνωρίζειν. 11 This activity may, as Lambda imagines of god, occur purely, with reference to no particular object; but in our lives awareness is woven into the fabric of our practical activities, and the happiness of a human life is inextricably bound up with that awareness. Note then two characteristics of our lives that are human expressions of divine νοῦς: 1) our capacity to lead and not simply to live lives, to act, that is, in the space of normativity, and 2) our capacity to live in the awareness of our lives, to live lives which, if they are happy lives, can be conscious of being happy.

Here are two final thoughts about the divine that may or may not be Aristotle’s, but which I would like to think would occasion his approval. The first concerns the question: thinking about the role not so much of the divine as of our attention to the divine, what might our religious lives have to do with our well-being? Perhaps the good of piety can be compared to the good of friendship. We sometimes think that to justify our sense of friendship as a human good, we need to show that having friends is a condition of a happy life. But Aristotle takes having friends simply to be a good for

human beings. (Not, interestingly, for the gods; just as they are immune from death, so they are from loneliness, above the requirements of sodality and friendship and love.) But the reason that we want friends, Aristotle argues, is simply because friends are good for humans to have; they enrich our lives in ways that Aristotle elucidates. A life with friends is a better life than one without. It’s not that friends are necessary to happiness; it’s simply that even those who are happy want friends.

So it is, I would suggest, with our lives in relation to god. It’s not that our lives cannot be lived virtuously without attention to the divine. There are perfectly decent lives that make no reference to god; some of our best friends are atheists. But to some of us, a life that includes the gratitude, worship and sanctification that comes through recognizing and invoking the divine is a richer and happier life, just as a life of erotic or culinary or aesthetic grace is.

The second thought arises from a remark I made a moment ago that for Aristotle the gods are not in need of friends. When I think of that, I think of the Homeric realization that the immortal gods – who, precisely because they are immune to the sorrows of death, live at ease (θεοὶ ἰμαῖ ζωοντες)\(^\text{12}\) – live lives that are somehow not serious and therefore somehow not real options for us. Of course we still envy them their immortality; it isn’t as though death is no sorrow. It’s better, as Achilles laments to Odysseus, to be the lowest laborer above ground than to be king of all the strengthless dead. But in the face of this, mortality remains Odysseus’ choice. And finally the hero of the day is that very bandy-legged Odysseus. He is, to be sure, god-like Odysseus (Ὀδυσσεῦς θεῖος), but above all he is human Odysseus, the god-like hero whose final choice is a human life: mortal Penelope and Ithaca over immortal Calypso and Ogygia. It is such a life that Aristotle offers us as the goal of our efforts and hopes: a wise, thoughtful, aware, deliberative, finite and if we are lucky, blessed life: a divinely human life.

\(^{12}\) Iliad 6.138.