Chapter 1

Trojan Suffering, Tragic Gods, and Transhistorical Metaphysics

Edith Hall

> The Greek, decisive confrontation with the daemonic world-order gives to tragic poetry its historico-philosophical signature.
>
> (Benjamin 1980: vol. 1.3, 879)

The Reasons for Suffering

When Philip Sidney defended theater in the first substantial example of literary criticism in the English language, his *Defence of Poetry* (1581), he used a story from ancient Greece to illustrate tragedy's emotive power:

> Plutarch yielded a notable testimony of the abominable tyrant Alexander Pheraeus; from whose eyes a tragedy, well made and represented, drew abundance of tears, who without all pity had murdered infinite numbers, and some of his own blood; so as he that was not ashamed to make matters for tragedies, yet could not resist the sweet violence of a tragedy. And if it wrought no farther good in him, it was that he, in despite of himself, withdrew himself from hearkening to that which might mollify his hardened heart.
>
> (Sidney 1973: 96–7)

Sidney was struck that Alexander of Pherae, a wicked Greek tyrant of the fourth century BCE, was induced to weep by ‘‘the sweet violence of a

tragedy.'' Indeed, the emotion so overpowered Alexander that he had to absent himself, for fear that his hardened heart could be made capable of pity.

The tragedy which upset the tyrant was Euripides' *Trojan Women*, as we know from the passage in Plutarch where Sidney had found it (see below). The sufferings that Alexander could not bear to watch were those of Hecuba and Andromache, women who lost their families at Troy. *Trojan Women* constitutes an extended lament and searing statement of the philosophical incomprehensibility of human suffering. Although famous in antiquity, its perceived inadequacy in relation to some of Aristotle's prescriptions for the ideal tragedy meant that it was relatively neglected from the Renaissance until 1905, when it inaugurated the tradition of using Greek tragedy to protest against establishment politics. The 1905 production was mounted at the Royal Court Theatre in London, in the translation of the Greek scholar and humanitarian Gilbert Murray, in order to protest against the concentration camps in which the British had incarcerated Boer women and children during the terrible war in South Africa.[1] Most of this chapter revolves around *Trojan Women*, but the focus on this occasion will *not* be on its political power.

For the play is also distinguished by its metaphysical complexity. It juxtaposes physically manifest Olympian gods – Poseidon and Athena open the play agreeing to destroy the Greeks as well as the Trojans – with Hecuba's explicit expressions of doubt that the gods can concern themselves with humans or even exist in their traditional form at all. At one point Hecuba appeals to the gods in an offhand articulation of ''Pascal's wager'' – acknowledging god may, she says, be useless, but you might as well do it just in case (469). At another point she prays to ''whatever principle it is that sustains the world . . . whoever you are, difficult to fathom and know, Zeus, whether you are the Inevitable Force of Nature or the Mind of Men'' (884–8): here she makes the (in Euripides' time) remarkably avant-garde proposal that the supreme god is actually the physical laws that govern the material universe, or human intelligence. Finally, she announces that the gods have ''come to nothing'' and that all her sacrifices have proved futile (1240–2).

Hecuba's metaphysical bafflement anticipates the entire future of the medium; indeed, in his recent study of tragedy Eagleton proposes that tragedy can only survive as a valid art form in the twenty-first century if marked by metaphysical openness (Eagleton 2003). Tragedy that suggests metaphysical answers derived from any single religious or philosophical

perspective is unlikely to have anything profound to say to the postmodern, multicultural global village. In this chapter *Trojan Women* will therefore be used as a basis for reflection on the relationship between tragic suffering and tragic metaphysics in its broadest sense, encompassing the gods, the unseen forces that shape the universe, and tragic characters' supernatural connection with the invisible world of the dead. It will be argued that there is a relationship between, on the one hand, Greek tragedy's susceptibility to theological and metaphysical reinterpretation relative to the religious beliefs of different societies and epochs, and on the other its permanent, definitive status as a philosophical examination of suffering. Greek tragedy turned its spectators into etiolated gods, viewers with superhuman understanding of the causes of the pain being witnessed, but with no power to prevent it. These are the selfsame metaphysical contours that underlie all subsequent drama known as "tragic."

To return to Sidney, his oxymoronic phrase "sweet violence" was borrowed by Eagleton as the title of his own book on tragedy, in which he stresses that one of the few things that is central to the historically mutable medium of tragedy is its representation of specific instances of *suffering*. Some tragic victims are aware of their suffering and the reasons for it; others certainly are not, as Arthur Miller rightly insisted: "It matters not at all . . . whether [the tragic character] is highly conscious or only dimly aware of what is happening" (Miller 1958: 31–6).[2] Many of the other elements that have sometimes been deemed necessary and definitive constituents of the genre (e.g., the high social class of the sufferer, or tragedy's ability to *ennoble* suffering) prove not, on consideration of twentieth-century examples including *Death of a Salesman*, to be necessary to tragedy at all. It is suffering that unites Oedipus, Hamlet, and Willy Loman, who dies after suffering as a way of life: his son Biff says that the result of the career path Willy chose is "To suffer fifty weeks a year for the sake of a two-week vacation" (Miller 1961: 16). That in Loman's life the proportion of suffering to non-suffering is as high as 50:2 is, moreover, in itself suggestive of the *concentration* on suffering implied by tragedy. As Aldous Huxley put it in a brilliant essay on the difference between tragedy and other "serious" genres, tragedy omits all the everyday parts of life that dilute its effect. Tragedy does not tell the "whole truth" about life – that even at times when you are terribly bereaved, domestic tasks must be done (Huxley 1961). Moreover, in order to build up its effect, tragedy takes a certain period of time – what Aristotle called its *mēkos*, or extension (*Poetics* Chapter 7): a joke can make someone laugh in a matter of seconds, but it is difficult to imagine what might constitute an

effective one-minute tragedy. (One of my editors suggests that the screams, heavy breathing, and garbage constituting Beckett's 35-second *Breath* (1969) just might qualify.)

A tragedy that did not represent suffering in some concentration and with some sustained build-up could not be tragic, by any criterion – ancient Greek, Senecan, Renaissance, Jacobean, eighteenth-century, nineteenth-century, Modernist, or contemporary. Eagleton has emphasized the *agony* inherent in it – whether psychological or physical, whether bereavement, boredom, or bodily mutilation. Yet "the dramatic representation of suffering," although a necessary definition of tragedy, is, as Eagleton stresses, not a sufficient one. The very process of staging agony as aesthetic spectacle must in a sense be abusive.[3] There remains, however, an obvious difference between the way that suffering is represented in tragedy and the way that it was represented in ancient Roman gladiatorial displays (which often were staged quasi-dramatically as combat between mythical heroes) and its manifestation in contemporary hardcore pornographic films. Tragedies, gladiatorial shows, and pornographic movies share dramatic form, enacted narrative, and agony, but neither the sole nor central goal of tragedy is the arousal of excitement or desire.

In Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus ponders the affinity between tragedy and pornography. Dedalus sees pornographic art as activating *kinetic* desire, whereas the emotion that is excited by tragic drama, in contrast, is aesthetic and "therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing" (Joyce 1960: 204–5). Many tragic poets have written scenes that play on this difficult borderline between arousing desire and arousing a more contemplative reaction: in Euripides' *Hecuba* (a play he wrote a few years before *Trojan Women* and which covers similar ground) the reported death of the half-naked Trojan princess Polyxena, in front of an internal audience of thousands of Greek soldiers, is a graphic example. It invites the external spectators to take erotic pleasure in the description of the young woman, who has torn her gown "from her shoulders to her waist beside the navel, revealing her breasts and her torso, most beautiful, like those of a statue" (558–61).[4] Yet the account simultaneously insists that the spectators raise to consciousness their own suspect reaction; moreover, the pornographic element in this scene is inseparable from the overriding *ethical* question it asks, which is why the Greeks had seen fit to sacrifice the young woman in the first place.

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The Philosophical Signature

One working definition of tragedy, therefore, is that it constitutes the expression of an enquiry into suffering, an aesthetically articulated question mark written in pain. It was certainly this immanent interrogatory quality that led the German philosophical tradition, from Hegel to Benjamin and Adorno, to turn to tragedy in search of a response to the radical questions that Kant had raised about the nature and proper limits of the field of philosophy and its critical practices.[5] As Hölderlin put it, "the tragic is the metaphor [in the literal Greek sense of "the transposition"] of an intellectual intuition"[6] For tragedy, while representing an instance of suffering in dramatic form, asks *why* it has occurred. It is not a matter of whether the suffering is of a particular type or quality: neither the Greeks nor Shakespeare's audiences are likely to have drawn much distinction between pitiful and "tragic'" agony. Philoctetes' abscessed foot is as fit for arousing tragic fellow-feeling as Iphigenia's death sentence, Lear's isolation, or Hamlet's alienation. The philosophical interest is in the *causes* of the suffering rather than its neuropathology.[7]

The answers to the question of cause can belong to any of the branches of the emergent fifth-century intellectual enquiry that became known as philosophy: ethics and its close relations social and political theory (the tragedy was caused by an ill-considered choice, the act of an evil individual, or social forces); epistemology and the problem of knowledge (the hero had no way of knowing that the woman he married was his mother; the community at large held an erroneous opinion; language is inadequate to the requirements of framing and communicating information); metaphysics/theology (the tragedy was caused by god, the gods, fate, or some mysterious cosmic force); ontology, which was later, like theology, regarded as a branch of metaphysics (being human is to suffer and die, suffering is the definitive characteristic of the finite human being, and not to be born – not to come into being at all – is best).

Troy formed the center of the mythical map by which archaic Greeks sought proto-philosophical routes through their experiences, and Euripides' repeated use of the mythical figure of Helen of Troy suggests that he found in her a benchmark for philosophical questions. In the three surviving tragedies in which she appears, the issues raised by her presence fall under the headings of ethics, epistemology, and ontology, respectively. In *Trojan Women* (415 BCE), Helen's role is to complicate the ethical dimension of the play and its quest to

Brown / Tragedy in Transition 9781405135467_4_001 Page Proof page 21 13.6.2007 2:40pm Compositor Name: ARaju

find the individual – human or divine – responsible for the carnage at Troy. In *Helen* (412), she is to be found in Egypt, where she has resided throughout the Trojan War, while a substitute image of her eloped with Paris. Her presence raises epistemological questions about how the true Helen can be identified. Is she the apprehensible, material individual, subject to ordinary laws of cognition, or the mysterious embodiment of her reputation, in the discourse and imaginations of men, that was psychologically manifested in stories and songs at Troy? In *Orestes* (408), the question becomes baldly ontological and metaphysical: Helen literally vanishes in supernatural circumstances, is elevated to the machine in which only gods could conventionally appear, and is turned, finally, into a constellation. This Helen confounds any rational probing of the nature of being Human, or of the human Being.

Many tragedies suggest that several causes have combined to create the suffering that they represent. It is not always easy to distinguish the metaphysical from the ontological, or the ethical from the epistemological. Some tragedies, notably *Oedipus Tyrannus*, even make allocation of responsibility itself not only a symptom of suffering but the direct cause of more. Laying blame exacerbates the pain of the titular Trojan women, and yet it is one of their main activities, since nearly all the characters, as well as several gods, are sooner or later held responsible for the carnage at Troy.[8] Their other activity is suffering, which the play potently synthesizes with the "why" question that it also asks, especially when Hecuba's bereavements are consummated by the Greeks' murder of her grandson Astyanax. Few episodes in world theater can rival the emotional impact of the scenes in which the infant is torn from his mother Andromache's arms, and later laid out by his heartbroken grandmother, a tiny corpse on his dead father Hector's shield (709–98, 1118–251). Sidney had found his anecdote about the tyrant who fled the theater in Plutarch's *Life of Pelopidas*, published in English translation just two years before the *Defence* was written.[9] Plutarch names the tragedy, describes Alexander's crimes (which included massacring the populations of entire cities), and specifies the cause of Alexander's flight: it was "shame that his citizens should see him, who never pitied any man that he murdered, weep at the sufferings of Hecuba and Andromache" (29.4–6). This is evidence that the ancient Greeks appreciated the emotive power of this play. It also helps to explain the player scenes in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, initiated by the arrival of the "tragedians of the city" to offer their Lenten entertainment.

In Act 2 scene 2, the player performs a speech by Aeneas describing the death of Priam and Hecuba's response to it. Hamlet wonders how the player

could make himself go pale, weep, and speak with a broken voice for a woman about whom he in reality cared nothing. If he did really care about Hecuba, and have Hamlet's reasons for feeling strong passions:

> He would drown the stage with tears
> And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
> Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
> Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
> The very faculties of eyes and ears.
>
> (2.2.564–8)

Hecuba's suffering, if depicted by a skilled actor, could inspire weeping and "make mad the guilty," just at it once reduced the thoroughly guilty Alexander of Pherae to an embarrassment of tears. It is this exemplum that suggests to Hamlet the very idea that "the play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.606–7). Claudius, like Alexander of Pherae, subsequently watches in the course of *Hamlet* Act 3 scene 2 a play dramatizing actions so similar to crimes he has himself committed that he has to absent himself from the performance.

The point of this discussion of the enduring cultural impact of Euripides' *Trojan Women* is partly to offer a specific example of how ancient tragedies can shape the subsequent tragic tradition in ways that are invisible and yet of enormous significance. Shakespeare had almost certainly never read in ancient Greek the *Trojan Women* that lay behind Plutarch's influential anecdote, and no English translation became available until the eighteenth century. It is of course possible – some scholars have argued likely – that he knew Latin versions of Euripides' plays, which had appeared by 1541.[10] He may indeed have known about Erasmus' Latin translation of *Hecuba* (1506). Yet Shakespeare used translations of the works of Plutarch widely elsewhere, especially in his Roman history plays, and the whole function of the figure of Hecuba in *Hamlet* fits better with the Plutarchean anecdote, plus a knowledge of the second book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, than with either Euripidean tragedy. Hamlet is fascinated with the way that a mere player can convey the extreme grief of Hecuba, which is a direct response to Plutarch's discussion of the ancient actor; it is also through this encounter that Hamlet decides that the play is indeed the thing wherein he can "catch the conscience of the king." Claudius is induced to leave the theatrical production at the court because it hits, as Euripides' *Trojan Women* had done long ago in Pherae, far too close to home.

Brown / Tragedy in Transition 9781405135467_4_001 Page Proof page 23 13.6.2007 2:40pm Compositor Name: ARaju

The Metaphysical Chrysalis

Reactions to Euripides' *Trojan Women* in subsequent centuries also provide, collectively, an excellent example of how the representation of a particular episode of suffering – the terrible ordeal undergone by the bereaved women of Troy – is susceptible to changes in the presentation of its metaphysical dimension. Indeed, the physical appearance of the gods on stage in this play seemed to epochs later than Euripides, when different religious and philosophical beliefs were held, to be an element that could simply be removed. Euripides' play was imitated in imperial Rome, in the Senecan *Trojan Women*, but this version avoided altogether the material theophany of Athena and Poseidon with which Euripides' play opens. Instead, the drama is opened by Hecuba, grief's emblem herself, who in her very first sentence poses and suggests answers to the question "why I am suffering?"

> If any man puts his confidence in royal power and rules supreme in a great palace, if he does not fear the fickle gods but surrenders his trusting heart to times of prosperity, then let him look on me, and on you, Troy: Fortune (*Fors*) never gave a greater demonstration of the fragile poise in which the proud are set.
>
> (Fantham 1982: 1–6)

In addition to the fickle gods' dislike of human greatness, and the old Roman principle of *Fors*, by the time her prologue has finished, Hecuba has also inculpated the *numen* of the gods – an almost untranslatable Latin word here approximating to "will" – and alleged her own responsibility in having given birth to Paris (28, 38–40). The Chorus later surveys different philosophical theories as they search for consolation: the belief of some Stoics in the total annihilation of the physical body at death; the doctrine of *ekpyrosis*, by which the whole cosmos or galaxy is periodically destroyed by the onset of an incendiary whirlwind; the conventional picture of the traditional Underworld (371–408).

Tragedies have subsequently been written by believers in many different Christianities. There have been attempts at tragedies by Calvinists, Jansenists, Huguenots, and Anglicans. Toward the end of the twentieth century, there have been productions of Greek tragedy that have been identifiably Confucian, Hindu, Moslem, Shinto, Rastafarian, and conflations with the rites of the African Ogun, god of the Yoruba. *Trojan Women* is no exception: it informed Robert Garnier's biblical *Les Juifves* (1583), a tragedy on the

suffering of the Jewish captives in ancient Babylon; Franz Werfel's version of Euripides (1917), frequently staged in Germany during both world wars, turned Hecuba into a proleptic Christian martyr.[11] In the German Democratic Republic *Trojan Women* was reconceived by Mattias Braun in a famous production, revived several times between 1957 and 1969. Its perspective was that of a Marxist interpreting classical drama in a Dialectical Materialist revolutionary theater, where the gods were understood in terms of human agency writ large, as symbols of ideological forces at work, or allegorically. But Tadashi Suzuki's adaptation, in which Hecuba communed with the ghosts of her dead in a Japanese cemetery devastated during World War II, was opened by the indigenous Japanese Buddhist–Shinto god Jizo, the patron of children.[12] Since the Gulf War, numerous productions in both the West and the Middle East have drawn on Muslim styles of vocal performance and funeral rituals. But the most philosophically interesting example is perhaps Sartre's *Les Troyennes*, an adaptation which appeared in the spring of 1965.[13]

Les Troyennes had its première with the Théâtre national populaire at the Palais de Chaillot, Paris, on March 10, 1965, where it was directed and designed by a Greek team. It was explicitly conceived as a protest against French brutality in Algeria. Yet the adaptation is also an articulation of the central premise of Sartre's particular brand of Existentialism, that hope is life and hopelessness is equivalent to death, as Sartre's Hécube herself remarks more than once. The Trojan women are, from a Sartrean Existential perspective, already dead, since death is a permanent state of denial of choice, "an absence of the defining human characteristic of freedom" (O'Donohoe 2005: 57). It is in this sense that Sartre's version is most innovatively philosophical; his gods pass the death sentence on Greeks and Trojans alike in the opening scene, thus removing all hope, which is the Sartrean precondition of meaningful human action or existence.

Sartre's old Marxist allegiances mean also, however, that it turns out that it is the gods who do not exist at all, since they are only sustained in being through human ideological activity. In determining annihilation for the world they therefore determine annihilation for themselves. Hécube actually predicts the gods' demise, which Sartre has made quite explicit in his introduction: "The gods are created along with mortals, and their communal death is the lesson of the tragedy" (Sartre 1965: 6). Sartre seems to have reveled in the paradox of staging gods that his own philosophy and even his heroine know to be figments of the human imagination, for he brought back one of them – Poseidon – in an entirely original epilogue appended to

the play. After the audience sees a flash of lightning, in lines that in print were deliberately typeset in the shape of a mushroom cloud, Poseidon delivers an apocalyptic warning of total extinction:

Idiots!
We'll make you pay for this.
You stupid, bestial mortals
Making war, burning cities,
violating tombs and temples,
torturing your enemies, bringing
suffering on yourselves
Can't you see
War
Will kill you:
All of you?
CURTAIN
(Sartre 1969: 347)

This had a precise meaning in the mid-1960s, in the light of the appalling torture practiced by the French in Algeria, as well as the Cuban missile crisis. For Sartre, the nuclear arms race underlined his conviction that when "hope is deleted from the human enterprise, teleology gives way to eschatology" (O'Donohoe 2005: 255). Here his tragic god delivers his own passionately felt political and ethical as well as metaphysical message, in a very precise historical situation, but in a play that simultaneously sets that god up as a product of the human mind. Thus, in theatrical semiotics, a tragic god can even signify an author's atheism.

The director of the first production of Sartre's adaptation was Michael Cacoyannis, who had recently directed Euripides' own play at the 1963 Spoleto Festival. The most familiar and accessible version of *Trojan Women* is Cacoyannis's subsequent film (1971), starring Katharine Hepburn as Hecuba and Vanessa Redgrave as Andromache. Although Cacoyannis's screenplay, adapted from a translation by Edith Hamilton, was in the main much more faithful to the Greek original than the screenplays of his other Euripidean movies, the one really significant structural alteration relates to the prologue. Since the aesthetic mode of Cacoyannis's film is relentlessly realist, he deleted the scene with Athena and Poseidon which introduces Euripides' play, a scene which stages "petty-minded deities blithely arranging to wipe out thousands of mortals" (Mackinnon 1986: 84). He replaced it with an impersonal voice-over which accompanies the opening freeze-frames by

Brown / Tragedy in Transition 9781405135467_4_001 Page Proof page 26 13.6.2007 2:40pm Compositor Name: ARaju

providing the information that the Greeks, the aggressors in the film, are soon to die themselves. This omniscient narrator, whose tone of quiet authority resembles that of the voice of God in certain Hollywood epics, providentially suggests that the crimes that are about to be enacted will eventually be punished. No doubt this notion resonated at the time of the film's release, when it was widely understood as a denunciation of both the Greek dictatorship and American war crimes in Vietnam. In the process the version loses altogether the anarchic, arbitrary edge of the Euripidean theodicy, which implies that no peace can ever be found amongst mortals subject to the whims of warring gods.

Cacoyannis's audiences worldwide, despite being invited to respond politically in their own secular contexts, were still watching an incidence of terrible suffering and being asked to enquire philosophically into its causes. No amount of surgery, or "realist" revision, can remove from the form and tone of tragedy the fact of its genesis as a medium which in every detail was framed by the forces that lay beyond the arena materially visible to everyday humankind. In fact, the transhistorically enduring metaphysical signature of tragedy, the result of what Benjamin called the decisive Greek "confrontation with the daemonic world-order," originated in its physical inclusion of gods in its performance space. In Greek tragedy, the "metaphysical relationships between audience, gods and humans" became "sharply insistent through their concrete visualization in the coding of space" (Lowe 1996: 526). The physical, vertical axis marked "a metaphysical separation between the two planes of existence within the stage world: the groundling level of the mortals, and the supernal plane of the gods" (Lowe 1996: 527).[14] In ancient vase-paintings inspired by tragic performances, the gods inhabit the upper level of the vase, looking down on the suffering mortals as if from windows in the upper storeys of a building.[15] This convention of artistic representation in the form of a physically elevated internal audience reflected the elevated physical positioning of the spectators in tiered seats in theaters, whether temporary wooden erections or permanent stone buildings, across the Greek-speaking world. It is this vertical axis that the subsequent tragic tradition – whether it retains or dispenses with material epiphanies of gods, incorporates Christian terminology, or dramatizes an incidence of suffering in contemporary, secular suburbia – has never abandoned altogether.

The way that characters suffer in tragedy, the philosophical enquiry it invites into the causes of their suffering, and the forms of dramatic irony it uses to situate the audience in respect of that suffering, are ultimately what

Brown / Tragedy in Transition 9781405135467_4_001 Page Proof page 27 13.6.2007 2:40pm Compositor Name: ARaju

provides it as a literary form and theatrical medium with its sense of generic continuity. You can lose the chrysalis from which the butterfly – or moth – emerges, but its shape and nature will always remain fundamentally conditioned by the shape and nature of the chrysalis. In Marxist terms, this is called the "relative autonomy" of art forms and artworks that achieve cultural longevity. The metaphysical *dimension* is fundamental to tragedy's "relative autonomy" – its ability to outlive historical and epistemic shifts as great as those introduced by the arrival of Christianity, the English Reformation, or Modernity.[16] The metaphysical is structurally impossible to excise from tragedy without stopping it from being a tragedy, even if its ideological manifestations vary, and even if it becomes physically invisible – even if Godot never turns up, after all.

Death and Mystery

The great French director Ariane Mnouchkine has said that the dominant interest the Greek tragedians hold for her is "metaphysical . . . they did theater with that very far away part of ourselves" (quoted in Delgado and Heritage 1996: 180). This special quality of tragedy, that points continually to what lies beyond empirically, materially discernible human experience is also connected closely to its intimacy with the past, and especially the dead. Nietzsche had a point when he identified the thrilling moment when Heracles leads the veiled Alcestis back from the world of the dead to her living husband at the climax of Euripides' *Alcestis* as the scene that epitomized every spectator's experience of the tragic actor (Nietzsche 1972: 59–60). For the ancient Greeks, almost all tragic characters were such revenants, since all their surviving tragedies, with the single exception of Aeschylus' history-play *Persians*, were set in a heroic world that had existed many generations before the premières of their plays. This is no longer the case, yet the sense of communion with the dead is another aspect of Greek tragedy which has inhered in its philosophical legacy: in the tragic world the dead always return, because the tragic hero so very often *lives among the dead* – those he has lost and mourns, or those he has himself murdered (Kott 1974: ix—x; emphasis added).

Even in plays set in their author's "here-and-now," the hero has often been cast as living among the dead, like the bereaved men and women in the Irish tragedies of O'Casey and Synge discussed in an important study by Macintosh (1994). Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* communes with the spirit and memory of his dead brother Ben, a diamond prospector in Africa.

This aura of intimacy with the dead is another bequest of Greek tragedy, especially of Sophocles' supremely death-conscious heroes (Jones 1962: 169). It is not just that the big bereavement scenes in Greek tragedy have directly shaped subsequent plays, as Hecuba's archetypal lament over Astyanax is implicitly echoed by Maurya in O'Casey's *Riders to the Sea*.[17] It is more important that subsequent tragedy has retained some residual element of the psychological conditions under which the people who created its first examples lived. The Athenians lived in far greater emotional and ritual proximity to their dead and personally faced the strong possibility of death and bereavement on a much more constant level, whether on the battlefield to which every citizen male was regularly summoned, or the childbed that jeopardized every woman.

This chapter has used the metaphor of the metaphysical and death-focused tragic winged insect retaining the imprint of its ancient Greek religious chrysalis. It must at least address, therefore, the striking neglect of the divine, religious, metaphysical, and thanatological dimensions of tragedy in its earliest Greek critics. One of the remarkable features of the earliest discussion of Greek tragic theater, by the classical Greeks themselves, is how little emphasis is given to the medium's metaphysical tendency. The comparison of the tragic art of Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs* is interested in form, meter, style, the character of its heroes, and whether its function is to please or to educate, but there is hardly any sign of an attempt to discuss the role of the gods in tragedy, its probing of any philosophical matters more cerebral than the practical science of rhetoric, or its intense dialogue with those who are no longer alive.

In the *Republic*, however, Plato's Socrates does have a specific criticism to make about tragedy's depiction of the gods. The gods, who are changeless and perfect, should not be introduced in disguise (2.381) or be accused of speaking falsehoods (2.383). Socrates objects to tragedy's *familiar* treatment of divine figures. Tragedy breaches what, in his view, should be a great gulf of respect and awe separating mortals from immortals. Perhaps he would have admitted into his Republic tragedy that asked theological questions in a way that did not involve negative representation of gods; but it is difficult to see what kind of tragedy in a religious society could refrain from implicating the divine in the representation of human suffering. What may lie behind the Platonic suspicion of the representation of tragic gods as miscreants may have been an adumbration of the type of charge laid against tragedy several centuries later by the early Christian polemicists, who loathed theater to a man,[18] and were

presciently aware that although "the Tragic Muse was born of religion" she would always remain "something of an infidel" (Lucas 1957: 69).

Aristotle's a-theological view poses more of a problem. His defense of tragedy against Plato is based on his conviction that representations of unpleasant things are educational (*Poetics* 4.1448b). He could, theoretically, have come up with a defense of the tragic representation of divinity, at least within certain criteria, but the rest of his philosophical output makes it hard to see how the intense reciprocity between gods and men so central to Greek tragedy could have interested him. Aristotle's god is the "unmoved mover," a remote non-substantial principle, the source of the human world but unaffected by human conduct or worship. And the world of Aristotle's *Poetics* is as doggedly centered on human experience and observation – as anthropocentric – as the rest of his philosophy: even the treatise that became known in later antiquity as his *Metaphysics* (simply because it concerned matters to be studied "after" [*meta-*] physical phenomena), included questions of ontology, first principles, and indeed the nature of the "unmoved" divine, but no discussion of the gods as represented in Homer or tragedy. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that in the *Poetics* Aristotle's account of the canonical heroes in tragedy discusses only their crimes against other people and ignores their relations with heaven (Chapter 13). He pays no attention to the religious context in which tragedies were produced, at festivals of the god Dionysus. His sole substantial comment on the gods comes in his famous discussion of the use of the stage crane. Aristotle associated this device particularly with Euripides, and objected to examples of its use that did not arise "organically" from the plot:

> The denouements of plots ought to arise just from the mimesis of character, and not from a contrivance, a deus ex machina, as in *Medea*. The contrivance should be used instead for things outside the play, either all that happened beforehand that a human being could not know, or all that happens later needs foretelling and reporting, for we attribute omniscience to the gods.
> (Chapter 15.1454b)

To Aristotle's notion of divine omniscience, and the way that the tragedians used gods in machines for revealing things in the future or "that a human being could not know," the argument of this chapter will soon return. But it is worth dwelling on the failure of the most influential text in the development of tragedy to suggest that theology or metaphysics belonged to its realm at all.

The answer, paradoxically, may be that Aristotle's avoidance of the topic has in itself been profoundly generative. When it comes to ethics, action, and responsibility, Aristotle certainly had plenty to say, and indeed argued influentially that tragedy's potential for ethical exploration of probability makes it a close relation of philosophy (*Poetics* Chapter 9). Perhaps, therefore, it is partly to Aristotle's focus on ethics and human action, rather than their larger metaphysical context, that we can attribute the *openness* and indeed the open-endedness of the metaphysics of the tragic medium as it continued to develop subsequently – its insusceptibility to exclusive appropriation by any single theological or philosophical viewpoint. The history of tragedy as it has been composed since its Renaissance rediscovery would have looked very different – much less mysterious and on that account much less powerful and fascinating – if Aristotle's *Poetics* had included any extended prescriptions for the place and function of the divine in tragedy. "Shakespeare was not attempting to justify the way of God to men, or to show the universe as a Divine Comedy. He was writing tragedy, and tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery," wrote A. C. Bradley, sensibly (Bradley 1904: 37–8).

Aristotle's apparent indifference to the tragic gods of his day and to specific religious viewpoints also seems echoed repeatedly by dominant trends within the criticism even of tragedy written by and for Christians, such as those by Shakespeare. Shakespearean critics have far more often than not argued along lines resembling the view that tragedy "is only possible to a mind which is for the moment agnostic," since "any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal."[19] This is the case not only with plays set in pagan ancient Greek or Roman contexts, but even those with explicitly Christian medieval settings such as *Macbeth*. The very diversity of types of Christianity which critics have detected in this grim play – ranging from Calvinist determinism to the most dogmatic traditional Catholicism – suggests that Christian theological categories are an unsafe filter through which to address the presentation of suffering and its ultimate causes in Shakespeare (Waters 1994: 141–73, 247).

The Spectator Bound

When the Greeks included the gods and their immortal perspective within tragedy's visual fields, they incorporated the metaphysical – the sense of mysterious striving beyond the discernible world to guess at its ultimate

Brown / Tragedy in Transition 9781405135467_4_001 Page Proof page 31 13.6.2007 2:40pm Compositor Name: ARaju

causes – forever in the medium. When they raised heroes from their pale existence in the Underworld to suffer again, the spectators reminded themselves that they and their closest kin would soon face death on the battlefield or childbed, thus imbuing tragedy with what proved to be a lasting atmosphere of intimacy with the dead. One of the reasons why these fundamental qualities have proved so resistant to change across time is precisely that the tragedians' "instruction manual" inherited from antiquity – Aristotle's *Poetics* – had so little to say on the subject, allowing the religious sensibility of each time and place where tragedy has flourished to formulate its metaphysics anew.

Yet a cause of the ancients' sparse commentary on tragic gods may actually have been that their presence in serious poetry was so organic that it was self-understood and scarcely to be discussed separately from tragic humans. It was inherited from the serious poetry of the past – especially Homeric epic – and it may never have occurred to them even to question why. With the gods, tragedy inherited the presentation of "the gap between individual and cosmic value – the ways in which things that mean a great deal to individuals become futile or infinitesimal when viewed in the objective proportions of time, multitudes, or divinity" (Lowe 1996: 524). This world picture is actually the great contribution not of tragedy but of an epic, the Homeric *Iliad*, where the literally life and death decisions taken by Achilles or Hector or Patroclus are taken while the epic audience is equipped with full knowledge of the gods' preordained and often arbitrary plans.[20] It is no surprise that Plato regularly calls Homer a "tragedian."

One of the very few surviving observations on tragedy's use of the gods framed by an ancient Greek playwright implies that tragic authors themselves were thought to possess almost godlike powers. Antiphanes, a comic poet approximately contemporary with Plato, wrote a comedy called *Poetry* in which a speaker, perhaps a comic playwright, complained that tragedians have it easy. When they have run out of things to say, and plot elements to dramatize, "and have completely given up on their plays, they raise the machine as easily as lifting a finger, and everyone is perfectly happy with what they see."[21] The playwright, like God, can interfere in or curtail tragic action on account of his authorial power over narrative, instantiated in his control over the god in the machine. Yet in terms of the ancient experience of tragic theater, which dispensed altogether with the authorial voice and narrative presence that so distinguishes epic, it is the *spectator* who most conspicuously possesses godlike powers. "The spectator stands where the Gods themselves stand, in a happy position of omniscience" (Styan 1968: 365–8). Yet the happiness of that omniscient condition is

painfully compromised because the spectators of tragedy can only ever be divine *epistemologically.* They can never ontologically be immortal themselves, and they have absolutely no ethical autonomy, no executive powers of agency which would allow them to intervene.

In Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* the question of tragic suffering is explored through characters called Hamm and Clov, whose names may partly reflect the hammer and nails used in Jesus Christ's crucifixion,[22] but also the terrifying opening of the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound*, where Prometheus is nailed to the rocks of the Caucasus by the hammering gods Might and Violence. The audience of tragedy is enchained, like the Titan Prometheus who was fettered precisely for trying to wrest, from the highest authority in the universe, the means by which to intervene in human life and transform it for the better. The tragic spectators' chains mean they can never change what they see – never prevent Astyanax from being thrown from the wall of Troy. Gilbert Murray, responsible for that first modern-language staging of *Trojan Women* in 1905, said that it is a truly great tragedy because, although so "harrowing," it is also "a bearing of witness" (Murray 1905: 6). To be a witness of tragic suffering means being shackled to the seat of a god, conscious and yet completely incapacitated, to watch the mortal passion. As Lukács long ago put it in *Soul and Form*, tragedy is that particular medium in which "God must leave the stage, but yet remain a spectator" (Lukács 1973: 154).

Notes

1 See Hall and Macintosh 2005: 508–11. For an excellent discussion of the production of the play and the political causes with which it has been associated see Willis 2005.

2 See also Williams 1966: 104; for an unusually clear articulation of the view against which Miller was arguing see, e.g. Krook 1969: 39–46.

3 Žižek 2001: 87; Eagleton 2003: 175–6.

4 See Hall 2006: Chapter 4.

5 See de Beistegui and Sparks 2000: 1–2; Rocco 1997: 30–1, 196–7.

6 Hölderlin 1988: 83; see Dastur 2000: 80–1.

7 On this topic see Kaufmann 1968: 135; Eagleton 2003: 5.

8 Hall 2000a: xxvi–vii; see also Croally 1994.

9 North (1579) in Wyndham 1895: 323. See further Hall 2002: 423.

10 In the translation of Oporinus. Further Latin versions appeared in 1562 and in 1597. For discussion of their possible impact on English Renaissance drama, see Schleiner 1990 and Ewbank 2005.

Brown / Tragedy in Transition 9781405135467_4_001 Page Proof page 33 13.6.2007 2:40pm Compositor Name: ARaju

11 Mueller 1980: 178–9; Flashar 1991: 131–2.
12 Trilse 1975: 144–50; McDonald 1992: 36.
13 See O'Donhohoe 2005: 251–6.
14 For a technical discussion of the staging of the gods in Greek tragedy see Mastronarde 1990.
15 For examples, see e.g. Trendall and Webster 1971: nos. III.3.24, III.3.28, III.3.44, III.4.1, III.4.2, III.5.6.
16 See the excellent remarks of Poole 2005: 27–9.
17 Macintosh 1994: 165–70; see also Lucas 1965: 181.
18 See Barish 1981.
19 Richards 1924: 245–8; for a bibliography on Christian concepts in Shakespeare see Bratchell 1990: 156–9.
20 Rutherford 1982; Gould 1983.
21 Antiphanes fragment 189.17–18 *Poetae Comici Graeci*.
22 So Steiner 1996: 543–6 and n. 9.