

A COMPANION TO
*T*RAGEDY

EDITED BY REBECCA BUSHNELL

A Companion to Tragedy

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*T*RAGEDY

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R. B.

A Companion to Tragedy: Introduction

Rebecca Bushnell

In his searing comedy, *Frogs*, Aristophanes asked his audience which tragic playwright would be better suited to inspire Athens at a time of crisis: the heroic and stirring Aeschylus or the skeptical and emotional Euripides. Dionysus descends to Hades to satisfy his longing for Euripides, who has just died, but he stumbles into a competition between Aeschylus and Euripides for the name of the greatest tragic poet. The two tragedians battle it out over style, and both poets are mocked unmercifully, but finally Dionysus declares that what he really seeks is a poet who can serve the city. Once that end is declared, it is clear the deck is stacked: when it comes to saving cities, it appears, ironists need not apply. Aeschylus is chosen as the poet to cure the state and bring peace to Athens, and Euripides is abandoned in Hades.

The premise of *Frogs* – that the tragic playwright might indeed be able to rescue the state from disaster – is critical for understanding what tragedy might mean to us today. The increasing segregation of tragic theater from public life in our own time may have seriously diminished its claim to immediacy. But we still reach out to the idea of the tragic when confronted by horror or catastrophe. Tragedy can shape experience and history into meaning, and the shock of significance may have the power to transform us. The distinction between tragedy and the merely horrific accident or catastrophe lies in our expectation that knowledge might emerge out of the chaos of human suffering.

Of course, as Aristophanes' example of Euripides testifies, tragedy has also been thought to be able to undermine social and moral order. In *Frogs* Euripides is roundly criticized for slippery morality and dragging out the filth of real life on the stage. It was also Euripides who, through his own depictions of inexplicable human suffering, displayed the inadequacy of the consolations of divinity and justice, which were the foundations of the city-state. Tragedy can be dangerous, as much as redemptive, when it opens up sores that cannot be healed.

In the West, in the centuries since Aristophanes, philosophers and poets have grappled with the question of how tragedy's formality, ethical example, and civic

role intersect – for better or for worse. Plato believed that tragedy would undermine the city-state by inciting passion and disrespect for the gods. Aristotle responded by redeeming tragedy’s emotional effect through catharsis, pulling tragedy back from the city into the mind and heart of the individual spectator. The English Renaissance poet Sir Philip Sidney reinserted tragedy into the political realm, when he asserted that the sweet violence of tragedy could make kings fear to be tyrants and tyrants abandon their cruelties; his contemporaries who opposed theater were convinced that tragedy would only drive spectators to imitate the violence they witnessed. The writers who fashioned neoclassical tragedy honed the aesthetics of tragic form, apparently severing tragedy from the welter of politics yet sending a more subtle message about social order. For Hegel and Nietzsche, in different ways, the conflicts of tragedy were to be played out in a world of spirit, more than on a civic scale, while to Freud, the tragic paradigm was the drama of the human psyche.

Tragedy can thus be construed in so many different ways – and those constructions themselves show what it means to us. It may be valued and defined in purely formal terms, or it may be understood as a spiritual or world view; it may be understood as an experience for the individual reader and thus a psychological phenomenon, or as a communal or political act, and thus an historical “event.” The premise of this companion to tragedy is that in Western culture the meaning of tragedy is inseparable from history. The dramatic genre of tragedy has its roots in the religion and politics of the Greek city-state, and it lives still as a profoundly social art. Tragedy’s subject is the relationship between the individual and the community in the face of a necessity that we may call the gods or history, and tragedy is performed to transform those who experience it. Tragedy’s original form was shaped as much by Athenian democracy as it was by ancient religion, and its survival in European and American culture has been intertwined with the fate of dynasties, revolutions, and crises of social change. Yet, at the same time, this historical approach does not in any way devalue philosophical, religious, psychoanalytic, and anthropological readings of tragedy. While these forms of reading tragedy are themselves embedded in their own historical moments, they have powerfully affected how we have understood tragedy’s cultural and ethical effects.

This companion presents tragedy as an artifact of Western culture and emphasizes its status as a dramatic genre. One could imagine composing a very different volume of chapters on the notion of the “tragic” more broadly construed, which would encompass global cultural manifestations of human suffering, especially in Asia, or one that would also extend beyond the narrower designation of tragic theater to include all performative expressions, including opera, music, film, and dance. But that is not the design of this book, which focuses on the complex *theatrical* inheritance from the Greeks to Rome and beyond, across Europe and North America, up through the twentieth century. The volume does end with an extended consideration of the appropriation and questioning of tragedy in African and Caribbean cultural traditions, where, as Timothy Reiss argues, we see how tragedy may be used against its makers.

The logic of the structure of this companion is thus twofold. The first set of chapters, on “Tragic Thought,” unfolds a variety of modes of interpreting tragedy

through different modes of thinking and experience, religious, philosophical, political, psychoanalytic, and historical. The chapters by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood and Richard Seaford root our understanding of Greek tragedy in religion and in the practices of the worship of Dionysus, the god whose contradictions define the essence of tragic ambiguity. The contributions on tragedy, philosophy, and psychoanalysis by Kathy Eden, Mark Roche, James Porter, and Julia Reinhard Lupton take up the most important philosophical and theoretical framings of tragedy, beginning with Aristotle's extraordinarily influential *Poetics*. In different ways, Aristotle remains a point of reference for Hegel's refocusing on the tragic dialectic, Nietzsche's returning tragedy to Dionysus and redefining it as the essence of modernity, and Freud's and Lacan's reinterpretations of tragic paradigms in the psychic and symbolic orders.

The final part of this section on "Tragic Thought" takes up three ways of reading tragedy historically and politically, since recent scholarship on tragedy has turned strongly toward rooting tragic drama in the time that produced it. Deborah Boedeker and Kurt Raaflaub's chapter on tragedy and the Greek city-state complements the earlier chapters on tragedy and religion, in analyzing the function of Greek tragedy in the context of the Athenian politics. Hugh Grady looks at Marxist, cultural materialist, and new historicist interpretations of English Renaissance tragedy, while Victoria Wohl considers the evolution of feminist readings of Greek tragedy.

The second part of the companion, "Tragedy in History," follows the historical development of tragedy from classical Greece to modernity. Since the Greeks, the notion of tragedy has always been retrospective, looking backward with a sense of loss, and thus a great deal of attention is to be devoted to a fresh assessment of Greek tragedy. Rather than focusing on the individual Greek playwrights, the chapters consider issues that cross over the entire extant corpus of tragic theater. Alan Sommerstein's chapter on tragedy and myth and Ruth Scodel's on tragedy and epic explore the dimensions of Greek tragic plots and their relationship to the patterns defined by well-known stories of Greek culture. Michael Halleran discusses what we know of the performance of tragedy in ancient Greece. Claude Calame considers the unique role of the chorus, while Sheila Murnaghan uncovers the role of women in tragic drama (as an extension of the issues raised by Wohl's chapter). Ralph Rosen offers us the perspective that Old Comedy brings to fifth-century tragedy, and Alessandro Schiesaro concludes this section with a study of the Roman transformations of Greek tragedy.

The following three parts of this companion offer perspectives on critical moments in the afterlife of ancient tragic theater: the tragedies of Renaissance England and Spain; French, English, and German neoclassical and romantic tragedy; and the theatrical transformation of tragedy in the modern era. In each of these eras, we can see that writers and audiences struggled with the weight of the past. The models provided by Greek tragedy could be seen as the foundation on which a compelling new tragedy could be built, sweeping away the detritus of moribund, sentimental, or corrupt popular theatrical culture and restoring the mythic essentials of Western culture. However, classical tragedy could also be seen as the dead hand of the past, a

frozen shell of a time long gone and of a world irrelevant to present values. The chapters on English and Spanish early modern tragedy by myself, Matthew Wikander, Michael Neill, and Margaret Greer open up an immensely vital moment in the history of tragedy, when playwrights were experimenting with new classical forms and played to kings and commoners alike, staging astonishing acts of violence and passion, regicide and rebellion. The following section on neoclassical and romantic tragedy shifts the focus to France and Germany (while Jeffrey Cox's chapter considers the extension of the conflicts of English Renaissance tragedy into the following two centuries). The three chapters on French tragedy by Richard Goodkin, Mitchell Greenberg, and Barbara Cooper follow the trajectory of French tragic drama from the overthrow of sixteenth-century Baroque theater through the extraordinary and rarefied phenomenon of neoclassical tragedy to its defeat, in turn, by melodrama and romantic theater in the nineteenth century. The final section, with chapters by Gail Finney, Brenda Murphy, and Timothy Reiss, offers an overview of the canonical modern reinterpretations of tragic theater in Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean. None of these chapters covering the history of tragic drama was intended to be comprehensive in covering all tragic authors or plays of a particular period. Rather, they are meant to suggest to the reader the critical questions of their time: how did tragedy, at that moment, *matter*, for writers and audiences alike.

Because of the companion's breadth, the contributors recognized that the chapters must be able to speak many different disciplinary languages but also be intelligible to nonspecialists. We wanted the chapters to enlighten readers across disciplinary divides, so that, for example, experts on Greek tragedy would communicate clearly to those in modern drama, or anthropologists and philosophers to literary scholars. It is an ambitious end, but all the more critical a task, given how the practice of reading tragedy has changed in the past two decades, especially in classical and Renaissance studies. At the same time, the chapters that follow here are not uniform, whether in style, method, or critical orientation, partly because they stem from many different disciplines and critical traditions. The reader will in fact find some disagreement among scholars on several contentious issues in the history of scholarship on tragedy, and quite appropriately so. This companion is not meant to provide a single point of view or narrative, but rather to give the reader a sense of the richness of the most current scholarship on the genre as reinvented across a great span of time and space.

What the contributors do clearly share is *their* conviction that tragedy matters: that is, that at critical points in the history of Greece, western Europe, and North America, tragic theater functioned as a vehicle for the expression of the deepest fears and most radical dreams of the society and culture that engendered it. The tragic scene may be played out in a stifling drawing room or on a battlefield, but wherever it happens, the experience has the power to evoke a culture's conceptions and questions about authority and the extent to which we determine the course of our own lives.

Part I

Tragedy and the Gods

Greek Tragedy and Ritual

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood

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.¹ 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.² 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,³

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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷ *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,⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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*.¹¹ 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