

# Part I

## Tragedy and the Gods



## 1

# Greek Tragedy and Ritual

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Greek tragedies are not timeless. They are cultural artifacts embedded in the society that generated them, for they were produced and understood through the deployment of perceptual filters shaped by the cultural assumptions of fifth-century Athens, which the tragedians shared with their contemporary audiences. Moreover, they were performed in a ritual context, and this, as will become clear in this chapter, was not an incidental aspect that can be disregarded when we consider the meanings that these tragedies had for the ancient audiences, but a central element that shaped the tragedies and the ways in which those audiences made sense of them. Nevertheless, Greek tragedies can also be made sense of through filters shaped by cultural assumptions other than those that produced them, and they do have resonances for other societies, for they articulate rich, polysemic, and multivocal meanings, and explore problems that in some respects (albeit not in others) transcend the particular cultural forms that were specific to fifth-century Athens; this is partly because the tragedies were set in the audience's past, the heroic age, when men had walked with gods, and so even topical concerns were explored in a non-moment-specific version.<sup>1</sup> But modern readings can be very different from those that had been constructed by the fifth-century audiences.

For example, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, Antigone's disobedience of the edict of Creon, the King of Thebes, and her burial of her brother Polynices in defiance of that edict, have been seen by many modern readers as a noble act by a courageous individual rebelling against a tyrannical state, Antigone being perceived as a heroic figure who did her familial duty and obeyed the gods, privileging family and divine law over the law of an oppressive tyrant. This had great resonance for twentieth-century readers, in whose eyes the individual with a conscience who defies the state was of paramount importance, whether or not the individual readers had themselves lived under authoritarian regimes (see, e.g., Vidal-Naquet 2002: 47–9). But for the fifth-century audience the tragedy was much less predictable, much more complex and subtle, and so also richer.<sup>2</sup> For in the eyes of the ancient audience Antigone was, above all, a

woman acting out of her proper place, in defiance of the decision of her community's leader, indeed, according to her sister Ismene, "against the will of the citizens" (v.79), at a moment when her community had just overcome a deadly danger, an attack from an invading foreign army brought against them by the traitor Polynices – and she was doing all that in the interests of that very traitor. There was no divine law that the audience knew to justify the fact that Antigone, a woman, acted out of her proper place, not only in defying her community, but also in performing a ritual act, the burial, which she was not, as a woman, supposed to perform (as opposed to lamenting, washing the corpse, and other rites which were a woman's proper role in the death ritual). Antigone, moreover, was the product of an incestuous union, the family she privileged was cursed, and her traitor brother Polynices, for whose sake she disobeyed the law, had killed their other brother, Eteocles, who had died a hero defending the city. Furthermore, in fifth-century Athenian terms Antigone's familial duty was to obey Creon, who was her uncle and became her legal guardian on the death of Eteocles.

Creon, on the other hand, was constructed, in the early parts of the tragedy, as the spokesman for the city, the polis, which itself, in ancient perceptions, was not a potentially threatening "state," but the community of citizens, the guardian and sole guarantee of civilized values, in which the religious sphere was an extremely important part. Creon begins by expressing sentiments that were the epitome of democratic patriotism and were indeed so understood by the fourth-century Athenian orator Demosthenes (19.247). It is only later in the tragedy that Creon makes tyrannical statements, thus sliding away from the concept "leader of the democratic polis," toward tyranny. Moreover, the ancient audiences would have perceived Creon as believing that in denying burial to Polynices he was only applying the principle (established in Athenian law and custom) that traitors were denied burial in their native land – a negative mirror image of the public burial and glorification of the war dead. It only eventually emerged that in denying Polynices any burial Creon had made a mistake, that he had extended that principle too far; that by keeping in the world of the upper gods a corpse, which belonged to the nether gods, Creon had upset the cosmic order and offended all the gods. This made for much more complex explorations, one of the main strands of which involved the exploration of the ultimate unknowability of the will of the gods, and correlatively of the fear that the religion of the polis, which articulated and guaranteed all religious activity, may sometimes get things wrong.

This was a very important problematization that modern readers would not register, unless familiar with Greek religion. Unlike Christianity, Greek religion did not have a canonical body of belief, no divine revelation nor scriptural texts – only some marginal sects had sacred books. It also did not have a "professional" divinely anointed clergy claiming special knowledge or authority; and there was no church. Crudely put, in Greek religion the polis (or, alternatively, ethnos, tribal state) played the role which in Christianity is played by the church: it was the polis who assumed the responsibility and authority to set a religious system into place,<sup>3</sup>

structure the universe and the divine world in a religious system, articulate a pantheon with particular divine personalities; it established a system of cults, rituals, and sanctuaries, and a sacred calendar. The only guidance available was through prophecy; and, indeed, the various cities consulted the oracles on cultic matters. But while the god always spoke the truth, human fallibility could intervene and falsify the deity's words, and so the Greeks could never be certain that a particular prophecy was true.

This nature of Greek religion invited religious exploration, and so also the creation of a locus for this exploration of religious problems. I have argued that in fifth-century Athens this locus was, above all, tragedy (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003). We saw an illustration of such problematization in Sophocles' *Antigone*, where the exploration of the possibility that the polis' religious discourse may sometimes be mistaken was (as in other tragic explorations in other tragedies) distanced from the audience's realities; it was located at a safe symbolic distance through both its setting (Thebes, not Athens, the heroic age, not the present) and through Creon's tyrannical statements, which at a critical point distanced the world of the tragedy from the audience's democratic polis. When the tragedies are made sense of (as much as possible) through the (reconstructed) filters shaped by the cultural assumptions shared by the fifth-century tragedians and audiences, it becomes clear that the relationship between the world of the audience and that of the tragedy was not constant and inert, but shifting and dynamic, manipulated during the performance of each tragedy through devices that operated in interaction with those shared assumptions: "distancing devices," such as Creon's tyrannical statements, which distanced the action from the world of fifth-century Athens, sharply differentiating the two; and "zooming devices," which brought the tragic world nearer, pushed the audience into relating the play directly to their own experiences.<sup>4</sup>

The brief consideration of *Antigone* has illustrated how Greek tragedies can be read through filters other than those of the fifth-century Athenians and produce significant meanings, which, however, are radically different from those constructed by the ancient audiences; and also that the meanings created through the implicit deployment of modern assumptions have (naturally) more resonance for modern audiences than those reconstructed through the reconstruction of the ancient filters. Reading Greek tragedies through the (explicit or by default) deployment of modern assumptions is a legitimate part of modern theatrical discourses. But, in my view, modern readers should also take account of, and classical scholars must strongly privilege, the attempt to reconstruct as much as possible at least the parameters that had shaped the (varied) readings by the ancient audiences.

This discussion has also illustrated that an important element in the process of the construction of meanings by those audiences was the relationship between their ritual realities and the tragic rituals, for example whether the rituals enacted, or referred to in the tragedy (in *Antigone* burial by a woman, prohibition of the burial of traitors), were normative or transgressive. This element is marginalized in readings that deploy modern assumptions by default.

There is an intimate connection between fifth-century tragedy and ritual. Tragedies are articulated (some more densely than others) with the help of many rituals, such as sacrifices, prayers, and also divine epiphanies, which are not exactly rituals, but which, as we shall see, evoke rituals, and often explain and establish various cults and rites. This is one facet of that intimate connection. Another is the context of the performances: tragedies and comedies were performed during a festival of Dionysus, above all the City Dionysia, in a sanctuary, the theater in the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus underneath the Acropolis in Athens, in the presence of the statue of Dionysus.<sup>5</sup>

If Greek tragedy had been the cultural artifact of a newly encountered society it would have been classified, I suggest, as a type of performance which was, at the very least partly, ritual. However, historically the dominant perception of Greek tragedy has been as the literary genre which gave birth to Western theatrical tradition – which, of course it is, but this knowledge should be blocked, to avoid reading a cultural artifact through filters derived from its distant descendants, a methodologically flawed procedure when the aim is to understand how that “ancestor” artifact functioned in the society that produced it. The perception of the relationship between Greek tragedy and religion in classical scholarship has changed over the years. When the ancient Greeks were perceived to be “like us,” and the reading of texts a matter of common sense, with little or limited reflection of the ways in which meanings were inscribed and read through perceptual filters shaped by cultural assumptions, the religious dimension of Greek tragedy was generally underplayed, and the resulting readings reflected the rationality-privileging perceptions of (especially twentieth-century) Western intellectuals. In recent years there has been a much greater acceptance of the religious dimension of Greek tragedy, with the emphasis on the articulations and manipulations of rituals in the creation of tragic meanings. (Zeitlin 1965: 463–508; Vidal-Naquet 1972: 133–58; Vernant 1972: 99–131; Easterling [1988] 1991: 87–109; cf. Friedrich 1996: 269–70), and the character of the dramatic performances as part of a festival has been stressed (see Goldhill 1990: 97–129). But not everyone accepts that the ritual context of the performance and the importance of religious elements in the tragedies are connected, let alone that they may indicate something about the ways in which the ancient audiences perceived the tragic performances. (see, e.g., Heath 1987: 48).

I have recently set out (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003) a detailed case for the view that tragedies were perceived by the ancient audiences as ritual performances, not as a purely “theatrical” experience simply framed by ritual and articulated through ritual, and that the rites, gods, and other religious elements in the tragedies were perceived to be representations of parts of the audiences’ religious realities; and also that Greek tragedy was, among other things, but very importantly, also a discourse of religious exploration, one important locus where the religious discourse of the Athenian polis was explored and elaborated in the fifth century; and finally, that this religious exploration was intimately connected with the ritual context in which tragedies were performed, and within which tragedy had been generated. I am not, of course,

suggesting that tragedies were simply discourses of religious exploration, or doubting that many other important problems are also explored, or that tragedies involve emotional experiences. What I am suggesting is that the reasons why the exploration of so many human problems is closely intertwined with religion are, first, the Greek perceptions of the world, in which the mortals' interactions with the divine was of crucial importance for, and affected the course of, human lives, behavior, and relationships; and second, tragedy's nature as a ritual performance which developed out of a ritual matrix conducive to religious problematizations and exploration. I also argued that, though in the fifth century tragedy changed significantly, and came to encompass a wide variety of problematizations, it did not lose its role as a locus of religious exploration, and did not cease to be perceived as a ritual performance. Let us briefly consider some of the arguments.

I will first illustrate how densely ritual elements are deployed in, and help articulate, Greek tragedies with two examples: Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*, the middle play of the *Oresteia* trilogy, and Euripides' *Electra*, a later tragedy focused on the same myth, a matricide, the killing of Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus by Clytemnestra's son Orestes, with the help of her daughter Electra, in revenge for Clytemnestra's murder of their father Agamemnon, on the oracular advice of the god Apollo.

The first part of *The Libation Bearers* is focused on the offering of chthonic libations. The original purpose of this rite, as intended by Clytemnestra, was to placate the angry shade of Agamemnon on her behalf, but this purpose was perverted and the rite turned against her: it became the starting point for Clytemnestra's murder, and Agamemnon's shade was asked to help his children avenge him by killing their mother.

*The Libation Bearers* begins with a prayer, then the chorus of female slaves bearing chthonic libations enters, together with Electra; the libations are poured, and Electra invokes Hermes Chthonios (the god responsible for the passage between the world of the living and the land of the dead) and asks him to summon the infernal gods, while she pours libations as she invokes, and addresses a prayer to, her dead father and asks his help for herself and her brother and against his killers, their mother and her lover Aegisthos. This is followed by lamentations by the chorus, and then the discovery of Orestes' offering of hair to their father's tomb. Then there is another prayer, and then Orestes reports a ritual, his consultation of the Delphic oracle, and Apollo's response: the god had urged him to avenge his father by killing his murderers and had enumerated the punishments inflicted by the infernal gods to those who do not avenge their kin. This report is followed by a lament, itself followed by a segment which includes further addresses to the dead Agamemnon, and requests for his help, invocations of, and prayers to, chthonic deities, and also the recounting of Clytemnestra's prophetic dream which had motivated her to send the chthonic libations in an attempt to placate her dead husband.

Most of the choral ode which begins at v. 783 consists of a prayer, and there is another prayer by the chorus at 855–68; at 900–2 there is a significant religious

reference that affects the course of action, a reminder to Orestes of Apollo's oracular command. The choral ode at 935–71 is a song of victory and thanksgiving sung to celebrate that Dike, the goddess who personifies justice, has come. What follows after 973 can be considered to be enacting a rite of supplication, since Orestes is holding the suppliant's bough. At 1029–39 Orestes, having mentioned that it was Apollo's inducements that led him to kill his mother, announces that, on Apollo's instructions (part of the original oracular response), he is now going to Delphi as a suppliant to be purified. At 1048 he begins to describe his vision of the Erinyes, the Furies, whom no one else sees. At 1057 he invokes Apollo, and the chorus urge him to go to the Delphic sanctuary of Apollo. He then exits, fleeing, to go to Delphi, pursued, the audience will understand, by the Erinyes.

Thus, a very considerable part of this tragedy is articulated by ritual, there are religious references everywhere, and the Delphic Apollo has a central role.

The main ritual skeleton articulating Euripides' *Electra* is focused on a ritual that is reported in detail by a messenger (vv. 783–851), the sacrifice performed by Aegisthus, in the course of which he was murdered by Orestes. This sacrifice was referred to before its description, and then again afterwards. In the description we are told (vv. 825–9) that Aegisthus had taken the omens and that the organs of the sacrificial victim were abnormal and diseased, that is, the omens were bad. The predicted misfortune came to pass when Orestes, almost immediately afterwards, killed Aegisthus. This is a sacrifice corrupted by murder.<sup>6</sup> This corrupted sacrifice is part of a wider web which also includes other, associated, rites, some reported, others enacted. Thus, the messenger reports that when Orestes revealed his identity the palace servants raised the ritual cry of triumph and crowned him with a wreath. When the messenger departs the chorus performs a victory dance and invites Electra to join in the dancing and singing. Electra will fetch a wreath to crown her brother, but it is the chorus who do the singing and dancing. At vv. 874–9 the chorus – in this tragedy a chorus of young women in the heroic age – refers to its singing and dancing in a way that will have zoomed the audience's perception to their identity as a chorus of Athenian men in the present, singing in honor of Dionysus at the Dionysia in the theatre in the sanctuary of Dionysus (see Henrichs 1994/5: 87–8). I shall return to this.

The next enacted ritual, Electra's crowning of Orestes at 880–9, is a disturbing victory celebration, for the killing of Aegisthus, which could have been presented as a legitimate act of punishment, is made problematic in this tragedy through the outrage of the ritual order during the sacrifice (Easterling [1988] 1991: 101); also potentially disturbing is the fact that the corpse of Aegisthus is brought on to the stage and treated with disrespect (Easterling [1988] 1991: 107).

The murder of Clytemnestra involves a deception also centered on a ritual. At 1124–38 Electra tricks her mother by pretending to have given birth and asking her to perform the sacrifice offered on the tenth night after childbirth. Clytemnestra goes into the house believing she will perform the role of sacrificer, while in fact she will be the sacrificial victim. When, after the murder, Orestes and Electra come out of the house, appalled at their actions, they continue with religious language. At 1198–9



Electra mentions choral performances and weddings as rites from which she will be excluded. This would have evoked for the audience her earlier statement (in 309–13) that she was isolated because she was excluded from ritual, deprived of participation in festivals and dances because she avoided the group of which she was supposed to be a member, that of married women, since in reality she was a virgin. (Aegisthus had given her in marriage to a peasant, to ensure that her husband could not become a threat to him, but this peasant respected Electra and did not consummate the marriage). At 1177–93 Orestes invokes three deities to look upon his deeds, Gaia, Zeus, and Apollo. Finally, the brothers of Clytemnestra, Castor and Polydeuces, who had become gods, appear in epiphany. The epiphany of deities to mortals in the world of the tragedies corresponded to a real-life religious experience in the world of the audience; for deities, it was believed, occasionally manifested themselves to mortals and gave them instructions, as a result of which very often a cult was instituted (Versnel 1990: 190–3; Burkert 1985: 186–8; Henrichs 1996: 546). The representation of a deity by an actor evoked, for the ancient audience, the ritual impersonation of divinities by priestly personnel during certain religious ceremonies (Burkert 1985: 186, 1997: 27–8).

The following rites also helped create the ritual web that articulated the tragedy but are not part of the central segment of its main ritual skeleton. Electra's informal lament (vv. 112–66); the reference (167–97) to the forthcoming festival of Hera, aspects of which are evoked by both chorus and Electra; a double report of a ritual in the Old Man's account to Electra of his visit to the tomb of Agamemnon: he mentions his own lament and the fact that he offered a libation and deposited myrtle branches, and also reports that he saw evidence of a previous sacrifice of sheep and offering of hair; the prayer by Electra, Orestes, and the Old Man (671–82). There is also a prolonged reference to a human sacrifice, the sacrifice of Iphigenia (1011–50). The choral odes contain ritual and other religious references. At 737 ff. the chorus express their disbelief of the story that (after Atreus' faithless wife had given a golden lamb to her lover) the sun had changed its course, to the misfortune of mankind, for the sake of mortal justice, adding that frightening stories are profitable to men in furthering the service of the gods and that Clytemnestra, not remembering such stories, killed her husband. This passage affirms the gods' intervention in human affairs on the side of justice; it is this that Clytemnestra should have remembered (Stinton 1976: 79–82; cf. also Cropp 1988: 152, 743–4.) The comment concerning Clytemnestra shows that the notion of "frightening stories conducive to piety" is not presented by the chorus with a rationalist's sneer, but as something good, since they remind people of the existence of divine justice.

The corruption of two rites, Aegisthus' sacrifice and the enticing of Clytemnestra inside the house on the pretext of her participation in a ritual, helps color the two murders negatively. The corruption is less serious in the case of Clytemnestra, correlatively with the fact that matricide was in any case negatively colored. The central strand of religious problematization in this tragedy is focused on the role of Apollo in instigating murder, especially matricide. As well as deploying complex explorations of human relationships, passions, behavior patterns, and characteristics,

Electra problematizes not simply the killing of the mother to avenge the father (which involved both human relationships issues and issues involving the gods, pollution, and divine punishment), but also the notion of revenge in general, suggesting the possibility that it is in itself a corrupting act. Most importantly, this exploration problematized the role of Apollo and the Delphic oracle. However, the ancient audience would not have perceived this as a “criticism” of Apollo and his oracle, but as an illustration of the dark side of life; once one is caught up in a cycle of destruction there will be a lot of suffering. But ultimately Orestes will be saved. So, if one acts on divine instructions, even if they make no sense, or seem wrong, there may be intense suffering, but there will be an end to the suffering and an end to the self-perpetuating cycle of destruction.

Euripides’ *Electra*, then, is articulated by a dense web of ritual elements, which is intertwined with rich religious problematization; thus, for example, the corruption of a rite colors an action negatively; the oracular consultation makes clear what it is that the god advises in a particular situation.

To move on. In terms of form, Greek tragedies are structured through songs sung by the chorus. The first song, called *parodos*, is sung as the chorus enters; the others, sung while they were in the orchestra, are called *stasima*. The role of the chorus in the tragedies diminished in the course of the fifth century, as individual characters acquired greater importance. However, the terminology used by the Athenians to speak of tragedy places the chorus at the center, defines tragedy through the chorus, and the chorus remained central in the organization of the production.<sup>7</sup> *Tragodoi*, “tragic singers,” continues to be used to denote tragic performances in, for example, Aristophanes, Lysias, and Plato. Clearly, this does not mean that the chorus was perceived to be dramatically more important, especially given its decreasing role within the tragedies, so this centrality may be reflecting the importance of the tragic chorus in the wider context of the festival. An explanation in terms of the ritual importance of the chorus would coincide with the ritual importance of choruses in Greek festivals in general.

The festival of the City Dionysia included sacrifices, a very elaborate procession, and competitions, elements that formed the basic template for major Greek festivals, occurring in particular variants in particular festivals, depending on the specificities of each cult. In the Dionysia the competitions were connected with Dionysiac cult in that they were dramatic and dithyrambic competitions – dithyrambs being hymns, usually to Dionysus, sung by choruses who danced in a circular formation. Another element specific to the City Dionysia was a preliminary rite: just before the festival proper started, the statue of Dionysus was removed from the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus and taken to a shrine a little outside the center of Athens, in the Academy; eventually it was ceremonially escorted back to the theatre in the sanctuary, where the performances took place in its presence.

According to the myth associated with the festival,<sup>8</sup> a man from Eleutherai called Pegasos brought Dionysus’ statue to Athens, but the Athenians did not receive the god with honor. Dionysus, enraged, struck the male sexual organs with an incurable

disease. Instructed by the oracle to bring in the god with honor, the Athenians manufactured phalluses, penises made of wood and leather, and with these they honored the god, commemorating their misfortune. The City Dionysia, then, celebrated the introduction of the cult of Dionysus in Athens, and reenacted that introduction, and this is why the statue of Dionysus was removed from its sanctuary, taken to the Academy and then ceremonially escorted back, reenacting the introduction and giving the god an honored reception, both in the present, and as an reenactment of the hospitality offered him at the introduction of the cult. The festival was focused on a rite of receiving and entertaining a deity, a rite of *xenismos*, common in the Greek world, which involved the offering of a meal to a god or hero.<sup>9</sup>

The word *tragodos*, which denoted above all a member of the tragic chorus (though it was also used for the tragic poet and actor), means, according to its most widely accepted and best interpretation, either “singer at the sacrifice of a billy goat (*tragos*),” or “singer for the prize of a billy goat” – or both together, since the prize animal would have been sacrificed to Dionysus (Burkert 1990: 16–18). A singer at the sacrifice of a billy goat makes perfect sense, since in Greek ritual practice songs, hymns, were indeed sung at sacrifices.<sup>10</sup> In at least some sacrifices in which several hymns were sung, there was a basic bipartite articulation: a processional hymn, sung as the sacrificial procession moved toward the altar, and one or more songs sung by the altar. There are good reasons for thinking that the nexus of choral songs sung at the sacrifice of a billy goat in the rite of *xenismos* at the early City Dionysia was articulated in this way. This reconstructed nexus of songs sung at the sacrifice of a *tragos* in that *xenismos* bears a striking resemblance to the articulation of choral songs in tragedy, the basic skeleton of *parodos* and *stasima*. This suggests that this schema articulating the tragic choral odes may be reflecting the ritual schema of songs that had been part of the sacrificial ritual during the *xenismos* of Dionysus; that those songs sung at that sacrifice had produced the template of the basic schema structuring tragedy, the *parodos* and *stasima*.

The centrality of the chorus in Athenian perceptions of tragedy, the fact that the terminology used by the Athenians to speak of tragedy defines tragedy through the chorus, and the fact that the chorus remained central in the organization of the production, are important not simply because they show that tragedy was perceived in ways that placed it close to its ritual roots, but also, and especially, because, I will now try to show, in the eyes of the fifth-century audiences the tragic chorus was not only perceived as a group of people in the world of the play, in the audience’s past, but also as a chorus, a group of male citizens acting as ritual performers, in the here and now, a chorus to Dionysus in the world of the present.

An element that indicates that tragic choruses were also perceived as ritual choruses in the present is the fact that the members of tragic – as well as dithyrambic – choruses had to be citizens (see, e.g., Plutarch *Phokion* 30; MacDowell 1989: 69–77; Csapo and Slater 1995: 351), and thus that they were, like other choruses, singing as representatives of the polis – while actors and poets could be foreigners. Also, as Easterling has stressed ([1988] 1991: 88–9), in tragedy the chorus is never simply a

group of bystanders or witnesses reacting and commenting; they are also a chorus ready to perform lyrics patterned on ritual song and dance and accompanied by appropriate music, for example, a paean giving thanks for victory, as in the parodos of *Antigone*.<sup>11</sup> I would take this further and suggest that, for example in the particular case of the parodos of *Antigone*, as the chorus processed in, singing a cult song the usual mode of performance of which was processional, it would have been difficult for the audience not to perceive this hymn as being sung also in the real world of here and now. Then, there are choral passages in which references to choruses amount to choral self-referentiality (Henrichs 1994/5: 56–111; Wilson and Taplin 1993: 170–4), in which choruses “draw attention to their ritual role as collective performers of the choral dance-song in the orchestra” (Henrichs 1994/5: 58). We saw an example of that in Euripides’ *Electra*.

Let us see how this self-referentiality works by considering another, striking, example (see Henrichs 1994/5: 65–73) from an ode in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*: in vv. 883–910 the chorus of Theban elders ask, if people act without fear of Dike, Justice, and without reverence for the gods and get away with it, “why should I dance?” that is, why should I worship the gods through being a member of a chorus? Then they sing that they will not visit the oracles any more if oracles do not come true. Finally, they pray to Zeus not to allow this present situation to escape his power – a situation which involves Oedipus’ patricide and incest, though at this point in the tragedy neither is clear to the tragic characters, who only know of the possibility that Oedipus had killed Laios, his wife’s first husband; the fact that Laios was his father is not yet known. The verses activate the audience’s knowledge that nothing will go unpunished and that the oracles will come true in this case. Of course, the religious problematization in this ode is located above all in the world of the tragedy, but when the chorus sing “why should I sing and dance as a member of a chorus?” in a context in which the meaning “worship the gods through being a member of a chorus” was also constructed, at the very moment when they are singing and dancing as members of a chorus, their song inevitably activated the audience’s awareness that they were at this very moment singing and dancing as members of a chorus in honor of Dionysus in the present. This activated the perception of tragedy as a ritual performance. At the same time, the complex and ambiguous relationship between the chorus’s two personae allowed the religious problematization they set out to take place at a distance, and in a context in which the audience’s knowledge about the play would lead them to give reassuring answers. The questions were articulated simultaneously in both worlds, but the audience’s knowledge allowed them to place the questions the chorus asks in the world of the play in their proper perspective, and give reassuring answers, for they know that nothing will go unpunished and that the oracles will come true. Clearly, the activation of the perception of the tragedy as a ritual performance is intertwined with religious problematization, the basic question, “if evil goes unpunished, why should we worship the gods?”

Choral self-referentiality, then, activated for the audience the chorus’s identity as chorus in the present performing in honor of Dionysus. The mask, while locating the

chorus in the other world of the heroic past, at the same time draws attention to the fact that the members of the chorus are not in fact “other,” that their otherness is constructed, and located above all in the mask, while they are also, underneath the masks, a chorus of male Athenians in the present.

Another argument for the view that the identity of the chorus as a chorus in the present was not wholly neutralized is provided by Plato (*Laws* 800C–801A). Plato expresses his disapproval of the fact that, as he puts it, after a public sacrifice many choruses, standing not far from the altars, pour blasphemies over the sacrifices by singing mournful songs and racking the souls of the listeners and making them cry. The fact that this idiosyncratic polarization about tragic choruses was possible indicates that in the Athenian assumptions, the shared assumptions that have to be taken for granted for Plato’s articulation to work, the tragic chorus was also perceived as a chorus in the present; for unless that was the case such a polarization would not make sense. The Platonic image entails that it could be presented as being the case that the world of the present could be penetrated by the world of the tragedy, that the mourning songs could be presented as constituting blasphemy within the ritual performed in the here and now.

Another argument in favor of the view that the chorus was also perceived as a chorus in the present may be provided by the tailpieces addressing Nike, the goddess of Victory, and requesting a prize in Euripides’ *Orestes*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Phoenician Women*.<sup>12</sup>

If tragic choruses were indeed also perceived (albeit not dominantly) as choruses for Dionysus in the present, it follows that in the fifth century tragic performances were perceived as ritual performances also in the sense that they were shot through by rituals performed as rituals in the present, since the choral songs which structured the tragedies were not only perceived as sung in the world of the tragedy but also in the here and now, by a chorus of Athenian men in honor of Dionysus at his festival in his sanctuary. This perception would inevitably have affected the perception of the tragic performances as a whole. These performances, taking place in a sanctuary, during a ritual, in the presence of a god, and involving the representation of rituals and often also of gods, and named after, and also otherwise focused upon, the one element which was also perceived to be a ritual element in the present, could not have been perceived as other than ritual performances, in the presence of the statue of Dionysus, part of the ritual entertaining Dionysus at his festival.

But, it may be asked, if the case is so clear, why did previous generations of classical scholars not perceive tragedy in this way? There are several interacting reasons why the ritual, and generally religious, dimension of tragedy was underplayed. To begin with, the implicit perception of Greek tragic performances through the filter of modern theatrical experiences led to the implicit underprivileging of their ritual context and the concentration on their content, taken in isolation, wrenched from that context. Then, the absence of awareness of the role of assumptions in the construction of meaning led to the tragedies being made sense of through the (by default) deployment of modern assumptions, especially the rationalizing filters of modern

scholars, which in turn led to the underprivileging of the importance of the religious dimension and the correlative reinterpretation of tragic religious discourses as ironic and/or critical of traditional religion – readings which could only be sustained by virtually eliding the importance of the ritual context of the tragic performances by marginalizing it as “simple” “framing.”

This process was facilitated by the influence of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, a treatise which radically underplays religion, and generally presents a perception of tragedy shaped by rigidly rationalizing filters and structured through the conceptual schemata Aristotle set out to construct, which reflected his own preoccupations and assumptions – the preoccupations and assumptions of a philosopher who was not even a participant in the culture, since he did not live in the fifth century and he was not Athenian. The distorting selectivity of Aristotle’s presentation of tragedy has been stressed in recent years (Taplin 1995: 94–6; Gould 1996: 217; Goldhill 1996: 244; Hall 1996: 295–309, esp. 296); but its influence has not entirely disappeared, or at least a conceptual bias ultimately based on that perception of tragedy has not.

The belief that some tragedies, above all by Euripides, were challenging established religion was an important element in this nexus of interacting factors that shaped earlier perceptions of tragedy in which its religious dimension was underplayed. The notion that Euripides was an atheist has been shown to be wrong;<sup>13</sup> it is a modern construct produced through the deployment of modern filters and the taking at face value of what ancient audiences would have understood to be the comic distortions in Aristophanes’ comedies (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 294–7). One of the main modalities of misreading that generated such interpretations is that which mistakes the dark problematizations in Euripidean tragedies (such as that in *Electra*) for criticisms of traditional religion. Such misreadings are produced when the tragic explorations are made sense of through modern filters shaped by assumptions which are not sympathetic to those of the Greek religious universe. I will now illustrate this, by briefly considering another instance of religious exploration and its articulation through ritual, an exploration which involves very dark problematization in Euripides’ *Orestes*, where Apollo is repeatedly criticized by the dramatic characters, blamed for Orestes’ matricide, and the notion that gods cause troubles and woes to humans is repeatedly expressed.

Euripides’ *Orestes* deals with events that took place after the events represented in Aeschylus’ *The Libation Bearers* and Euripides’ *Electra*. In *Orestes* Orestes is pursued by the Erinyes after the matricide and he has also been condemned to death by the Argives. Because his uncle Menelaus had not come to his assistance, Orestes intends to punish him by killing his wife Helen and daughter Hermione. However, the gods snatch Helen away, so Orestes threatens to kill Hermione and burn down the palace, unless Menelaus convinces the Argives to spare his life. Catastrophe is averted by Apollo, who appears in epiphany, accompanied by Helen. He announces that Helen is now deified and tells Orestes that he is to undergo purification and then rule Argos – and also that he must marry Hermione and that Orestes’ friend Pylades must marry Electra.

Many modern scholars have interpreted this ending of Orestes as an ironic construct, for they perceive an incongruity between this unexpected happy ending and the earlier bleakness. However, as I will now try to show, an ironic reading (besides being both a priori and culturally determined) cannot function when we deploy the (reconstructed) filters shaped by the ancient assumptions through which the tragedy was made sense of by the ancient audiences,<sup>14</sup> in that a series of interacting factors make such an interpretation impossible. First, throughout the tragedy Apollo had been zoomed to the audience's religious realities, through references that would have evoked the audience's own consultation of the Delphic oracle, so that they would have identified the Apollo of the tragedy with their own god, not perceived him as a literary construct. Second, the epiphany of deities in the tragedies activated, and so was perceived with the help of, two religious schemata, real-life epiphany (corresponding to the perspective of the dramatic characters) and (from the perspective of the audience) "ritual impersonation of deities by priestly personnel." This also would have led the audience to perceive the god on stage as a representation of the god they worshiped, a perception further reinforced by the fact that this was a performance at a festival of Dionysus in the sanctuary of Dionysus in the presence of the statue of Dionysus, in which, moreover, the chorus was also as a chorus for Dionysus in the present – (a persona confirmed and stressed by its concluding words in which it is asking Nike for victory in the competition). All these interacting factors would inescapably have led the audience to perceive Apollo on stage as a representation of their own god, not as a theatrical device of closure constructing an ironic ending.

After telling Orestes that he must go to Athens to stand trial for the matricide and that he will be victorious at this trial Apollo promises that he will reconcile him to the city of Argos, because, he says, "I forced" Orestes to kill his mother. Throughout the tragedy, Apollo was repeatedly blamed for the matricide, which was characterized as unholy, and for its consequences, and here he accepts that responsibility. But things are not that simple. The audience would have perceived the notion that Apollo was alone responsible for the matricide as one possible way of presenting a complex situation, but not as the whole picture. For the Greek – and tragic – perception of double motivation, divine and human, in which the gods will something but mortals' actions bring it about, would have deconstructed the notion that the god alone was responsible. More importantly, there is another recurrent theme in Orestes, which also deconstructs the notion of Apollo's sole responsibility: the notion that these disasters were the result of an ancestral curse, and the consequent operation of an avenging demon. This affects the way in which the audience would have made sense of the notion that Apollo had forced Orestes to kill his mother. Since, in the eyes of the audience, an avenging demon triggered off by the curse was operating, it was inevitable that Orestes should have suffered, so Apollo's command was good advice on how to deal with a dreadful situation. Apollo stresses his own responsibility, focuses on his own role, because he is stressing that Orestes obeyed him, a god, and he wants to marginalize Orestes' choice in this context, in which he is speaking of reconciling him to the people of Argos; it is as though he is presenting the case for Orestes that he will make to the Argives.

Consequently, the superficial impression that Apollo is to blame for Orestes' matricide was modified, for the audience, through their perception that Orestes had ultimately made his own choices, and also, very importantly, through the perception of the workings of the avenging demon. Nevertheless, Apollo was responsible; he had ordered Orestes to kill his mother. Does this entail that the audience would have perceived Apollo to have been wrong, and worthy of criticism? Surely, gods should not instigate matricide. These, I suggest, are culturally determined questions. For the ancient audience Apollo was right, in that the fact that Orestes followed his advice has led, after suffering, to the present situation, in which it is clear that order will eventually be restored, and Orestes' sufferings will come to an end. This does not alter the fact that his guidance involved the commission of an unholy deed. The themes of "vengeance" and "reaction to injustice and wrongdoing with further wrongdoing" are explored in many tragedies. The answer is not simple. The ideology of the society in which tragedy was generated led to an hierarchy of wrongness. In Greek discourse the father, and the father-son relationship, were privileged, and a woman who betrayed and killed her husband was perceived, as Clytemnestra is described in this tragedy, as a threatening figure, representing the dangers of complete disorder. But the matricide is also presented in very negative colors, and also threatens disorder. Because of this hierarchy of wrongness, order will be eventually restored after a matricide, but the other side is also strongly articulated, and the prospective happy ending does not obliterate Orestes' suffering which the audience has witnessed.

Would the audience have perceived that there were alternatives to what Apollo had advised Orestes to do? From the human perspective one character, Tyndareus, believes that there were. But in the Greek representations the human perspective is limited. So, the audience's perception, I suggest, would have been that in those circumstances, only part of which are intelligible to mortals, Apollo's command revealed what was the best way to deal with an extremely bad situation – however dreadful that remedy. So, one of the perceptions articulated in this tragedy was that the ways of the gods are unfathomable, but this is intertwined with the perception that even when people think that the gods have abandoned them, it is not true – if they have followed the gods' will; ultimately the gods help those who obey them, whatever it may look like; there is suffering, and this suffering is not annihilated by what will happen in the future, but eventually the suffering will come to an end, and things will work out. This is a reassuring message. However, this reassurance is partly deconstructed, as far as the world of the audience is concerned, by Orestes' reply. Orestes acknowledges that Apollo is a true prophet. His fear had been that it might have been a false oracle, not Apollo's voice, but an avenging demon attempting to deceive him. This would have evoked the fact that in the audience's reality people did not know if the prophecy they received was right, for there was always the danger, in their perceptions of prophecy, that human fallibility might interfere to distort the god's message. But again, the very fact that there is an order and a divine plan in the cosmos is itself reassuring. *Orestes*, then, does not criticize the gods or challenge established religion; it sets out a complex religious exploration.



Euripidean tragedies often explored problematic areas in the Greek religious system and the human relationships that were grounded in that system. They explored, among other things, the empirically observable fact that the world is cruel, and people suffer, by articulating the darkness and bleakness and offering “answers,” which were ultimately, in complex ways, reassuring.

The perception that Apollo was a representation of the audience’s god was, we saw, an important element in their reception of the religious exploration in *Orestes*. Since this perception was to a large extent constructed through the activation of ritual schemata from the audience’s lived religion, it is clear that here also the discourse of religious exploration is constructed through (among other things, but especially) the deployment of ritual. This is another illustration of the articulation of religious explorations (and the explorations of associated issues pertaining to human interactions) through the ritual web that structures the tragedies. Indeed, on my view, which I will now summarize, tragedy was generated through the interaction between ritual performance and religious exploration. The festival myth of the City Dionysia is not the only myth of resistance to the introduction of Dionysus’ cult. The best known among such myths is that of Pentheus, King of Thebes, as told in Euripides’ *Bacchae*. In this tragedy Dionysus, the divine son of Zeus and the mortal Semele, arrived at Thebes, bringing his cult; his mother’s sisters challenged his divinity and he punished them by sending them madness which drove them to the mountain where they were raving, joined by the other Theban women, to whom Dionysus had also sent frenzy. Dionysus’ cousin, Pentheus, resisted the introduction of Dionysus’ rites and imprisoned Dionysus and his followers – though they all escaped from prison miraculously. Pentheus was punished by being torn apart by his mother and the other raving women who mistook him for a mountain lion. Pentheus, and all the others who, like the Athenians, resisted the cult of Dionysus, had followed surface logic, not realizing that this stranger who brought disordered behavior was a god. On the surface the behavior of Dionysus and his retinue was wrong, mad; but in the deeper reality that was inaccessible to human logic that disorder was good. What seemed madness was right; and what had seemed right – the exclusion of disorder – turned out to be madness. For this disorder was inspired by Dionysus and opposition to it was an offense against the gods. This is a paradox, and paradox characterizes religion and the world of the gods which is unknowable to men. One of the perceptions expressed in such myths is that ultimate religious reality lies beyond the limits of human rationality. This Dionysiac challenge of human rationality invites exploration, both in itself and also insofar as it presents a polarized version of the unknowability of the divine will and so appropriate human behavior – at least in cases in which the latter is not based on customs hallowed by tradition, practices that, as the Greeks saw it, had proved their efficacy through the longevity and prosperity of the communities that practiced them.

I have argued (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 67–200) that it was through the interaction between the myth of Athenian resistance to Dionysus, which raised complex religious problems and invited exploration, and choral performances at the sacrifice of

a goat during the rite of xenismos of Dionysus, the focus of the City Dionysia, that tragedy was generated in the particular historical circumstances of sixth-century Athens and thanks to the contribution of particular poets. For the focus of the xenismos, and so also of the hymns accompanying its sacrifice, was the festival myth, the rejection of Dionysus' cult and the realization that this was a terrible mistake, and so also the problematization of the paradox that these myths of resistance to Dionysus set out. In other words, the hymns would have implicated a subject highly conducive to religious exploration, of a type that also raised wider questions pertaining to religion in general, and this was one of the factors that led to the generation of new forms that eventually led to the emergence of tragedy. On my argument, the ritual performance and the exploration had began by focusing on the festival myth, which involved a world that was both other, part of the heroic past, and part of the world of the present, in that it involved the introduction of the cult of Dionysus which was part of the Athenian present, as were the relationships between the god and the Athenians set up in that heroic age. Subsequently, these explorations encompassed other Dionysiac myths, comparable to the festival myth, that also invited the generation of comparable explorations. Eventually, these explorations widened their scope to take in non-Dionysiac religious matters; new forms developed, and tragedy was born.

On my thesis, tragedy in the fifth century was still a ritual performance which explored – among other things – the religious discourse of the polis. When the plague, which began at 430 BCE, brought about moral and religious “turbulence,” insecurity, anxiety, and questioning (Thucydides 2.47.4, 2. 53.4; see Parker 1996: 200) that religious exploration (in the extant Euripidean tragedies) acquired greater urgency and intensity, and set out a darker problematization, but it still offered “answers,” which were ultimately, in very complex ways, reassuring.

## NOTES

- 1 I discuss the preferred setting of Greek tragedy in the heroic age and its implications in Sourvinou-Inwood (2003: 15–66).
- 2 For the detailed arguments on which what follows is based see Sourvinou-Inwood (1989: 134–48, 1990b: 11–38).
- 3 Sourvinou-Inwood (1990a: 295–322 [2000: 13–37], 1988: 259–74 [2000: 38–55]).
- 4 Sourvinou-Inwood (1989: 134–48, 2003: *passim*, esp. 15–66); cf. Pelling (1997: 217–18, 228–9, 233–4).
- 5 See Pickard-Cambridge (1968); Csapo and Slater (1995); Goldhill (1990: 97–129); Sourvinou-Inwood (2003: 67–200, cf. 40–5). They were also performed at the Lenaia, in some local communities at the Rural Dionysia, and from the late fourth century BCE at the Anthesteria. But the City Dionysia was their primary and most important context.
- 6 See Easterling ([1988] 1991: 101–8); Henrichs (1994/5: 86); cf. Cropp (1988: 153–7, 747–858).
- 7 See, e.g., Winkler (1990: 42); Wilson and Taplin (1993: 170); Wilson (2000: 54–5, 61–7).
- 8 Scholia Aristophanes *Acharnians* 243a; Pickard-Cambridge (1968: 57–8); Garland (1992: 159); Cole (1993: 26).
- 9 On this rite see Jameson (1994: 35–57); Burkert (1985: 107).

- 10 The detailed argument on which what follows is based is set out in Sourvinou-Inwood (2003: 141–200).
- 11 See Rutherford (1994/5: 127): “the parodos of the Antigone can itself be thought of as a paean, although this would be a celebratory victory paean, contrasting with the fearful and apotropaic song of Pindar.”
- 12 Especially if they were Euripidean. But even if they were actors’ interpolations they would still testify to perceptions in which the chorus was also perceived as a chorus in the present. The notion that they are post-classical is based on the circular argument that “the break of illusion is foreign to tragedy” (Mastronarde 1994: 645, 1764–6); but the notion “break of illusion” is too crude a concept for the complex situation that tragic performances involved; the argument is circular because it becomes invalid if it is right that the tragic chorus was also perceived as a chorus in the present – with this part of the chorus’s persona being zoomed at the end of some tragedies (see also Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 66 n.135, and esp. 415–17).
- 13 See esp. Lefkowitz (1987: 149–66, 1989: 70–82). I added some further arguments to this discussion in Sourvinou-Inwood (2003: 291–458, 489–500).
- 14 A detailed discussion with bibliography is in Sourvinou-Inwood (2003: 386–402, 410–14).

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