THE WISDOM OF TRAGEDY: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGY AND THE ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDIANS

A dissertation submitted to the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies

Drew University in partial fulfillment of

The requirements for the degree

Doctor of Letters

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Madison, New Jersey

May 2015

ABSTRACT

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Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides interspersed lines of commentary about the human condition throughout their tragedies. These lines take the form of advice, lament, or aphorism, but a common word unifies them: wisdom. They offer guidance on how to accept the tragedy that human life invariably brings. Moreover, the tragedians explore questions of what constitutes a flourishing and meaningful human life—in the wake of tragedy and in general. 2500 years later, in contemporary America, psychologists are conducting research on similar topics: What helps people recover from personal tragedy? How can overcoming tragedy lead to a "better" life? And, for that matter, what *is* a better life? The tragedians' and psychologists' methods of answering these questions may differ vastly, but they arrive at similar conclusions. Indeed, much of what the tragedians say about relationships, self-control, hope, and grief has been substantiated by psychologists. Such wisdom is timeless.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Words cannot express my gratitude to my father, whose support has made this project possible. Long before I studied Greek tragedy, you taught me what it means to be a wise and good person. I am also indebted to Dr. Virginia Phelan and Dr. Liana Piehler, both of whom inspired me throughout the dissertation process—and beyond it. You have been more than teachers; you are mentors and guides. Special thanks, too, to John Livecchi, who first showed me what it means to love great literature and the Greeks in particular. I could not have written this dissertation without all of you.

INTRODUCTION

One of the salient features of the Ancient Greek ethos is the stress on humility. Indeed, the Delphic oracle warns us, "Know Thyself." Modern students often mistake this maxim for a command to know who we are—to recognize our interests and values—and to develop these accordingly (Vandiver, "Apollo and Artemis"). In reality, the Delphic command reminds us to know our place (and act accordingly).

It is with trepidation, then, that I explore lessons we can draw from the 33[1] extant Greek tragedies. After all, some of the most eminent minds in history have written on the subject: Aristotle and Friedrich Nietzsche, to name a few. (It's difficult to enter into the same arena as someone so august that he's known by one name.) Still, we twenty-first-century Americans live in a different age from Aristotle's, with new disciplines of thought that offer different perspectives. Writers and scholars in other epochs have undoubtedly drawn the same conclusion as I do now, a notion that explains the perennial revisiting and reinterpretation of the three great Athenian tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. If I believe this is a worthwhile exercise, I am in good company. Stephen K. Levine, author of *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy*, summarizes Heidegger's belief about art's role: "Works of the past need to be made manifest all over again in the light of the world in which we live" (32). In our world, 'knowledge' increases at an unsettling rate. Between 1997 and 2002, for instance, "the amount of new information produced in the world was equal to the amount produced over the entire

[1] I chose to include Euripides' *Rhesus* in my survey, a work many scholars regard as spurious. The number of extant plays, therefore, is often given as 32.

previous history of the world" (Calkins et al. 9). However, the exponential explosion of readily available facts cannot replace wisdom. In fact, we arguably need wisdom now more than ever.

We live in an age with a proliferation of books about trauma, stress, and recovery. The polymath Aristotle, for all his scope and brilliance, did not have access to the research of such psychologists, who provide quantitative data to support the wisdom Greek tragedy offers. In particular, the findings of specialists in the aftermath of tragedy and trauma often mirror the Greek chorus's commentaries. Aeschylus' chorus, for instance, tells us that we must suffer into truth; psychologists' research and practice lend some validity to the aphorism. Edward Hickling, PsyD, has seen this phenomenon with his patients: "For some people, it seems, there is the possibility of surviving a personal tragedy, but to arise from those ashes a changed, and in some ways a better, person" (93).Then, too, there is the burgeoning field of Positive Psychology, which explores the "science" of living a fulfilling life. Expert in the field Christopher Peterson describes it as "the scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death, and at all stops in between. It is a newly christened approach within psychology that takes seriously as a subject matter those things that make life most worth living" (Peterson 3).

I discovered with pleasure that many of Sophocles' felicitously phrased lines are not only aesthetically beautiful but reflect psychological realities, as the experts understand them. Of course, common sense indicates that we should not apply the theories of twenty-first-century psychologists to analysis of characters depicted by fourth-century (B.C.E.) tragedians. That is true enough. However, the psychologists' research and insights are primarily intended for the twenty-first-century reader, not as analysis of

the characters themselves. As Oxford Tutor of Classics Oliver Taplin reminds us, "*We* are now the audience of tragedy" (12). He contends that tragedy plays a powerful role in human life:

> By enthralling its audience tragedy unites emotion and meaning so as to give us an experience which, by creating a perspective on the misfortunes of human life, helps us to understand and cope with those misfortunes. There is nothing new or startling in this conclusion; but if it is along the right lines there is no harm in its being repeated and rephrased. (Taplin 12)

Therefore, my immersion in Greek tragedy, in which I read all the plays in the original Greek, became more than an intellectual exercise; it proved to be a spiritual one. In applying the wisdom I gleaned—on perspective, envy, and social interactions, to name a few—I found myself practicing better habits of mind and behaving in ways more conducive to "flourishing." I regard my journey as just that: an exploration, and in many ways something every bibliophile does instinctively. I am not a psychologist. I am, quite simply, a reader who believes that great books can offer us a better life on myriad levels. When I was a child, I read voraciously for entertainment, as bookish children do, and that enhanced my young life. In high school, I first learned of the power of great literature. This struck me with the force of a revelation, and the effects of this conversion experience (as I think of it) continue to this day. When I was in college—taking myself rather seriously, as college students are wont to do—I read for (among other things) cultural literacy and the pleasure of analyzing literature's deeper meanings. To be sure, I cried at the beauty of the works and marveled at the dazzlingly brilliant literary criticism. Sometimes, though, after reading such criticism, I found myself with the vaguely unsettling feeling of asking, at least unconsciously, "Okay, so what?"

This is not to diminish the intellectual skill it takes to analyze literature; it simply means that I was ready to begin the next part of my journey. It wasn't until my doctoral

work that I had enough life experience to understand how literature could help us grapple with the nature of our existence—as it actually is, not as we fantasize that it might be—and to enhance our everyday interactions with people and events. In other words, I began to understand how it could teach us. It's no coincidence that I experienced this transformation in a Greek tragedy course. After all, tragedy provides the perfect vehicle for contemplation. The tragedians themselves drew on traditional myths, which serve as subjects for meditation on the nature of human existence. "Myth," according to German dramaturge Helmut Schäfer, "is the attempt to understand the world through art" (Altena 475). Readers of Greek tragedy, therefore, receive a double benefit, first from the lessons of the myths themselves and second from the tragedians' commentary on those myths.

Like many readers, I'm drawn to the duality of the familiar and exotic that Greek mythology exemplifies. The characters are so familiar in their emotions and reactions—so like us. The distance between our era and that of the Ancient Greeks disorients as well as charms, however. Greek tragedy can seem alien in many ways: prophets divine the future from animal entrails, goddesses demand human sacrifice, and mortals not only claim divine ancestry but communicate with the gods who engendered them. Strip these conventions away, however, and you are left with Humanity writ large, viewed in the crucible of conflict and tragedy. The characters, fallible and heroic and larger-than-life as they are, still serve as models (both positive and negative) for how we might conduct our own lives. Clearly, I'm not the only person who feels this way about the genre: Greek Tragedy is more popular than ever with theatergoers, with 4,246 professional productions mounted between 1951 and 2003 (Altena 472).

Perhaps this is because the issues the tragedians explore are as old as humanity itself: How do people behave when their fortunes are abruptly altered? How does this alter their perspective on life? What lessons can tragedy teach us about pride, humility, acceptance and compassion? When I experienced my own tragedy, I opened myself to the lessons tragedy can teach us, and I was surprised by the comfort the plays brought me. After I healed and resumed 'normal' life, I continued to find the tragedies equally valuable as guides for living. Maxims and aphorisms abound in tragedy, and I was careful not to take any one of these as wisdom. As Oliver Taplin reminds us, "We might well agree that, in so far as tragedy teaches, it does so through the work as a whole, through the way that human life is portrayed and not merely through individual spoken lines. So the audience learns, in so far as it learns, by way of the whole experience" (Taplin 8-9). There is no substitute, then, for immersion in reading the tragedies themselves. What I could do was look for patterns and notice salient words of wisdom that were supported by the plot as a whole. When I did, clear themes emerged across the tragedies and the tragedians. I was guided encouraged by another of Taplin's points:

> By enthralling its audience tragedy unites emotion and meaning so as to give us an experience which, by creating a perspective on the misfortunes of human life, helps us to understand and cope with those misfortunes. There is nothing new or startling in this conclusion; but if it is along the right lines there is no harm in its being repeated and rephrased. (12)

Scholarship on Greek tragedy began with Aristotle and continues to flourish today, with myriad works exploring the role of Fate, the double-bind of Agamemnon, and the dangers of hubris, to name a few popular topics. Taking my cue from the Delphic Oracle, I humbly stepped aside and let scholars like Bernard Knox and H.D.F. Kitto address those. Instead, I listened to the voices of the past, paying particular attention to the places where they intersected with modern psychology—and with my own

experience. Please join me at the juncture of those three roads, which I like to think of as the timeless.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Translators love to cite the phrase "traduttore, traditore." In other languages, after all, puns sound more sophisticated, and Italian is a particularly luscious tongue. Literally it means "translator, traitor." But even now I cannot resist fleshing it out, adding verbs and articles: "The translator is a traitor." This looks better, but still does not convey the sense that translators are forced, by their very task, to betray the beauty and nuance of the original language. They do not choose treachery; rather, treachery, to borrow from Shakespeare, is thrust upon them[2]. I try again: "The translator cannot remain faithful to her source." This remains unsatisfactory, and I realize why: I view the translator not as a traitor but a diplomat. A diplomat immerses himself in a culture, but stands always outside. He observes, taking notes, admiring. In time, he begins to understand the native usage of language—but still consults a lexicon. Most importantly, he serves as liaison between two cultures.

In this project, then, I view my role as affectionate liaison between the Greek and English languages. I fell in love with the Greek language during college (and the literature, in translation, in high school), traveling with Odysseus over the wine-dark sea and descending—a more difficult path—into Plato's cave. Since then, I have kept up with it by reading a page a day. In those early years I came to understand the shades of difference between the adjectives *kalos* and *agathos*[3], both of which carry the sense of goodness. Now, after years of poring over my lexicon, they are as distinctive in my mind as the English adjectives "beautiful" and "noble."

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[2] "Be not afraid of greatness: *some are born great*, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them" (*Twelfth Night* II.v).

[3] *Kalos* is used more often to describe physical beauty, *agathos* moral beauty.

Still, Ancient Greek is nuanced to a daunting degree. Some words have columns of meanings, many of them contradictory. *Kakos*, an adjective that appears often in tragedy, has fourteen definitions in the Liddell & Scott Greek-English lexicon: bad, ugly, ill-born, craven, worthless, sorry, unskilled, base, evil, wretched, pernicious, unlucky, abusive, and foul (863). The translator is forced by necessity, then, to make a choice—all the while avoiding the pitfall of the schoolboy's stilted, word-for-word translation. As translator Paul Woodruff puts in, "Like the art of living, the art of translation is about making wise choices in order to produce an admirable and coherent whole" (490). In *Children of Heracles,* for instance, Euripides has the following line: "*ē gar aischunē paros tou zēn par'esthlois andrasin nomizetai*" (200-201). A literal translation yields the following: "for a sense of shame is considered before living by good men." I would render it thus: "Good men esteem a sense of honor more highly than life itself." In my translation, I strive to retain the meaning of the Greek while aiming for readable English, as I understand it. Ideally, I strive to convey my awe of the tragedies and the majestic language of their composition. Reading them in the original has been the greatest intellectual experience of my life. Indeed, it has shaped who I am. Such is the power of the Greek tragedians.

Chapter 1

TRAGEDY THEN AND NOW

When twenty-first-century Americans hear the word tragedy, they imagine something quite different from the fifth-century Athenians' concept. To the Ancient Greeks 'tragedy' did not evoke a disastrous event, but "the form of [a] play and the circumstances of its performance" (Vandiver, "Tragedy Defined"). To be sure, these plays invariably included some form of catastrophe and the playwrights' commentary on them: hence, our associations of calamity. However, this feature was not their defining characteristic—at least not according to Aristotle, who stipulates that "the plot of a tragedy needed to be serious, but serious does not necessarily mean sad" (Vandiver, "TD"). Instead, the philosopher officially defines tragedy as "mimesis of serious and fully developed action that possesses a lofty quality,[4] in language seasoned to suit each of the separate forms of its portions, and doing so by means of actions, not recital. And through pity and fear it effects catharsis of these emotions" (*Poetics* 1449b.VI 23-28). Important for our purposes, Aristotle factors tragedy's impact on the audience into his very definition of the genre. Working within the general framework he described, the three great tragedians of the era—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—produced many variations.

Because only thirty-two tragedies survive out the nine hundred that could have been performed in the City Dionysia, it is difficult to generalize about 'Greek Tragedy' proper (Debnar 5-6). If we do generalize, we must do so with the awareness that approximately 11 percent of what the three tragedians produced have survived from

[4] *Megethos* can mean greatness, magnitude, loftiness, stature, and sublimity, among other things.

antiquity to the present day (Small 104). We know the titles of 82[5] plays by Aeschylus but possess the texts of only seven, including our only complete trilogy, *The Oresteia*.[6] Our situation regarding the prolific and long-lived Sophocles follows the same pattern: we have the titles of 118[7] plays and the text of seven. We are more fortunate with Euripides; we have 17[8] of the 92 plays he wrote (Vandiver, "Tragedy Defined"). To be sure, this constitutes a staggering loss and ensures that our knowledge about Greek Tragedy will remain forever incomplete.

Despite our relatively small sample of surviving Greek tragedies, however, we can safely generalize on one point: tragedians drew their material primarily[9] from mythological stories that took place in the Late Bronze Age or "The Mycenaean Age" (Taplin 4). Michael J. Anderson, in fact, goes so far as to call tragedy "a highly authoritative, culturally relevant, and publicly endorsed articulation of myth" (122). Many tragedies were set during the Trojan War and its aftermath; eight involve Agamemnon's family (Anderson 127). Tragedians, naturally, were drawn to "myths of violent conflict and turbulent crisis" (Anderson 121), so the turmoil of war provided ideal fodder for their plots. However, "such hostilities are viewed primarily through the lens of personal enmity or private suffering" (Anderson 127). We do not watch Troy burn; rather, we hear Hecuba lament its fall. As Classicist Oliver Taplin put it, "The stuff of tragedy is the individual response to such events; not the blood, but the tears. It is the life-

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[5] Some sources say that he wrote 90 plays.
[6]People often assume (mistakenly) that the Oedipus plays (*Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*) must be a trilogy, but they were produced in different years.
[7] Sources tell us that he wrote 123.
[8] Or 18, if we count the spurious *Rhesus*, handed down as Euripides' but almost certainly not written by him.
[9] A notable exception is Aeschylus' *Persians*, the earliest extant tragedy, which depicts the aftermath of the battles of Salamis and Plataea (Sommerstein xiii). In another infamous exception, the tragedian Phrynichus produced *The Capture of Miletus* (493-494), which portrayed a recent event. He was fined one thousand drachmas for reminding the Athenians of their role in this calamity.

sized actions of this personal dimension which are the dramatist's concern, and which he puts on stage" (Taplin 2) Because tragedians drew their plots from mythology, the audience would enter the theater already familiar with the broad outlines of the story. In fact, in a fragment from the fourth-century (fr. 189 PCG), comic playwright Antiphanes has one of his characters remark that the comedian's work is far more difficult: he must create original stories, whereas the tragedian only has to include a character named Oedipus to give the audience sufficient background (Roberts 138). However, myths exist in variations, and even within one variation the playwright could alter details, add minor characters, and shift the focus of the myth in order to explore certain themes (Vandiver, "Tragedy Defined"). This practice promised an amalgamation of "tradition and contemporary innovation" (Anderson 121) that maintained audience interest. This is not the only reason that mythological stories suit the tragic genre: they "reflected generally upon the cycle of human life, exploring its most intense joys and its deepest sorrows" (Andseron 122). Despite their setting in the Late Bronze Age, the tragedians used the power of the myths and tailored their retellings to suit the preoccupations of fifth-century Athenians (Taplin 7). More importantly, the myths had a universal quality that ensured their continued relevance.

What we also know is that the tragedies, or *tragoidiai* as they were called in fifth-century Athens, were performed annually, in late March, at the Theater of Dionysus. Based on the theater's configuration, scholars speculate that the audience must have ranged from 14,000 to 17,000 people. Male actors[10] would play multiple roles, a practice made possible by face masks (Halleran 167-168). As the size of the audience suggests, this was a civic event, not a private one: the eponymous archon, the primary magistrate

[10]The Greek word for actor gives us our English word "hypocrite" (Vandiver, "Production and Stagecraft").

of Athens, would select the three tragedians, who would then compose a trilogy of tragic plays, followed by a more comedic satyr play[11] on the same theme. Judges chosen by lot would then award the tragedians first, second and third place (Davidson 208). In addition, the *polis* funded the event in several ways: either by paying the tragedians directly or by imposing a tax on the wealthy, which was called the liturgy tax. Being a *chorēgos*, someone financially responsible for the chorus, was therefore a dubious honor—one some tried to avoid. Along with funding the tragedies' choruses, this particular tax went toward games, gymnasia, and triremes. Financing a tragic performance cost as much as furnishing a trireme (war ship) in Athens, a city that prided itself on its naval prowess. Such vast yearly expenditures underscore the importance the city accorded the City Dionysia (Croally 62). Indeed, the Athenians must have regarded the tragic performances as an integral part of their culture. And as Christopher Pelling reminds us, "Athens was also a city very aware of its own identity" (83).

At the time tragedy was flourishing, Athens was undergoing changes and developments that would indeed have given it reason to contemplate its identity. For one thing, they were embarking on the 'unprecedented adventure' of democracy that began with Cleisthenes' reforms in 508 B.C.E. (Croally 65). The genre also reached its peak between Greece's War with Persia (beginning in 492 B.C.E.) and the internecine struggle between Athens and Sparta (431-404 B.C.E). That these events took place in the beginning and end of the fifth century, respectively, is convenient for modern students of tragedy to remember. After all, the earliest extant tragedy we have (Aeschylus' *Persians*) dates to 472 B.C.E., and the last dates to 406 B.C.E. One can therefore understand the temptation to link the rise and fall of tragedy's Golden Age with the rise and fall of the

[11] We only have one surviving satyr play, Euripides' *Cyclops*.

Athenian empire. However, scholars are wont to remind us that this conception of time is an artificial construct imposed by modern dating practices (Vandiver, "Tragedy Defined") and that "tragedy did not end with Athens' defeat in 404, nor did it spring full grown from the head of Aeschylus in democratic Athens following the battles of Salamis and Plataea" (Debnar 6). Still, one must not discount the impact these conflicts had on Athens, who won a stunning victory in the first war and suffered a disastrous defeat in the second. After all, tragedy was one of many cultural phenomena that flourished at this time. As Classicist Elizabeth Vandiver puts it, "The fifth century was a time both of innovation and of turmoil, and that combination of cultural innovation and political and military turmoil seems to have provided the perfect atmosphere for the development of Greek Tragedy" ("Tragedy Defined"). Whatever prompted or hastened the development, scholars generally concur that tragedies were a regular fixture in the City Dionysia around the year 500. Before that, the past recedes into hazy legends not unlike the myths depicted on stage.

We do not know as much as we would like about the origins of Greek tragedy. Indeed, even the word 'tragedy' itself is mysterious. The etymology of the word seems to mean 'goat song,' which many scholars interpret as 'song for a goat.' The most commonly accepted theory is that the tragedians originally competed for a prize goat, although other speculations abound (Scullion 29). According to legend, tragedy began when the apocryphal Thespis first added his voice to the chorus in 534 B.C.E. In other words, he "got the idea of having one person speak in character and respond to the chorus rather than the chorus narrating events" (Vandiver, "Tragedy Defined"). Aristotle repeats this story as fact, and so it has become an accepted part of folklore. Most likely, tragedy

did develop out of choral recitations of poetry, although perhaps not as charmingly as Aristotle would have it. In both cases, the dithyramb and tragedies drew their subject matter from heroic myth, which points to a common origin (Scullion 25). According to Scullion, scholars tend to view Aristotle's "skimpy and schematic" (25) pronouncements as truth; however, he urges us to remember that the philosopher—or anyone else, for that matter—most likely did not have access to any text written before 500 B.C.E. (24). Aristotle's presumptions on the origin of tragedy owe a great deal to his tendency to view any given process (or organism) as developing toward a perfect *telos,* or endpoint. Aristotle would also have been familiar with dithyrambic[12] performances, such as Bacchylides' *Theseus,* which features a figure from myth and chorus singing together. It is natural, then, for him to deduce that tragedy and dithyramb are connected. At any rate, his assertion that epic provided the chief influence on tragedy should be regarded as valid (Scullion 35).

The extent of tragedy's ritual origins is a source of debate. Scholars like Scott Scullion remind us to evaluate the evidence for a ritual origin before assuming that the genre began as Dionysian rituals. Yes, the tragedies were performed under the patronage of Dionysus, but the Athenian proverbial phrase "nothing to do with Dionysus" reflects the widespread observation that the plots themselves were not Dionysian per se[13] (33). In his *Birth of Tragedy,* however, Friedrich Nietzsche views Dionysus as integral to the spirit of tragedy. Nietzsche associated Dionysus with music, which was closely aligned (in his view) with irrationality, loss of self, frenzy, madness, and excess. Apollo, his opposite, represented reason, control, moderation, and rationality. Greek tragedy, then,

[12] "Dithyramb, an epithet of Dionysus, of uncertain meaning, designated a genre of choral lyric in honor of that god" (Battezzato 160).
[13] The exception being Euripides' *Bacchae*, in which Dionysus plays a key role.

was essentially a conflict between the Dionysian chorus and the Apollonian characters (Vandiver, "Roots of a Genre"). In that way, Greek tragedy has everything to do with Dionysus. While we can only guess at the earliest performances of proto-tragedy, we do know that contests and performances were common features of all festivals, not only of the City Dionysia. And these festivals were just as civic as they were religious. Prize-amphorae from the Panathenaia festival, for instance, contain images of both Athena and the event, such as a race (Scullion 34). As Elizabeth Vandiver reminds us, "Festivals were one of the few opportunities in fifth-century Athens for gathering large numbers of people together. If you've invented a tragic genre, you need an audience" (Vandiver, "Democracy, Culture, and Tragedy"). Given the preponderance of modern writing on the subject of tragedy's ritual origins, it is curious—and telling—that neither Aristotle nor any other ancient writer considers tragedy as essentially 'Dionysiac' (Scullion 35) the way Friederich Nietzche does. Theoretical speculation notwithstanding, this is another aspect of Greek Tragedy that will remain forever mysterious—and contested.

We are on firmer ground in establishing the general features of tragedy. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle provides an overview of this topic; nearly all (if not all) subsequent critics of tragedy refer to him in their analyses of tragedy's components. In his introduction to the Loeb edition of *Poetics*, Stephen Halliwell emphasizes the "historically formative role" and "continued salience" of the treatise (20-21). It is fitting, then, that his work should guide the outline of tragedy's features here. Halliwell describes Aristotle's aim in *Poetics* thus: "Rather than the identification of a hard kernel of tragic meaning, Aristotle's goal can best be seen as the progressive demarcation of an area of possibilities which simultaneously codifies existing achievements of the tragedians, and

legislates for the ideal scope of tragedy" (13). According to Aristotle, this 'scope' of tragedy has six elements: "narrative, character, phrasing, meaning[14], visual impact, and lyric music" (*Poetics* 1450a 7-10). He judges narrative, the plot, as the most important—indeed, as both the "soul of tragedy" (1450a 38-39) and the "goal of tragedy" (1450a 22): "Of all these things the most important is the plot's structure. Tragedy, after all, is a mimesis not of people but of action—and life" (*Poetics* 1450a14-17). Meaning (*dianoia*) is perhaps the only element that requires explanation: "When [the characters] proclaim something or convey their opinion" (Poetics 1450a 5-7). It is this element that will concern us most in the following chapters—although only insofar as the sentiments revealed are supported by the plot and character. After all, villains make valid points too, particularly in the age of sophistry.

The features that comprise Greek tragedy are, of course, complex and varied; however, some common elements do appear across all—or nearly all—the extant works. For one thing, the spoken lines (as opposed to the lyrical songs) are nearly always composed in iambic trimeter,[15] three units of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables (*Poetics* 1449a22-28). In this rhythm, characters might give an extended speech, called a *rhēsis* (Halleran 170). They might also engage in an *agōn*, "a formalized debate between two parties" (Halleran 176). Another common mode of speech is stychomythia, "alternating one-line dialogue" that "allowed for the economical, if stylized, progression of argument, information, and revelation" (Halleran 169). Perhaps the most famous type of speech in Greek tragedy is the messenger speech. Tragedians rarely incorporated

[14] Other possible definitions for *dianoia* include "thought," "intention," "purpose," "spirit," and "thought expressed."
[15] Over 90 percent of the spoken verse in extant tragedy was composed in this meter (Halleran 170).

violent scenes into their plays; rather, they relied on messengers[16] to report the acts of violence. Generally, these messengers are anonymous, but occasionally characters in the play perform this function (Halleran 174). All of these speech styles would be familiar to Athenian audiences.

Although modern readers tend to focus on the dramatic features of the tragedy, it is important to remember that the Athenians regarded tragedy as primarily a musical event. This "dyadic" genre comprised of "song and speech" (Halleran 167) included "highly choreographed dance songs" (Wilson 181). With very few exceptions, including the transcription of a choral song from Euripides' *Orestes*, the music of the ancient world has not survived (Wilson 191). We are left to glean details about the meter from the text itself. However, it is not always evident which portions of the tragedy were sung and which were spoken, although the meter and "key linguistic characteristics" often reveal clues (Battezzato 153). As in a Broadway musical today, song would be interspersed among the spoken dialogue. Luigi Battezzato and Gregory Nagy clarify the distinct functions of these modes of expression: "Song and dance are traditional features of the tragic genre. Song is a special mode of delivery; it is a 'marked' term that stands in opposition to the normal way of declaiming verse, just as 'dance' is opposed to normal movements" (Battezzato 149). This "special mode of delivery" was signaled by the *aulos*, or pipe, which was the instrument of tragedy (Wilson 184).

Readers correctly associate the song and dance aspect of tragedy with the chorus, although actors did perform solos (Wilson 184). The chorus is comprised of 12-15 actors, all of whom would have been male (Wilson 184). Together they represent a group that is

[16] The Ancient Greek word for messenger is *aggelos*, pronounced "angelos," which gives us our word angel.

both "homogenous with respect to social status and sex" and "marginal…to the community of the heroes who act upon the stage" (Battezzato 154). Marginal groups would include old men, women, or foreigners. Some commentators posit that this marginal status allows them to "react in a way that would be considered too wild or 'feminine' in everyday life" (Battezzato 155). For example, they weep and lament the fate of their city. Given the nature the plots, the chorus members often have occasion to bewail the catastrophes that visit the royal houses of Atreus, Oedipus, and others. These houses provide the tragic heroes, each of whom is "isolated before some rift in the universe, looking […] into the chasm that must engulf him" (Kitto 29). In general, the chorus serves collectively as commentator on the unfolding spectacle, which is why they are the source for much of tragedy's wisdom aphorisms and advice. Throughout history, the chorus has been viewed as the "judgment of the ideal spectator" or "voice of the author." This ideal spectator guides the audience on how it should react to the unfolding action (Battezzato 150). Elizabeth Vandiver notes that the chorus's central importance is indicated by the name of the citizen who financed the tetralogy: *chorēgos* ("Democracy, Culture, and Tragedy"). Whether or not one agrees that the chorus represents the so-called "ideal spectator," it is safe to generalize that they represent "a plausible reaction" to the unfolding drama (Battezzato 155).

In addition to the common features of speech and song, the extant tragedies' structures have similarities as well. A tragedy opens with a prologue that gives the audience sufficient background about the past and looks forward to the future (Roberts 141). This can take the form of an opening speech, a dialogue, or some combination of both (Roberts 137). After the audience is oriented with the prologue, the play alternates

between choral songs (called *parodoi* and *stasima*) and episodes, which are in turn marked by the entrances and exits of actors" (Battezzato 150). Aristotle defines an episode as "a complete part of tragedy between full choral songs" (Halleran 167). He also believes that the "best constructed and most essentially tragic" plays ended with "a change from prosperity to misfortune" (Roberts 136), a notion that will be explored further in Chapter Two. Ideally this change occurs to someone "not preeminent in virtue and justice" (*Poetics* 1453a.8*)* because of that person's "hamartia" (*Poetics* 1453a.10), which the Liddel & Scott Lexicon defines as "a failure, fault, error (in judgment), guilt, and sin."[17] In his introduction to the *Poetics,* Stephen Halliwell elucidates this principle, explaining that tragedy "may revolve around the exhibition of sufferings which stem from profound human fallibility" (19). To evoke the proper response from the audience, the protagonist must strike the proper note: he should be "magnified" so as better to dramatize the "acute shifts of fortune" (Halliwell 403), but he must not be either saintly or evil. If the audience members cannot "relate" to the characters—a modern-sounding phrase, but one with precursors in Aristotle—they will not respond with the appropriate pity and fear.

In actuality, the plays do not strictly adhere to this theoretical construct. Their endings vary widely: vengeance completed, prophecy fulfilled, and disaster realized, to name a few (Roberts 143). Some even have what we would consider happy endings, marked by "deliverance, reunion, or reconciliation" (Roberts 136). Four of Euripides' plays cannot be considered tragedy proper because they end happily: *Alcestis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Ion*, and *Helen*. The works have eluded simple classification since ancient times and have been called tragi-comedies, romantic melodramas, or even high comedy

[17] The last definition, sin, is confined to religious use, particularly in the New Testament.

in the case of the *Helen* (Kitto 311). This does not mean, however, that they are in any way inferior to their purely tragic counterparts. In fact, Kitto tells us, "In sharp contrast with Euripides' tragedies these tragi-comedies have plots whose construction is not only free from fault but even deft and elegant to a remarkable degree" (311). In spirit the tragi-comedies are analogous to Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, which also hovers in the space between the two genres (Kitto 315). What all the endings, even the happy ones, have in common is that they use markers of closure in non-theatrical life: departure, reunion, fulfillment, death and ritual. Whatever the mode of closure, the chorus could be counted on to close the play (in all but two instances in extant tragedy) with a generalized coda (Roberts 142).

These combined features make tragedy a formidable vehicle for contemplating the nature of human existence—particularly in its bleakest moments—and prompting the audiences toward reflection. This impetus contributes to the very name of the playwright: *didasklos*, which means teacher (Vandiver, "Democracy, Culture, and Tragedy"). Tragedians do not embrace any particular philosophy; rather, they explore universal aspects of life through particular myths:

> Each play, taken as a whole, does not lead the audience to a single definitive answer [to a complex issue]: rather than expound dogma, tragedy provokes further questions. Although no tragedian sought to elaborate a philosophical system, their works appropriated and explored various philosophical problems. (Allan 81)

The spectacle was widely believed to produce instructive effects. In fifth-century Athens, the arts, in fact, "were the principal means by which education was carried out" (Levine 27). This was done in part by examining one's own existence through contemplating other people and worlds (Croally 67). These "extremes of action and experience" (Halliwell 394) would naturally prompt reflection. Even characters from the tragedies

themselves make self-referential allusions to the practice of gazing upon suffering and learning through art. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, for example, when the eponymous tragic hero has been destroyed by his stepmother Phaedra's passion for him (or, more accurately, when they have both been destroyed by Aphrodite), he cries, "I wish I could stand removed and gaze upon myself, so that I could weep at what I'm suffering" (1078-1079). With this phrase, Hippolytus places himself among the tragic audience. This very act of "[stepping] aside for a moment" is the catalyst that can "show us the fullness of life" (Levine 36). The hypothetical spectator Hippolytus reacts appropriately to his actor-counterpart: weeping, or at least experiencing deep emotion, was one of the primary means by which tragedy instructed its audience. The pre-Socratic philosopher Gorgias believes that this emotional impact on the audience *is* the crux of tragedy; anything we could learn about the world comes through this experience (Taplin 10). In Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, the prophet Tiresias is more explicit about the lessons to be drawn from mythology: "The gory ruin of his eyes is the gods' ingenious example for Greece. Oedipus's children, hoping to cover this action with the veil of time and thereby to surpass the gods, foolishly missed the mark" (870-874). The ability of myths to instruct—and the audience's perception of myth as instructional—is something the tragedians take for granted.

Nor are references to learning from tragedy confined to the genre; several comedies allude to the tragedian's role as teacher. Timocles' comedy *Women Celebrating the Dionysia* (fourth century B.C.E.) describes how tragedy broadens the mind: "…The mind forgets its own problems / And finds itself engrossed in others' problems, / Then goes home edified as well as pleased" (qtd. in Halliwell 394). However,

the most substantial discussion of tragedy exists in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, the premise of which assumes that tragedy teaches (Taplin 8). The play features a contest in Hades between Euripides and Aeschylus to determine which one is the better tragedian. The two agree to the term that the winner of the contest will be chosen for his wisdom. Moreover, the aim of his wisdom should be to promote moral improvement (Croally 58). The former (newly deceased) claims that poets should be respected "for cleverness and advice, and because we make men in cities better" (1009-10). Aeschylus adds to this theme: "Boys have a schoolteacher to instruct them, grown-ups have poets" (qtd. in Taplin 8). As Neil Croally points out, comic poetry often exaggerates and distorts, so we must be careful not to accept all comedic lines as realistic representations of fifth-century Athenians and their views. However, as noted above, the premise of the debate relies on the perception that tragedy teaches: "More than that, many of the jokes would not work unless that function were assumed" (Croally 58). We can conclude, then, that the comedy offers a reasonably accurate window into tragedy's role in Athenian society.

Many Ancient Greek thinkers also viewed tragic theater as fostering philosophical reflection and even prompting personal enlightenment. This view of poetry did not begin with tragedy: Plato's Socrates called Homer "the educator of Greece" (Croally 56), and Heraclitus, in one of his fragments, admitted that Hesiod is a teacher (Croally 57). A full survey of philosophical responses to tragedy is impossible here. After all, tragedy played a "prestigious role" among the Athenian literati and philosophers (Halliwell 409). It will suffice to give a brief summary of Plato's and Aristotle's views on tragedy's educative role. Plato famously banishes the poets from his ideal Republic; tragedy, in his view, focuses too much on pleasure and emotional reaction (Croally 59). Still, he concedes the

power of poetry and its ability to teach; his problem was that it "taught things badly" (Croally 59). In his *Laws,* for instance, he records the poet Theognis' assertion that he plans to continue the tradition of sharing the advice he himself has learned since his youth: sensibility, moderation, and justice (Croally 57). Despite a few instances to the contrary, Plato remains wary of tragedy and its powerful effect on the emotions. Conversely, his student Aristotle regards the emotional effects of tragedy as intellectually valuable, insofar as they prompt deliberation, particularly about moral virtue (Croally 60). For Aristotle, tragedy is akin to philosophy because they both seek to understand the world. Recognizing this, he "strove to introduce philosophical order into its interpretation" (Halliwell 401), as we have seen in his *Poetics.* The process worked both ways: Aristotle may have striven to impose order on tragedy, but tragedy helps us make sense of the order of the world. He explains the unique universality of poetry, including tragedy: "Poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more to the universal, while history relates to particulars" (*Poetics* 1451b5-8). It is precisely this universal quality that ensures tragedy's continued relevance.

With the *Poetics*, Aristotle ushered in a tradition of using the plays to make sense of the world. To this day, contemporary philosophers use evidence from Greek tragedy to support their arguments (Allan 71). But not only philosophers stand to benefit from contemplating the plays: their wisdom is available to everyone. Like Aristotle, Oliver Taplin views emotions as a key factor in how tragedy affects us: "Tragedy makes us feel that we understand life in its tragic aspects. We have the sense that we can better sympathize with and cope with suffering, misfortune and waste" (11-12). Nor is this a purely intellectual exercise with no practical benefit. Tragedy is so powerful in part

because it *forces* us to contemplate the world around us—and even more importantly, to contemplate our own lives. It can then yield valuable and tangible results for individuals and society as a whole. As Neil Croally puts it, "A reflective, communal response to the issues that most importantly affect us as human beings and citizens is something worth having" (Croally 69). It is a natural step, then, to test the wisdom of tragedy against the findings of modern psychologists.

The usage of "tragedy" in modern parlance differs vastly from its ancient evocation; still, we retain the sense of suffering and sudden reversal of fortune outlined in Aristotle. Classicist Elizabeth Vandiver explains the connection: "So in modern usage, obviously the link between the theatrical term tragedy and the more generalized use of the word tragedy is that tragedy refers to something sad, disastrous, or very, very unfortunate" (Vandiver, "Tragedy Defined"). In the twenty-first century, people use the word when referring to catastrophes resulting from "wars, motor vehicle accidents, sexual and physical assaults, natural disasters and deaths, among others" (Hickling 9). None of these events is something we would wish to experience. Why, then, are people today drawn to tragedy? Why does Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* continue to fascinate audiences? Why do our contemporaries so readily click on an internet link describing some catastrophe? Aristotle famously writes that tragedy "accomplishes a catharsis of emotion through pity and fear" (*Poetics* 6.27-28). In other words, we experience all the tragic emotions without the personal aftereffects. Why this might be desirable remains somewhat mysterious. It is comparable to the controlled terror of a roller coaster, scary and safe all at once. Unlike roller coasters, however, tragedies have profound psychological effects—whether we're talking about one of Sophocles' dramas or

something we experience personally. Peter Trachtenberg, author of *The Book of Calamities*, explains the purpose of his own book in language reminiscent of Aristotle's *Poetics*: "It explores suffering as a spiritual phenomenon, a condition that afflicts the spirit as well as the body; this is true of both the pain we endure and the pain we only witness. It explores the ways that people try to make sense of suffering, in order not to be destroyed" (10). Despite the disparity in the definitions of ancient and modern tragedies, both force us to confront the possibility that we—spectators now—might one day be forced to act as protagonists in such a story.

Psychologists who help patients recover from trauma have explored connections between traumatic events and their portrayal in literature. (Psychologists writing on the subject often use the word trauma[18] and tragedy interchangeably.) Edward Hickling, specialist in post-traumatic stress disorder and author of *Transforming Tragedy: Finding Growth Following Life's Traumas,* observes, "As long as there have been human beings, we have documented the aftermath of horror and psychological anguish for some of those who survived a traumatic event" (7). Such documenters are particularly drawn to Ancient Greek literature. Dr. Jonathan Shay, who works with veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, has written two books connecting Homeric epic and the psychological trauma: *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*. Stephen Levine, author of *Trauma, The Arts, and Human Suffering,* cites the ancient world as a model for a healthy view of suffering: "From the ancients we know that things must die in order to be made anew" (Levin 12). This is not limited to Ancient Greece, however: psychiatrist Mark Epstein has found Buddhist teachings especially valuable in his practice, something

[18] The word trauma, like tragedy, derives from Ancient Greek. Liddel & Scott's Greek-English lexicon defines trauma as "wound; hurt."

he documents in *The Trauma of Everyday Life*. In any event, many experts in the field do not dismiss the ancient world as irrelevant or outdated. On the contrary, it seems that they are discovering ancient texts to be an invaluable source of wisdom.

What we must learn—from ancient literature or otherwise—is that tragedies are a part of life, and it is in our best interest to prepare ourselves for their intrusion into our reality. Hickling acknowledges, "But most of us, probably all of us, will in some way or another be touched by life's tragedies" (81). However, this is not entirely bad news. As Peter Trachtenburg puts it, "Because suffering is often instructive, an oppressor can become a teacher" (499). Suffering can do this because everything else "falls away" in its "crucible," leaving us to contemplate our essential selves (Levine 27). Specialists in the field of post-traumatic injury stress that tragedies often serve as the catalyst to learn "something new or unexpected about ourselves" (Hickling 66). In fact, the term PTG (Post-Traumatic Growth) was coined to describe the positive psychological changes that can occur from an unexpected tragedy (Hickling 78).With this new understanding of ourselves comes new understanding of life. Alluding to Nietzsche, Expressive Arts Therapy specialist Stephen Levine notes that "only by looking into the abyss could we find the truth" (28). It is worth quoting Edward Hickling extensively to convey a sense of the way psychologists view the potential of tragedy to shape our lives and world-view:

> Going through life's tragic moments and life's traumas can provide us an experience, which can give us great wisdom and understanding of ourselves and the world around us. There is a price, and that price is paid in painful feelings and the tragic losses that occur in most of life's tragedies. However, there may be a wisdom and knowledge gained from this. This wisdom can often be found in the changes in how we think about our personal narratives, how we think about ourselves, how we think about the world and how we plan to interact with the world and others. If we see ourselves as having come through something, some adverse terrible period, as stronger, better, wiser, more deeply enriched by

> what our understanding of the world is about, that obviously is a very different experience and narrative than those who see themselves as damaged, limited and never able to move on. (81)

Psychologists and psychiatrists also stress the importance of maintaining a healthy mindset after a tragedy occurs. As Hickling writes, "It is what we do with the tragedy that becomes important, not that they are good or bad; they just are. They are a necessary and important part of life" (81). This calls to mind Hamlet's famous quote: "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (II.2.1350-1351). The onus is on us to uncover meaning. Viktor Frankl explores this notion in his *Man's Search for Meaning*—namely, that we must give meaning to our suffering with our response to it (Hickling 217). Art can help us to do just this. As philosophers and thinkers speculate about the positive impact tragedy can have, modern psychologists and psychiatrists are incorporating the arts into the healing process. As Stephen Levine writes in *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy*, "Artistic expression has always been a fundamental way in which human beings have tried to discover meaning in their lives. The arts are ways of shaping experience, of finding forms that make sense of life through imaginative transformation" (18). In the best-case scenario, art can even "reconcile us with life" when we "face [experience] full-on" (Levine 18). With echoes of Aristotle, Levine posits that the arts "give a form to the suffering of the soul" (27). Like the very tragedies that affect our lives, art, too, has the power to "shape the world in which we live in a new way. . . . It can therefore have an effect on us in our everyday life and can offer us the possibility of a new way of living" (Levine 44).

The promise of a new way of living is what art, and Greek tragedy in particular, can offer us. Although our conception of tragedy in twenty-first-century America may have changed from what it was in Ancient Greek times, the constants in human nature—

and the world—ensure that the tragedians still have much to teach us. Indeed, as human beings we are obligated to think and learn and try to understand our lives, even if ultimate understanding forever eludes us (Levine 20). If we open ourselves to literature and to our own experiences, however, we might be surprised at the transformations that occur.

Chapter 2

THE SUFFERING OF MORTALS

Throughout their works, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are candid about the suffering that everyone—from king to slave—necessarily encounters. Nor is this viewpoint confined to the ancient world. After all, it is true that no one escapes life without at least some suffering. As psychiatrist Joel Epstein writes, "We are all traumatized by life, by its unpredictability, its randomness, its lack of regard for our feelings and the losses it brings" (17). Such an acknowledgement must be the starting point for any student of Greek literature and human psychology. Conceding the truth of this reality helps to orient us within the human condition and prepare us to accept our own inevitable suffering. A typical individual's experience with suffering might not be as dramatic as that of, say, Oedipus. However, the houses of Atreus and Oedipus in particular dramatize the darker elements of human existence; the tragedians return to their stories again and again as exemplifying the instability of human happiness and the reversals of fortune we all experience to some degree.

Paradoxically, despite a short existence in comparison to the immortal gods of tragedy, humans will inevitably experience a full spectrum of suffering in their lifetimes. In Euripides' *Iphegenia at Aulis*, the eponymous maiden voices a sentiment that functions as a refrain throughout Greek Tragedy: "How much our race suffers—how greatly we suffer, we who live only a day! But it's been ordained that men should be wretched" (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 1330-1332). It is not surprising that Iphigenia should voice such a sentiment: her father, Agamemnon, offered her as a sacrifice so that he might lead his

army to Troy. Only the intervention of Artemis spared her life, which is subsequently devoted to the goddess's worship. However, Iphegenia must not be viewed as an isolated incident of despair: throughout the extant Greek tragedies runs the idea that mythology's towering figures are larger-than-life artistic incarnations of our own experience with suffering. Indeed, tragedians view suffering as woven into the very fabric of human existence, along with the brevity of the human life span. These two aspects are, in fact, intertwined: it is at least in part the transience of our existence that causes suffering. Experts in the field of trauma and tragedy have reached the same conclusion about the human condition. Psychologist Edward Hickling, trauma specialist, reminds us, "My personal answer, which comes after considerable thought and experience, is that part of being human quite naturally leads to suffering. We think. We feel. We understand. We learn. We remember" (24-25). This worldview might strike readers in our time, an age that values positive thinking, as hopelessly pessimistic. It is another paradox that only such an honest evaluation of life will yield authentic optimism.

One aspect of suffering that preoccupies figures in tragedy is the preponderance of varieties thereof. In Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, the chorus comments on this fact: "Human suffering contains an infinite variety of hues, and never will you see quite the same color of feather twice" (*Suppliants* 328-330). In this particular case, the fifty Danaids comprising the chorus flee unwelcome marriages to their fifty Egyptian cousins and seek refuge in Greece. It is an unusual case in the "infinite variety" of human suffering, to be sure, but they express a common enough sentiment. The chorus of libation bearers in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* echoes the sentiment of the *Suppliants'* chorus, if not the actual words, upon seeing the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, slain by Orestes: "Not one

mortal can pass through his life without committing or suffering harm. One moment brings one problem with it, and the next another problem still" (*Libation Bearers* 1018-1020). Their words certainly suit the situation at hand. After all, in the previous scene they lament their lot: a murdered king, an unrepentant queen, an arrogant lover. In the next, they bemoan the yoke of fate that has led Orestes, inexorably, to exact vengeance. Within the Aristotelian strictures for dramatic unity of time,[19] in any given play the chorus is spectator to a dizzying array of woes that beset the tragic heroes and heroines. Whether deliberately or not, Euripides' chorus recalls the assertion of their Aeschylean counterparts in his *Ion:* "Many misfortunes abound for many mortals; those misfortunes take myriad forms. But you will scarcely ever find a person who's truly blessed in life" (381-383). In this scene, Ion and his mother Creusa converse about their respective destinies, although neither knows the other's identity. He serves in Apollo's temple, having been left there by his mother—herself a servant of Apollo. She wishes to consult the oracle about the whereabouts of her son. Although the motifs of mistaken identity, recognition and reconciliation recall conventions of comedy rather than tragedy, the years of separation and pain of uncertainty prompt the chorus to philosophic reflection. The Ancient Greeks chorus, which represents the collective voice of the people, seldom shows surprise at calamity. Classicist H.D. Kitto calls its members "the voice of Humanity, its sufferings the common sufferings of Humanity" (29). 2500 years after Aeschylus and Euripides composed their plays, Joel Epstein uses similar phrasing in the opening of his book *The Trauma of Everyday Life:* "Trauma is an indivisible part of human existence. It takes many forms but spares no one" (1). He elaborates on this thesis ten pages later:

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[19] Aristotle held that tragedies should take place within a twenty-four-hour time frame (*Poetics* VIII).

> Trauma happens to everyone. The potential for it is part of the precariousness of human existence. Some traumas—loss, death, accidents, disease, and abuse—are explicit; others—like the emotional deprivation of an unloved child—are more subtle; and some, like my own feelings of estrangement, seem to come from nowhere. But it is hard to envision the scope of a human life without envisioning some kind of trauma, and it is hard for most people to know what to do about it. (Epstein 11)

The forms tragedies take now may differ from those in the ancient world (conversely, they may not; war still exacts its toll on humanity), but the number of ways they can manifest themselves remains high.

Tragedy not only appears in many forms but appears unexpectedly. In his *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus obliquely compares suffering to a winged creature through the voice of his Titan protagonist: "Calamity roams around, settling here and one time, there another" (275-276). It alights as indiscriminately as a bird does on statues. A mortal—or, in this case, a Titan—has as little power to deter calamity as the statue does to deter the bird. In *Alcestis*, Euripides echoes this notion of calamities appearing suddenly and without warning. King Admetus's wife Alcestis has sacrificed herself on her husband's behalf so that he might avoid his fated death; a dubious gift from Apollo permits the exchange. When Admetus bemoans the loss of his wife, the chorus reminds him, "Different calamities appear and oppress different mortals" (*Alcestis* 893-894). While this certainly strikes the reader as an insensitive way to address the grieving, the chorus often serves to remind other characters about the pervasiveness of suffering. We might phrase it differently, reminding the afflicted that they are "not alone."

The principal characters are given to similar pronouncements. In *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, Euripides once again explores the fate of Agamemnon's daughter. In a scene reminiscent of Euripides' *Ion*, Iphigenia has a conversation with her brother

Orestes, each ignorant of the other's identity. Knowing that Orestes and his friend Pylades must be sacrificed to the goddess Artemis (the fate of all strangers who arrive in the Taurians' land), Iphegenia meditates on their fortune—and on the fortune of mortals in general: "Who knows which person such fates will befall? Everything from the gods comes stealthily, and no one knows when a problem will come—or from where, or to whom. Fate marches us forward to confusion" (475-478). Undoubtedly she is thinking of the vicissitudes of her own destiny as well. Orestes, for his part, remains stoic, reasoning that all mortals must die and it is therefore foolish to lament *when* death must come, if indeed it must.

Orestes wisely orients his experience within the human condition instead of asking, "How could this happen to me?" It helps that he is surrounded by the chorus, the members of which have also suffered and therefore understand his affliction. In the aftermath of his vengeance upon his mother, as depicted in *Eumenides,* he surrenders to the gods, humble. He is not an exception, singled out for punishment like one who has been struck by lightning. Nor does his aristocratic status exempt him from pain, just as it did not exempt his father, Agamemnon. *Iphigenia at Aulis* opens with the commander of the Greek forces brooding over his dilemma: he must either sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia or disgrace himself by refusing to make the sacrifice, thereby aborting the mission to Troy. When he laments his nobility, which brings with it additional responsibilities, his servant (an anonymous Old Man) responds, "I don't approve of such things from the nobility. Atreus didn't bring you into the world to experience all the good things only, Agamemnon. For you are a mortal" (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 28-31). Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus, receives similar council from an anonymous old

woman in Euripides' *Helen*. In this play, Euripides explores a variation of Helen's story: that Menelaus has left the real Helen in Egypt, while only a phantom Helen goes to Troy. After the war, Menelaus reaches Egypt to reclaim his wife, at which point Euripides' play begins. Because of his hardships, Menelaus arrives in Egypt with a less-than-kingly appearance, dressed in rags and at King Proteus's mercy. When he laments his destiny, the old woman reminds him, "Many people fare badly; you're not alone in this" (*Helen* 464). Even Oedipus, the *ne plus ultra* of the suffering to which humans can be subjected, is recast as just another human being who must endure what comes. After his death, the chorus attempts to comfort Oedipus' grieving daughters, Antigone and Ismene: "Since he ended his life happily, friends, cease your grieving! No one is immune suffering" (*Oedipus at Colonus* 1720-1724). According to Hickling, this worldview is not pessimistic; in fact, it is a hallmark of mental health. On his Resilience Survey, designed to foster a healthy mindset after a tragedy, Hickling includes an item that encourages people to recognize their suffering as universal: "I understand that I am not the only one things like this happen to" (61). Modern Americans would do well to emulate the Ancient Greek chorus in this regard, as their advice is conducive to psychological healing.

If suffering is universal, according to the Ancient Greek tragedians, it is not always deserved. Aristotle explores the way characters contribute to their own downfall, famously using the term *hamartia*, which the Liddell & Scott lexicon defines as "a failure, fault, or error." In his introduction to *Poetics*, Stephen Halliwell elucidates this slippery term: "*Hamartia,* in short, embraces all the ways in which human vulnerability, at its extremes, exposes itself not through sheer, arbitrary misfortune […] but through the erring involvement of tragic figures in their own suffering" (17). *Hamartia*, then, is part

of being human, in all our multifarious fallibility. Sophocles' Creon, for instance, stubbornly persists in punishing Antigone, thereby effecting his own house's destruction when his son Haemon subsequently commits suicide. According to Aristotle, characters must be fallible—as Creon is—to evoke the requisite pity and fear from tragic audience. As Michael Anderson points out, saints are inimical to tragedy because they are too unlike us: "The experiences of these greater-than-human-beings simply could not generate in an audience the pity and fear that Aristotle judged essential to tragedy" (128). However, the tragedians did allow that characters' tragic flaws did not always factor into their destruction. Tragedy is not quite so formulaic as that. The starkest and most unsettling example is perhaps Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, whose title character has been abandoned by his shipmates simply because his festering wound proves an unpleasant traveling companion. The chorus voices the unfairness of this undeserved suffering: "I have neither seen nor heard of any mortal who met with a more hateful fate than this man did. He never robbed anyone, but was just like any other man…and now he is undeservedly ruined" (683-685). In this case, the flaw lies not within Philoctetes but outside of him. As H.D.F. Kitto explains, "Macneil Dixon's answer is that the tragic poets, wiser than the philosophers, recognize that there is a tragic flaw, but one that sometimes is not in the character of the sufferer, but in the universe itself" (Kitto 10). In his *Book of Calamities*, Peter Trachtenberg reaches a similar conclusion to that of Sophocles' chorus: "Some misfortune confounds any attempt to impose order on it, to separate causes from effects, to attach blame. At a certain point the line between bad luck and character becomes invisible" (587-588). If the genre of tragedy escapes a rigidly formulaic structure, so do the real-world manifestations of tragedy.

Whether self-imposed or not, suffering in Greek tragedy is real and ever-present, whereas happiness, its opposite, is continually described as illusory or fleeting. The messenger in Euripides' *Medea* certainly has cause to voice this sentiment after reporting the deaths of Creon and his daughter Creusa, who have been destroyed through Medea's deadly wiles: "Now is not the first time I've regarded our mortal life as a shadow, and I would state without hesitation that those mortals who seem to be wise or wordsmiths—well, they incur the charge of folly most of all. No mortal man is truly happy. One may be more fortunate than another because of an influx of riches, but none is blessed" (Medea 1224-1230). The messenger regards happiness as a deceptive illusion: people may believe themselves happy, but in reality they are not. Conversely, the messenger of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, who reports the death of Jocasta and the blinding of Oedipus, acknowledges that Oedipus and Jocasta were once truly happy, despite their present misfortune: "Their former happiness really was happiness; but now, on this day, they have groaning, ruin, death, dishonor…whatever you can name, it's present" (1282-1285). Like the messengers, the chorus members, as the observers, are particularly well suited to making such pronouncements about the ephemeral nature of happiness. In Euripides' *Orestes*, for example, they pity Electra as she tends to her brother Orestes, who is both physically and psychologically unwell after exacting vengeance on his mother Clytemnestra: "Great happiness isn't permanent for mortals: this I lament. Shaking it like the sail of a swift boat, some god inundates it with terrible trouble—troubles as violent and deadly as the sea's waves" (340-344). Because of joy's evanescent quality, Euripides liberally repeats a line of folk wisdom: that no one can be called blessed until the end of his life. He applies the adage to describe the surviving women of

Troy and the descendants of Heracles, who have endured similarly staggering reversals of fortune. In *Trojan Women*, Hecuba ends her speech to her daughter Cassandra by reminding her, "Regard no prosperous person as happy before he dies" (510).[20] Although Euripides favors the line more than the other tragedians do, Sophocles uses it as well. In his *Women of Trachis*, Sophocles has Deianeira, Heracles' wife, open the play with a variation of this line: "One of mankind's traditional sayings reveals an important lesson: you don't really know whether anyone's life has been good or bad until he's died" (1-3). It establishes the theme that Deianeira's formerly happy relationship with Heracles was destined to be short-lived; that is the nature of happiness, after all: it disappears quickly. As Aeschylus phrases it in his *Suppliant Women*, "In mortal matters, nothing stays well-off all the way to its completion" (269-270). Of course, that includes human life, whose completion is death.

Happiness disappears so quickly because fortune is inherently unstable, a concept the tragedians often explore by anthropomorphizing time, fortune, or fate. These vague forces are portrayed like Glaucester's[21] wanton boys who willfully or carelessly overturn men's lives. The messenger in Sophocles' *Antigone* opens his speech reporting Haemon's death by expressing this notion: "I don't praise or blame anything in human life as though it were permanently settled. Fortune is always raising up and casting down both the fortunate and unfortunate, and no prophet can stop the cycle" (1155-1160). Because Creon begins the tragedy as the most fortunate of mortals, his reversal of fortune

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[20] Hecuba's daughter-in-law Andromache echoes the matriarch's line in her title play: "You should never say that any mortal is happy until you see his death—how he passes his last day and reaches the world below" (100-102). In *Children of Heracles*, it's the messenger who repeats the line to Heracles' mother Alcmene: "Now, with this fortune, he proclaims a clear lesson for mortals to learn: don't envy anyone who seems to prosper until you see he has died. Good fortune is ephemeral" (863-866).

[21] "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (*King Lear* 4.1.37-38).

illustrates the concept starkly. At the tragedy's close, he has lost his son because of his own intransigence. Although Creon certainly precipitates his son's demise, it is to fortune, not to the king, that the messenger attributes Thebes's latest catastrophe. In the eyes of Thebans and tragic characters throughout Greece, personified fortune is not only believed capricious but so unstable as to be deemed insane. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Hecuba—who, like Creon, has lost a son—meditates on this trademark characteristic of fate after bewailing her son's death: "Only a fool thinks his prosperity is secure and rejoices. It's fate's custom to leap here one time, there another, like a madman. The same person isn't fortunate forever" (1203-1206). One should no more trust fortune than one should trust a madman. Occasionally, though, characters in tragedy benefit from the whims of fate. Oedipus, perhaps the most spectacularly unfortunate of human beings, ends his days as a revered protector of Athens. The gods even bestow favor on him by sparing him the pains of death. As the messenger reports, "Without disease or suffering or anything grievous, he departed—wondrous, if any one among mortals is" (*Oedipus at Colonus* 1663-1665). Prior to this quasi-apotheosis, the chorus comments on the vagaries of time that might bring about such a reversal: "Time always sees—sees everything—casting down some one day and raising others the next" (1454-1455). Oedipus, once the most reviled of mortals, becomes a boon to humanity. In Euripides' *Helen,* the servant makes a similar observation after Menelaus and Helen are reunited in Egypt. Upon learning that Helen was not, in fact, the cause of countless troubles for the Trojans and Achaeans (rather, the gods sent an *eidolon* to Troy while the real Helen stayed in Egypt), the servant tells her, "Daughter, the divine is complex and difficult to understand. How thoroughly it twists everything this way and that! One man suffers, but later meets with

happiness from kindly gods; another doesn't suffer but dies unluckily in the future. Nothing in fate remains constant forever" (711-715). At times fate is cruel and other times kind, but it is always enigmatic. Later in the same tragedy, the chorus remarks, "What is divine, what is not divine, and what is between the two…who among mortals can claim to have understand this through inquiry? The farther limit is found by the one who sees that the god leaps here and back, there and back again, with contrary and unexpected fates" (1137-1143). The popularity of the Delphic Oracle notwithstanding, mortals cannot foresee their fates, let alone change them.

Because fortune is so unstable and mysterious, the tragedians continually emphasize that good fortune must be regarded as temporary. Any other viewpoint will only compound the suffering that will occur when that good fortune must—by its very nature—disappear. In another of Euripides' plays about the aftermath of the Trojan War, *Hecuba*, the queen's enemy Polymestor uses language nearly identical to Hecuba's in *Trojan Women* when he speaks about the about the fall of Troy: "Nothing can be trusted—not a good reputation or the idea that the fortunate will not be unfortunate" (956-967). Hecuba had entrusted her youngest son Polydorus to the mercenary Thracian king, who drowned the boy and kept his treasure before the play begins. In her grief, Hecuba is driven mad herself with desire for revenge: she kills Polymestor's sons and blinds their father. While Polymester cannot be regarded as a credible source, Hecuba's personal tragedies, bound up with the tragedy of Troy's fall, do symbolize the instability of fortune. Indeed, the heroines of the Trojan War saga often serve to illustrate this principle. In *Agamemnon*, Cassandra bewails her reversal of fortune; after being a princess of Troy she is now a slave to Agamemnon, conqueror of her native city: "Oh,

human fortunes…any shadow can darken the light of prosperity" (1327-1328). Hector's wife adds her voice to the chorus of disenfranchised Trojan women—a chorus that spans multiple plays—who must accept their new status: "Once enviable in time past, I, Andromache, most unfortunate, if ever a woman was" (5-7). Such profound loss as Andromache's naturally prompts some reflection on (and reevaluation of) the nature of existence. Nor is this kind of meditation restricted to characters of Greek Tragedy. Hickling notes this as a common occurrence following tragedy: "It often now seems that the world is more dangerous, and our ideas about safety, fairness, and how we expect things to happen are greatly challenged" (173). This phenomenon is even more dramatic in the case of characters who once occupied the highest echelons of society, only to become slaves and outcasts. However, it can just as easily apply to anyone who has experienced a profound loss.

Several characters in the extant tragedies declare that this change from fortunate to unfortunate exponentially magnifies suffering. After all, anyone who begins life wretchedly cannot miss former happiness. On the other hand, a king who once enjoyed a life of autonomy and splendor will spend the rest of his days mourning its loss. As Menelaus says in Euripides' *Helen*, "When a man of high station has troubles, he falls into an accustomed place; it is worse for him than for a man who been unfortunate for a long time" (417-419). Euripides repeats this idea in his *Heracles.* The titular hero, who has just realized that he has unwittingly murdered his own wife and children, tells Theseus, "Change is painful to the man once called blessed. The one who always fares badly doesn't suffer, being naturally wretched" (1291-1293). It is natural that someone in the throes of extreme suffering should make such an assertion. However, the chorus

reinforces Heracles' claim from their vantage point of observer. In fact, the chorus of *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* goes so far as to say that the chronically miserable have a happier lot: "I envy the one who has always had a ruinous fate. He is not distressed by his harsh necessities; they are his familiars. But to exchange good luck for distress is hard for mortals to bear" (1117-122). Loss, then, is the crux of suffering. In his study on the nature of calamities and our reactions thereto, Peter Trachetenburg elaborates on this idea, explaining that the drastic loss is bound up in our identities:

> To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: "I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort." (qtd. in Weil on 577-578)

This may have been written about Oedipus, so aptly does it describe his reality. Once revered king, he becomes "filthy and most contemptible." So, too, do Hecuba and Andromache lose everything they possess—even their very identities.

Perhaps this is an apt place to address the charge of pessimism that tragedians have garnered by writing so candidly about the ubiquity of suffering and the impermanence of happiness. For example, Plato, in Book Ten of *The Republic,* presents tragedy as "inhospitable to human hopes of justice and happiness" (Halliwell 400). This is at least in part because "the genre displays extreme afflictions overcoming supposedly exceptional figures (esp. *Republic* 387d-88c). Such plots imply a pessimistic view of the world: even the best can suffer the worst; goodness and happiness are dislocated from one another" (Halliwell 403). However, psychologists might view the tragedians' depictions of suffering as realistic—or at least reasonable—rather than pessimistic.

Christopher Peterson, an expert in Positive Psychology, notes that "people base their judgments of overall life satisfaction on how they are feeling at the present moment" (85). It should not surprise us, then, that characters in tragedy should decry the nature of existence at the worst moments of their lives. After all, modern Americans are hardly different. Peterson continues, "Flushed with a momentary triumph or thrown for a loop by a recent setback, people may accordingly report that life per se is good or bad. More generally, […] a happiness judgment is based only on the information readily available to people at the moment the judgment is solicited, and what is salient at the moment is easily manipulated" (85). It is true that mortals suffer—that their formerly happy states are exchanged for unhappy ones. The tragedians simply depict what they observe in life and in myth, albeit in artistic and hyperbolic terms. To escape such moments of pessimism, one would have to escape mortality itself.

In both Greek tragedy and Homeric tradition, the immortal gods stand in stark contrast to their mortal counterparts, serving as wish-fulfillment of human fantasy. Perhaps that is why people imagined them thus, the forerunners to modern celebrities who remain ostensibly impervious to decay and want. In *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus describes mortals' plight from a god's-eye view. Oceanus rebukes Prometheus for vainly sacrificing himself to assist such wretches: "What help is there for such short-lived[22] creatures? Didn't you see their weakness—their powerlessness so like that experienced in dreams? Through such chains is the blind race of men imprisoned" (*Prometheus Bound* 547-550). From the perspective of eternity, the very brevity of human life renders it tragic. If the gods view humans as wretches who live only a day, humans view

[22] The word Oceanus uses to describe humans is ἐφημέριος (*ephēmerios*): [lasting] for only a day. The word has survived in English as "ephemeral."

immortals' lives wistfully, envying their carefree power. The chorus of suppliant women in Aeschylus' eponymous drama contrasts the gods' lot to their own: "For the gods, everything is free from trouble" (*Suppliants* 100). Immortals' years stretch out endlessly, exempt from memories of past troubles or worries over future ones. Moreover, human beings must serve them—something that has not escaped the notice of Euripides' Theseus. In *Suppliant Women,* Argive mothers, along with the king of Argos, beseech Theseus and the Athenians to intervene on their behalf. Their sons have died helping Polynices besiege Thebes in an attempt to reestablish his kingship there. Both of Oedipus' sons, Polynices and Eteocles, have perished. Creon, now Thebes' king by default, refuses to bury Polynices and his Argive coconspirators. Theseus attempts to beg off the responsibility and can't resist philosophizing in the process:

> Fools, understand the miseries of mankind! Life is a struggle for us. Some mortals were once fortunate and others will be later; some are so now. But it's the immortal who has it easy. The unfortunate man honors him because he wants to become fortunate, and the wealthy man extols him because he's afraid to lose the lofty influence. Aware of this, we must not take it to heart when we suffer moderate injustice. (549-567)

It is easy for Theseus, in the prime of his life and his kingship, to be stoic. It is more impressive when Oedipus can be so philosophical after his calamitous reversal of fortune. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, King Theseus of Athens now listens instead of speaking. Oedipus tells him calmly, "Dearest son of Aegus, only the gods never have to age or die" (607-620). He has come far indeed since he cursed Apollo and his own existence in *Oedipus Tyrannos*. His observation is apt. As classicist Anderson points out, "With the exception of Dionysus, Demeter, and some lesser divinities, the immortals of Greek myth existed largely above the reach of deepest mortal suffering" (128). Such deities serve to dramatize the mortal lot by offering an alternative paradigm of existence.

In the polytheistic Ancient Greek worldview, the nature of mortal existence entails a great deal of suffering; on the other hand, many secular 21st century Americans tend to view tragedy as a violation of the anticipated order. Even Dr. Ed Hickling, an expert in the study of tragedy and its aftereffects, hedges, "Life may give us tragedies" (1). In other words, it is not a certainty. Peter Trachtenberg takes this even further, explaining that American culture not only denies the inevitability of suffering but views it as "something that happens to other people, under circumstances so exotic and bizarre as to be statistically impossible" (19). This can lead to a feeling of alienation and isolation in American sufferers. Dr. Mark Epstein observes this effect in his psychiatric practice:

> Those who have encountered incredible hardship or loss often feel that their experiences are singular. They believe that they, alone, have been hurt, and they judge themselves, or worry that other people will judge them, if they reveal what they are going through or have been through. They expect themselves to 'get over it,' or, at the very least, to protect other people from their distress. (139)

This isolation, in turn, leads to more suffering. Perhaps the impulse to view suffering as "statistically impossible" stems from a desire to distance ourselves from it. Peter Trachtenberg explains this phenomenon:

> It's often said of exceptional victims that they are just like us, but they aren't. They're *better* than us—braver, nobler, more sweet natured and forbearing. Because they're better, they reassure us in the same way that their outcast counterparts do, and of the same thing: that what happened to them will not happen to us. For the true horror of another's calamity is the prospect that it might strike us. (577)

Along with the American tendency to view suffering as "exotic and bizarre" comes a fascination with it. This mindset is captured in such proverbial expressions as, "It was like a car wreck. I couldn't look away." Stories about unfortunate victims of fate abound on late-night television and the internet, among other media. Such is our fascination with extreme suffering, Peter Trachtemburg suggests that the "personal effects" of Ryan

White[23] "were put on display in the Indiana State Museum, like the relics of a saint" (576-577). To be fair, this attitude is not restricted to contemporary America. As Trachtenburg puts it, "Every age has its designated sufferers and also its exceptional ones, whose anguish inspires shock and pity and even reverence" (576). Oedipus is, of course, the example *par excellence*; Sophocles' choruses in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* display comparable fascination in his presence. After their king's stunning reversal of fortune in *Oedipus Tyrannus,* the chorus chants, "You poor wretch! I can't even look at you, but I still want to ask you many questions, to learn, to observe…you make me shiver with horror" (1303-1306). Their words encapsulate the duality of the human approach to suffering: we are simultaneously drawn to it and repelled by it. Nor has the fascination with Oedipus diminished at the end of his life, as portrayed in *Oedipus at Colonus.* By this time, word of his infamy has reached the environs of Athens. Seeing him, the chorus admits, "It's terrible to awaken buried evil, stranger, but I still desire to know…" (510-512). We can recognize ourselves in the spectators of tragedy as well as tragedy's victims. In a sense, the chorus serves as precursor to the modern spectator who reads about a tragedy on the internet, then turns to ask someone, "How could something like this happen?" Encountering such stories, we feel pity for the victims and terror that we might experience something similar. Being mortal, we too could fall prey to tragedy at any moment.

Why, then, should we subject ourselves to the spectacle of suffering? Why remind ourselves that calamity might alight on us at any time? One common response—something of a refrain from antiquity to the present—is that tragedy offers us

[23] Ryan White was infected with the AIDS virus after a blood transfusion and subsequently cast out of his middle school.

"perspective," thereby making "[spectators'] troubles seem more endurable" by comparison (Halliwell 395). Spectators' troubles do indeed appear manageable and even negligible in comparison to the "magnified reflection of the scope of human suffering" on stage (Halliwell 395). Philosophers have explored the implications of this phenomenon. Plato believed that this "magnified reflection" exists to the detriment of humanity: negative emotions were not, after all, conducive to flourishing. However, he did concede that the "tragedy's audience is exposed to a concentrated, soul-transforming experience" (Halliwell 396).

Conversely, Democritus, a Thracian philosopher and contemporary of Plato[24], suggested that one can "[cope] better with one's sorrows by contemplating the greater woes of others." Such contemplation would cultivate "tranquility of mind" (Halliwell 395). In fact, the idea that others' suffering can foster inner peace appears in a comic fragment from the fourth century B.C.E.: "'…The mind forgets its own problems / And finds itself engrossed in others' afflictions, / Then goes home edified as well as pleased'" (*Timocles* fr. 6.5-7 *PCG*). (Halliwell 394). The word "edified" points to the even more important role tragedy has in our lives. We should not simply leave the theater feeling grateful that, say, our choices may be difficult, but not as difficult as Agamemnon's. Ideally, we should depart with a greater understanding of the nature of human existence and the role suffering plays. It is precisely for that reason that such figures as Oedipus and Agamemnon, skilfully portrayed by the three great tragedians, are capable of "forging […] a (re)valuation of life on the anvil of extreme suffering" (Halliwell 399). Aristotle remains the primary authority on the subject—the authority best able to capture the transformative potential of tragedy. In his introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics*, Stephen

[24] Democritus lived from 460-370 B.C.E.; Plato lived from 428-348 B.C.E.

Halliwell describes the interplay of catharsis, emotion and mimesis that give tragedy its power:

> This configuration of [catharsis, emotions, mimesis] allows us, however tentatively, to make of catharsis a concept which is interconnected with various components in Aristotle's theory of tragedy, and which in some sense completes his account of the genre by framing the experience of it as psychologically rewarding and ethically beneficial. Tragedy, on this reading, may revolve around the exhibition of sufferings which stem from profound human fallibility, yet engaging the understanding and the emotions in contemplation of these phenomena it succeeds in affording the experience which deeply fulfills and enhances the whole mind (Halliwell 19).

Whether Oedipus or Ryan White, victims of destiny will continue to pique our curiosity. This aspect of human nature may—at least in part—account for the existence of Greek Tragedy and its continued popularity. When we behold suffering, we are both fascinated and appalled. If we are fortunate, we have a "soul-transforming experience." And every time, perhaps unconsciously, we make a silent prayer, using a variation of the words Euripides' chorus speaks upon learning the destiny of Oedipus's descendants: "May my life be more blessed!" (*Phoenician Women* 1583).

Chapter 3

AWAKENING AND ACCEPTANCE

Although suffering is so inextricably—and, some might say, lamentably—intertwined with the human experience, it does have some purpose: to foster wisdom. Aeschylus offers the consolation that mortals will achieve "learning by way of suffering" (*Agamemnon* 177). The tragedian does not portray this aspect of existence as a serendipitous accident. Rather, the gods themselves have ordained it so. According to the watchman in *Agamemnon's* opening scene, "Justice herself allots wisdom to those who suffer" (*Agamemnon* 250-251). Nor is this idea restricted to art. The promise—or at least possibility—of personal growth through suffering allows people to move forward, integrating the tragedies into their understanding of life. Twenty-first-century psychologists like Dr. Edward Hickling support Aeschylus' ancient thesis: "One theory [about Post-Traumatic Growth], in fact, necessitates that growth only comes if there is enough suffering. […] Suffering in one form or another may be a needed condition for change" (81). Although some people initially resist accepting this truth, the wisest among them choose to embrace the spiritual insights that suffering can effect.

Wisdom itself is an elusive term that requires clarification. An understanding of wisdom, therefore, begins with its dictionary definition: "knowledge that is gained by having many experiences in life" (Merriam-Webster). Knowledge, on the other hand, is defined as "information, understanding or skill that you get from experience or education" (Merriam-Webster). According to their respective definitions, knowledge may be learned from others, but wisdom requires personal experience—often experience that

entails suffering. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Theseus comments on this distinction between wisdom and knowledge, lamenting that skills can be taught but not wisdom. He has just learned of his wife Phaedra's suicide, although he does not yet know that her accusations against Theseus's son Hippolytus are the result of frustrated love and not the truthful confessions of a victim.[25] Excoriating his son in particular, Theseus generalizes about human nature: "O humanity, how often you go astray in your folly! Why do you bother teaching myriad skills, forever discovering and devising all manner of things, when you neither understand nor seek this one thing: how to teach a mind lacking wisdom to be wise!" (*Hippolytus* 916-920). In other words, the most valuable quality a person can cultivate—wisdom—cannot be taught, despite humanity's manifold skills and rhetorical prowess. In another Euripides play, *Suppliant Women*, King Adrastus of Cadmus opines this human tendency to learn only from bitter experience and not from sage counsel: "Witless mortals—who don't draw your bow against the right target and incur many troubles as a result—you never listen to your friends, only to actions!" (*Suppliant Women* 744-747). He is speaking in particular about humanity's penchant for waging war instead of resolving conflicts peaceably, but he could be describing any wisdom gained from hard experience. In wars and other conflicts, wisdom proves more valuable than knowledge. Paradoxically, though, wisdom is only won though the types of wars and conflicts that wisdom itself could prevent. And often the wisest members of society are not in positions sufficiently powerful to prevent conflict.

Characters in tragedy are wont to bring about (or at least contribute to) their own downfalls, thereby learning wisdom "the hard way," as the proverbial saying goes. The

[25] Aphrodite causes Phaedra to fall in love with her own stepson because Hippolytus has failed to show her proper reverence. When Hippolytus rejects Phaedra's advances, she frames him and commits suicide.

chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone*, in fact, ends the tragedy with this lesson after Creon admits to having unwittingly killed his own son through stubbornness: "The great words of the proud bring great calamities, and in time this teaches wisdom" (*Antigone* 1348-1353). Ruth Scodel reminds us that this should not be dismissed as a tacked-on bit of gnomic wisdom: "Even *Antigone,* where Creon's final lines acknowledge his error, is not a cheap lesson. Even if the moral seems familiar, it is not easy" (Scodel 248). It is often difficult to imagine characters in Greek tragedy benefitting from their newly acquired wisdom; the extent of their destruction is too absolute. After all, Creon cannot undo the death of his son, and he will have to live with the knowledge that he contributed to his family's ruin. Victims of tragedy who exist outside of literature meet with equally terrible and terrifying fates from which they must recover. Part of the therapist's role is to help those victims recognize that this hard-won wisdom has the power to transform: "Suffering therefore can be the occasion for meaningful transformation within a therapeutic context; it can resemble the 'happy fault' (*felix culpa*) of which St. Augustine speaks, the fall that leads to deliverance" (Levine 44). St. Augustine's word choice, *culpa*, recalls Aristotle's *hamartia*, the "fatal flaw" in a character that leads him inexorably toward ruin. The ability to view such a fall as potentially beneficial empowers those who have suffered tragedy, transforming them from passive victims into agents.

At first, some of the characters in tragedy—and with them most of humanity—reject the notion that wisdom is worth the price of suffering, preferring instead a childlike denial. After describing the potential benefits of post-tragedy wisdom, Dr. Hickling adds, "I think that almost everyone who has suffered a terrible loss or other consequence of trauma would gladly give up whatever growth occurred to not have to bear that tragic

moment" (93). Therefore, the wisdom comes stealthily, stealing upon its beneficiaries in an unconscious process. Agamemnon's watchman, who has overseen much in the days since his master departed for Troy, observes, "The pain of memories falls, drop by drop, upon the heart during sleep. So wisdom comes to those who receive her unwillingly" (*Agamemnon* 179-181). The years of patient watching and waiting have taught him much about human nature—including the truism that many people prefer the bliss of ignorant joy to the wisdom of harsh experience. Sophocles has his Ajax repeat this theme when the dishonored hero, resolved to commit suicide, addresses his son for the last time: "I am jealous that you're ignorant of these problems. When you understand nothing, life is most pleasant. This absence of thought serves as an anodyne[26] to suffering, until you learn to rejoice and grieve" (*Ajax* 552-555). Euripides' Heracles makes an even more extreme statement, yearning not to revert to childhood but to become something with no sentience: "I wish I could become a rock, unaware of misfortunes," he cries out in the agony of his deathbed (*Heracles* 1397). Such pronouncements cannot merely be ascribed to theatricality. According to Shaun McNiff, professor of art therapy, "It is quite natural to guard against the crucible of transformation. Human nature tends to flee from encounters with vulnerability and the discomfort of uncertainty" (xii). This tendency simply equates to self-preservation. Even trauma specialist Edward Hickling admits, "If you asked me if I would be willing to give up these insights not to have gone through the injuries, I would unhesitatingly say, 'Yes.' But life's tragedies and traumas aren't ours to take back or alter" (84). In such a position, we are left only with the choice of how we view and respond to the tragedies life gives us.

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[26] The English rendering remains faithful to the Greek original: ἀνώδυνον, or *anōdunon*.

Even if it were possible to avoid any unpleasant experience, choosing blissful ignorance over wisdom means remaining forever a child. According to Peter Trachtenberg, modern America suffers collectively from this immature worldview: "This fantasy of immunity arose out of traditional American exceptionalism but became prevalent only amid the euphoric abundance of the postwar years. It is a child's fantasy, and it has made us a nation of children" (20). This is a harsh assessment, to be sure, but anyone who consciously denies the benefits of suffering—let alone denies its pervasiveness—cannot acquire the wisdom it might bring. In the ancient world as in our time, childhood is associated with happy ignorance, whereas the experience of age brings wisdom. In Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, Heracles' wife Deianeira tells the chorus of young women, "May you never experience such soul-destroying pain as I'm currently enduring, pain of which you remain ignorant. Youth is nurtured in such a state, where it isn't distressed by the sun god's heat or rainfall or winds, but exalts in a life filled with pleasures and free from toil" (143-148). Her husband Heracles is out fighting monsters and presumed dead; Deianeira fears both for him and for her children. It is natural that she should envy the chorus, whose maiden members do not yet know the cares of marriage and motherhood. Likewise, in Euripides' *Medea*, the nurse comments on her charges' unawareness of their parents' problems: "The youthful mind tends not to meditate upon suffering" (48). Youth, with its unawareness of life's sorrows, is a blessed time. But all children must eventually grow up.

Along with youth, the tragedians use sleep as a metaphor to describe ignorance of suffering. In *Agamemnon*, for example, the chorus uses dream imagery to stand in for misguided expectations—the daytime counterparts to night's visions: "Whenever a man

believes he has glimpsed good fortune, the vision proves fruitless and slips through his hands. In a moment it goes, flying on the winged ways of sleep" (*Agamemnon* 423-426). Sleep, which Homer describes as Death's twin brother, brings with it a welcome respite from trouble and often supplements this rest with fanciful projections. However, only the inexperience of youth trusts in such visions. Peter Trachtenberg also uses the trope of tragedy waking us from a dream-like state: "The death of my friend awakened me. Afterward I became conscious of human misery in a way I hadn't been before, acutely, viscerally; I became enraged by it. (Of course the rage was childish, but I don't regret it, only the long stupor that came before)" (12). Until he integrated suffering into his life, Peter Trachtenberg did not consider himself a true (and awakened) adult. Before then, he was asleep. Although vain hopes and misguided perceptions might serve as a pleasant distraction, ultimately people must awaken to reality if they hope to survive tragedy and learn from it. They might even come to prefer the new awareness to their old ignorance, as does one of Edward Hickling's patients: "I wouldn't wish this illness on anyone, but it has given me a lot. I might have gone through these last few years asleep, not fully taking in what was right there for me" (Hickling 222). Most importantly, though, dreams are not reality, and we can only enjoy them for so long. When the alarm bell of tragedy awakens us, we can only choose how we react to the disruption. This is as true in Greek Tragedy as in twenty-first-century America. Writing of Oedipus, H. D. H. Kitto reiterates the hard fact that this is our only choice: "But when you are knocked flat, you must accept it; and if you cannot get up again, you must be resigned" (142). It is what we choose to do after this point that matters. As Mark Epstein puts it, "There may be nothing

left for us to do with the traumas that befall us than to use them for our own awakenings" (Epstein 63).

For the protagonists of tragedy, the first step to awakening and acceptance is recognizing the futility of fighting destiny. The tragedians often portray this force of destiny (*moira*) as both inexorable and preordained, a part of the human condition. However, the concept is slippery and protean, shifting slightly from play to play and tragedian to tragedian. According to Kitto, the crux of Aeschylus' plays is not conflict between two characters but between "a solitary hero facing his own destiny or playing out an inner drama of his own soul" (Kitto 32-33). Here, then, destiny seems to take on an antagonistic force, with the protagonist shown "at grips" with it (Kitto 29). Destiny is equally elusive in Sophocles, although Sophoclean protagonists play perhaps more of an active role in their own destinies. According to a commentator on Sophocles' plays, "At times our texts seem to say that man's lot is his own doing; at other times the gods seem to determine the human condition; elsewhere we find talk of an impersonal, objective destiny that affects not only man but the gods as well" (Hogan 13). Whatever the origin of this conception of destiny, it amounts to "the observed good and bad fortune of anyone's existence" (Hogan 13). According to Ann Lebeck, the Ancient Greek conception of a man's fate as woven fabric "allotted him at birth, his death a bond the gods bind round him" appears in many Indo-European cultures (79). If the concept does in fact stretch back so incalculably far, that would explain destiny's role in tragedy. In the extant plays, fate is always described as inestimably powerful, a quality often remarked upon by the chorus. For example, the chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone* proclaims, "The power of destiny is formidable; nothing can escape it—not wealth or war, not the city

walls or the sea-beaten ships" (951-954). Indeed, even the gods willingly subordinate themselves to Fate, as the exchange between Zeus and Hera in Book 16 of the *Iliad* illuminates.[27] The ancient folk wisdom on the subject resembles that of contemporary American mourners, who may console themselves that "everything happens for a reason." In this instance, too, the particular being—or thing—orchestrating the reason remains unnamed, perhaps deliberately. In both cases, this fact alone is clear: we humans are subordinate to this force.

Closely linked to Destiny (*moira*) is the concept of Necessity (*anagkē),* which carries with it the sense of compulsion. Like Fate, Necessity is a "shadowy conception stronger than the gods" (Kitto 57). Necessity, too, appears powerful to the point of omnipotence in the eyes of tragedians. For instance, Sophocles' Philoctetes tells Neoptolemus,[28] "I eventually learned, by compulsion, to bear my afflictions" (538). Necessity here is tinged with anthropomorphism, as though it were a harsh master who has forced Philoctetes to submission. Similarly, in Euripides' *Helen*, Menelaus regrets that he must disguise himself as a beggar to obtain entry into the Egyptian palace where his famous wife dwells.[29] However, he ends with a wistful acceptance of the situation: "It's not my saying, but the words of a wise man: nothing is more powerful than terrible necessity" (*Helen* 513-514).

Necessity is a powerful force, to be sure: in Greek mythology even the gods are subject—and subordinate—to Necessity, as they are to Fate. The Titan Prometheus

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[27] Zeus considers intervening in the Trojan War to save his son Sarpedon, but he accedes to Hera's warning that the gods' meddling with Fate would yield disastrous results.

[28] Philoctetes' comrades abandoned him en route to Troy because the unfortunate man had been bitten by a snake; the festering wound grew too unpleasant to bear. In Sophocles' play he lives on a solitary island—until the Achaeans need his bow to defeat the Trojans. Urged by the wily Odysseus, Achilles' son Neoptolemus tries to convince Philoctetes to abandon his grudge and accompany them to Troy.

[29] In this version of the story, the "real" Helen remains in Egypt while only a phantom projection of Helen goes to Troy.

articulates his own views on the subject after Zeus's minions have chained him to the rock: "I must bear my fated lot as lightly as I can, aware that the power of necessity cannot be conquered" (*Prometheus Bound* 103-105). There is a grandeur to Prometheus, a gravitas that won't permit unseemly struggle. He serves as a model of one who endures the yoke of fate gracefully. Sophocles' Ajax displays similar sangfroid after he realizes the extent of his disgrace before his fellow warriors.[30] He asks his wife Tecmessa, "Why do you grieve over what's been done? It won't change the way things are" (*Ajax* 377-378). Gods and warriors—the de facto nobility—spare themselves the ignominy of futile mourning. Perhaps the most striking image of this type occurs in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, when Hecuba offers counsel to her compatriots of the fallen Troy: "As your fortune alters, hold on! Sail along the passage; that is, sail with your fate. Don't set the prow of your life against the wave, but go with the currents of destiny" (101-104). The currents of fate, as powerful and mysterious as those of the ocean, cannot be resisted. More than two thousand years later, Dr. Hickling offers similar advice to his patients, albeit less poetically:

> Related and embedded in the phrase ["it can't be helped"] is the notion of fate. It is inevitable, and needs to be accepted.… It doesn't mean, however, that the events and how you deal with them can't be transformed into something else, or that the path is determined. It is limited to the time it is occurring. It is very present focused. You and where you go are not hopeless, or inevitable; it's just those traumas that needed to be survived and then carried. It can't be helped, the scars will be there, but what happens next is not yet determined. (Hickling 228)

After the doctor stresses the importance of accepting the inevitable, he leaves the future open to hope and possibility. We cannot undo the past, but we can shape the future.

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[30] Ajax, believing a flock of cattle (in the Sophoclean version) to be his fellow Achaeans, slaughters them. His rage, indistinguishable from madness, is kindled when the Achaeans award Achilles' arms to Odysseus instead of to Ajax.

In the tragedies, bowing to the inevitable is not portrayed as exclusively heroic but logical as well. In Euripides' *Heracles*, the hero's first wife, Megara, receives news of her husband's death, a message that is later discredited. She and her children take refuge at the Theban altar of Zeus. Despite her predicament, Megara remains stoic, telling the chorus, "I consider any mortal who resists fate irrational" (*Heracles* 283-284). She ends her speech by reiterating and elaborating on the same principle: "Whoever struggles against god-sent fates is zealous, but his zeal is senseless. There is no one who can undo what has been destined" (309-311). Moreover, recognizing the futility of fighting destiny is not only irrational but unwise. Given that the positive result of suffering is the acquisition of wisdom, it is counterproductive to retain the view that fate can be resisted. The chorus of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* recognizes this truth, advising the Titan to yield to Zeus lest he endure even more painful punishments: "They are wise who kneel before Necessity" (*Prometheus Bound* 936). In Euripides' *Orestes*, Menelaus offers similar counsel to his nephew: "It's necessary for the wise to submit to fate" (715-716). The cycle of stories surrounding the Trojan War may seem remote and disconnected from our lives today, and Prometheus is even more remote. However, Dr. Hickling gives his patients the same advice as Menelaus gives Orestes, citing recent events instead of mythic ones:

> First, one needs to face the part of the event that lets you know that the situation is hopeless. Not in a despairing way, but in the inevitability of the event. One can't stop a tsunami, or the fallout of a nuclear reactor. No one can stop the radiation spreading into food, into water, or look for loved ones pulled out into the Pacific Ocean. There can be no help for you. There are no words, no actions that can undo these events. It can't be helped. (Hickling 228)

Whether advised by a twenty-first-century psychologist or an ancient chorus, people do not find it easy to admit powerlessness in the face of Fate. In Aeschylus'

Libation Bearers, Electra illustrates the sense of helplessness that can accompany this submission. She has survived horrific events that have decimated her family: the sacrifice of her sister Iphegenia and the murder of her father Agamemnon. She is aristocratic, but helpless all the same—especially because she is female and unmarried. While performing a ritual libation ceremony in honor of her dead father, she muses, "Ruin can't be conquered, can it?" (*Libation Bearers* 339). Recent psychological research supports the wisdom of such an outlook, confirming that the aftermath of tragedy almost invariably includes "acceptance of … vulnerabilities and limitations" (Hall et al. 49). In fact, Peter Trachtenberg views helplessness as the hallmark of all the 21st-century tragedy he surveys, from 9/11 to the 2004 tsunami: "One characteristic common to all suffering I write about is that it entails a loss of power" (31). Trachtenberg chronicles this phenomenon in an anecdotal way. One woman, after losing her twenty-seven-year-old daughter to illness, remembers saying to herself, "I get it, God. I get it. I have no control over anything" (247). It doesn't matter whether we believe in *anagkē*, God, or randomness; a sense of helplessness before tragedy remains constant throughout the years. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, news of a child's death evokes a response similar to the one described in Peter Trachtenburg's account of suffering. The herald Talthybius tells Andromache, Hector's widow, that the Achaeans plan to kill her son Astyanax. After delivering the news, he counsels Andromache, "Do not resist; suffer your misfortune nobly. Don't imagine you have power when you don't" (*Trojan Women* 727-729). With echoes of Talthybius' advice, Psychologists Elizabeth Hall, Jason McMartin and Richard Langer, who explore the effects of suffering, conclude their study by reminding readers that "adverse events show us the limits of the human condition" (53).

The only psychologically healthy approach is, first, concession to these limitations and, finally, command over those domains we can control. In another scene from Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Hecuba offers a wonderfully poetic image that illustrates submission to Fate:

> If sailors meet with a moderate storm, they put forth great effort to be saved from troubles: one man at the helm, another on the sails, and someone securing the hold. But if a mighty, uproarious sea overpowers them, they give themselves up to the waves' course. Thus I am speechless in the face of so many calamities; submitting, I keep quiet. The gods' disastrous wave has conquered me. (689-696)

The ocean is an apt metaphor for all of life: beautiful, mysterious, at times peaceful, at other times terrible. The Trojan women depicted in Euripides' play have encountered the stormiest seas imaginable. It is no wonder, then, that several characters advise yielding to the powerful blasts of Fate. This is not pessimistic but realistic.

In fact, both characters from tragedy and psychologists specializing in trauma consider realistic assessment an integral aspect of recovery and moving forward. In Euripides' *Andromache*, for example, Hector's widow has been given as a slave to Hermione, daughter of Helen and Menelaus. The chorus advises cautious circumspection, telling her, "Recognize[31] your fate; consider your present circumstances, the trouble to which you've come" (126). This advice is nearly identical to that of Edward Hickling to his patients: "Accept what is, and not what you think should be" (179). This acceptance does not equate to admission of defeat or pessimism. Perhaps counterintuitively, it facilitates a sense of peace. Mark Epstein elaborates on this principle: "Inner peace is actually predicated upon a realistic approach to the uncertainties and fears that pervade our lives. Western psychology often teaches that if we understand the cause of a given

[31] This imperative verb, *gnōthi* in Ancient Greek, is the same word inscribed on Apollo's Temple at Delphi: *gnōthi seauton* (know thyself).

trauma we can move past it, returning to the steady state we imagine is normal" (3). In other words, we will wait in vain for the world to return to the way it was before the tragedy. Rather, we must integrate the tragedy into our new existence. Avoidance does not help; it only keeps us stuck in an unhealthy limbo of dread: "Trauma is unavoidable, despite our strong wishes to the contrary. Facing this truth, this disillusioning attack on our omnipotence, with an attitude of honesty and caring strips it of much of its threat. When we are constantly telling ourselves that things shouldn't be this way, we reinforce the very dread we are trying to get away from" (Epstein 57). This is not to suggest that facing reality is easy. Quite the opposite. Epstein concedes, "Because everyday life is so challenging, there is a great need to pretend" (Epstein 17). However, there is an even greater need to move forward, which must ultimately take precedence.

As part of facing reality, victims of tragedy must recalibrate their understanding of the universe. People who once viewed the universe as stable now see it not only as unstable but downright hostile. Mark Epstein explains "absolutisms," which constitute a fantasy from which we awaken when we suffer tragedy: "Therapists who specialize in the treatment of trauma … speak of how trauma robs its victims of the 'absolutisms' of daily life: the myths we live by that allow us to go to sleep at night trusting we will still be there in the morning" (54). Absolutisms allow us to rise from our beds each morning, believing that the day will pass uneventfully—not that, say, we will fall victim to a deadly car crash. This mindset has a practical value; it allows us to function without common fear or paranoia. Such is our default pre-trauma setting:

> When a person says to a friend, "I'll see you later," or a parent says to a child at bedtime, "I'll see you in the morning," these are statements, like delusions, whose validity is not open to discussion. Such absolutisms are the basis for a kind of naïve realism and optimism that allows us to

> function in the world, experienced as stable and predictable. It is in the essence of emotional trauma that it shatters these absolutisms, a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one's sense of being-in-the-world. (Epstein 54-55)

These kinds of absolutisms are necessary if we are to function. However, trauma does not allow us to continue believing in them. In another Euripides play, *Hippolytus*, the chorus gives voice to this new understanding of the world as a dangerous place. When the play opens, Theseus is happily married to Phaedra; together they rule a prosperous city. Theseus' son Hippolytus is out hunting, oblivious to the trauma about to befall him. After Phaedra's suicide, Theseus exiles and curses his son Hippolytus. Athens' stability, in other words, is overthrown. The chorus comments, "I don't see how I could say that any mortal is fortunate. For now the first [among men] has been turned upside-down" (981-982). Of course, the members of the chorus have always known intellectually—just as we know—that suicide and rape exist, that fathers turn against their children. However, trauma forces us to know these things viscerally and not abstractly. In other words, they can actually happen to *us*, as opposed to characters in a play or people on the news. Edward Hickling explains the difference: "When [tragedy] happens to us, we know it differently. Now it cuts into our self-protective shell and lets us know it isn't just other people, but any of us that these things can happen to. We are vulnerable, and our illusions of how life is supposed to be get shattered" (117). This process is unsettling, to say the least. Victims understandably voice a pessimistic worldview, as the chorus in *Hippolytus* does. After all, they are in shock. Mark Epstein explains why this revelation requires an adjustment period: "Trauma is disillusioning. […] It reveals truth, but in a manner so abrupt and disturbing that the mind jumps away. The old absolutisms no longer reassure, and the newly revealed reality feels crushing" (Epstein 56). The victims

need time to adjust to this new conception of the world. In order to make the adjustment, they must make their minds anew.

Even when subject to tragedies imposed by fate, people are free to embrace spiritual growth. This is a central tenet of psychology books offering advice to victims of trauma. Indeed, it is incumbent upon us to choose our own responses. One heir to this line of thinking, a tradition with roots in Stoicism, is Rabbi Harold Kushner. After his three-year-old son was diagnosed with a degenerative disease, Kushner responded with a book that married the genres of self-help and spirituality: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Edward Hickling summarizes Kushner's stance on finding meaning in tragedy:

> Kushner suggests that the bad things that happen to us in this world do not have meaning when they happen to us. They do not happen for any good reason that would cause us to accept them willingly. But we give them that meaning. We can redeem the tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them. The questions we should be asking is not why did this happen to me and why did I deserve this, which is unanswerable and pointless. The better question: now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it? (214-215)

This approach is logical as well as empowering. Yes, we are subordinate to fate (as ancient and modern thinkers agree), but nothing can control how we choose to view our circumstances.

Kushner's approach to trauma, which philosophers and psychologists would later explore as well, is not explored in the ethos of Greek tragedy. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, though, we can discern a faint precursor to Kushner. In the midst of the plague ravaging Thebes,[32] Creon reassures Oedipus, "Even things that are hard to bear can lead to all kinds of good luck—that is, if they happen to turn out all right" (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 87-

[32] Immediately after seeking a remedy for this plague, Oedipus learns of his history.

88). However, his qualification—that things must "turn out all right" in order to bring "good luck"—ultimately rejects the idea that tragedy has much benefit for humanity aside from wisdom. Compare this to the work of Mark Epstein, who writes, "The traumas of everyday life, if they do not destroy us, become bearable, even illuminating, when we learn to relate to them differently" (Epstein 3). However, we need only adjust our associations with "wisdom" for Aeschylus and psychologists to find common ground. Both agree that suffering alone can lead us to a new plane of awareness. As Hickling puts it, "It is only through pain that one is able to make sense of the world in a new and different fashion" (81). This is a rephrasing of Aeschylus' dictum that we must suffer into truth. In Aeschylus' conception of the term, truth—or wisdom—won from hard experience renders us more sensible and moderate. Edward Hickling and Mark Epstein, among other psychologists, believe that wisdom means seeing the world in a new way. Often, that new way of thinking comes with a different set of values. Hickling describes Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which "begins with the idea of accepting the unwanted, private experiences, which are out of your personal control, and committing with action to move towards things that each individual defines as a valued life" (154). Many of those things that comprise a valued life have remained remarkably constant over the millennia. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides still have much to teach us on that subject.

Long before the tragedians composed their plays, humanity was enchanted by the image of a garden in a time before suffering. After all, "Four of the world's religions begin in gardens, sheltered green spaces untroubled by pain or death" (Trachtenburg 480). In these faraway mythic places, which existed before History or Time, people were

innocent and sheltered, like children. Although Greek Tragedy, too, draws its stories from mythology, the plays do not offer escapist fantasies or refuge from suffering. By contrast, the tragedians force us to behold scenes of pain, which in turn prompt us to speculate on the suffering we encounter in our own lives. If humanity did indeed begin in a garden shut off from harsh realities—at least in the realm of mythology—then it could only mature to wisdom outside of the garden. As a team of psychologists notes in "The Role of Suffering in Human Flourishing," "Wisdom is the skill of living well, and living well requires no skill in paradise" (Hall et al.). It is the reality depicted in Greek Tragedy, and not the fantasy, that can help us live well.

Chapter 4

WISE HABITS OF MIND

If suffering does produce wisdom, what sort of wisdom, then, do the characters of Greek tragedy learn from suffering? They learn to be more prudent, more measured in their words and decisions. They learn to choose reason over emotion, considering how any given behavior might affect the situation and proceeding with logic. And although some aspects of the ancient world's ethos might strike us as foreign, these lessons are timeless. Indeed, psychiatrist Mark Epstein offers an insight that could well have been a line in one of Sophocles' choral odes: "Emotional pain is as fruitful an object of awareness as anything else; it may even have qualities, like intensity, that make it particularly useful as a way of training the mind" (18). The result of a trained mind is increased *sōphrōsunē*, which Liddell & Scott defines as soundness of mind and self-control.[33] This quality applies to speech, emotions, desires, and states of mind. Most importantly, it can forestall some of the disasters depicted in tragedy.

Throughout the extant tragedies, *sōphrōsunē* and sound judgment are lauded as inestimably valuable and lamentably scarce. In her essay entitled "Sophoclean Tragedy," Ruth Scodel describes the term *sōphrōsunē* and its derivatives: "To be *sōphrōn* is, literally, to be sane, to be aware of one's limits and social obligations, and to respect the claims of others" (236). The virtue is a social one, with benefits extending beyond the self and encompassing the wider community. Nor is this a uniquely Greek value. At the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, social scientists

[33] The other possible translations are prudence, discretion, sanity, moderation in sensual desires, and temperance.

categorized a list of "universal" positive characteristics after surveying "widely influential religious and philosophical traditions" (Peterson 139). Among these traits are two that correspond to *sōphrōsunē*: "prudence: being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted"; and "self-regulation: regulating what one feels or does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions" (Peterson 144). Positive psychologists regard prudence and self-regulation as necessary ingredients for a good character because they protect against "destabilizing emotional extremes of all sorts" (Peterson 144). This sound and reasonable approach to life accords nicely with Euripides' own worldview. According to Kitto, "Euripides, like most Greeks, is a rationalist in that he believes reason, not belief or formula or magic, to be the guide to life; but he sees, too, that we have in us, besides reason, non-rational emotions which are necessary but may run wild, thwarting our reason and bringing calamity" (197). In his *Hippolytus*, Phaedra goes so far as equate a sound mind with life itself: "They say that only one thing vies with life itself: the presence of a just and good mind" (426-427). Her word for mind is *gnōmē,* which can be translated as intelligence, thought, understanding, or judgment. Because Phaedra has been recently struck with frenzy by Aphrodite, she would naturally miss what she has so recently lost. In the place of reason, she has a mad desire for her stepson—something that inevitably and inexorably hastens disaster. In fact, Euripides viewed this dichotomy as the "central tragedy of man, his capacity for intelligence and self-control, his domination by unreason and folly" (Kitto 230).

Because the genre's parameters dictate that tragedians must portray destruction and not narrowly escaped disaster, the playwrights can have their characters meditate on

the benefits of *sōphrōsunē* but not necessarily act on it. Such is the case with Phaedra; she is aware of her own lack of *sōphrōsunē,* and yet she yields to its opposite: irrational emotion. Tragedies—at least in the artistic sense—can always occur as long as emotion rules over reason. As Halliwell points out, "To transcend 'tragedy,' whether in art or life, what is needed is a philosophical wisdom that sees beyond the attachments expressed in human emotion" (401). Phaedra cannot transcend her emotions or her attachments, and so Theseus' house falls. Tragedy, of course, is associated with the destruction of houses, not their prudent maintenance, just as Homeric epic is associated with Achilles' frenzy in battle and not the "quiet life" he rejected as unheroic.[34] Phaedra's absence of *sōphrōsunē* is as necessary to tragedy as its presence is indispensable to good character in general. In another tragedy of the destruction of royal houses, Euripides' *Bacchae,*[35] the chorus sums up the role a sound mind plays in life: "Unbridled tongues and lawless folly: these end in misfortune. But a quiet life and a sound mind remain unshaken and keep houses together" (386-392). Euripides' Pentheus is not fully aware of his lack of *sōphrōsunē* with regard to respecting Dionysius, but he receives punishment nonetheless. The gods do not inquire too closely about motives; only the action counts.

Teaching *sōphrōsunē* by portraying its opposite is a common practice in tragedy. After all, the restraint inherent in *sōphrōsunē* does not harmonize with the theatrical excesses of, say, Medea or Xerxes—or even the less egregious displays of Sophocles' Creon in his *Antigone* incarnation. Even in contemporary psychology, the so-called "temperance strengths are defined in part by what a person refrains from doing, and they

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[34] In Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles' mother Thetis refers to two Fates from which Achilles may choose: a long, unremarkable life or a short, celebrated one. Because he chooses the latter, we have the *Iliad*.
[35] In yet another tragic story set in Thebes, King Pentheus brings calamity on his family by refusing to recognize Dionysus as a legitimate deity.

might be more apparent to observers in their intemperate absence than in their temperate presence" (Peterson 144). The observers of Greek tragedy would certainly be accustomed to seeing displays of intemperance, the Creon of *Antigone* being a salient example. In this play the chorus has the last word, as choruses nearly always do. After observing Creon's stubbornness, which leads directly to the death of the his son, the chorus remarks, "Prudence[36] facilitates happiness far more than anything else does" (*Antigone* 1348-1349). Encountering these maxims, readers must resist the temptation to skim over them as one would any hackneyed phrase. Rather, they must meditate on all that has transpired—in this case, that Creon's lack of prudence has destroyed his life. As Kitto observes, "Sophocles makes it quite clear that Creon's ruin is the direct and natural outcome of what he, himself, has done to Antigone, Haemon, Eurydice" (122). The phrases, then, must be considered within the context of the entire play. This is why the pronouncements of the chorus carry particular weight. Suzanne Saïd observes as much in her critical article "Aeschylean Tragedy":

> The chorus is also a mediating principle between the heroes and the audience and often communicates directly with the audience. As narrator, the chorus comments on what has already occurred or sets the mood for the events to come. As enunciator of wisdom speaking in a higher style than the characters, the choral voice carries authority and may appear as the mouthpiece of the poet. (219)

Earlier in the play, Creon's son Haemon tries to reason with his father, using phrasing that foreshadows the chorus' coda: "The gods have endowed people with wits,[37] the greatest of their possessions" (*Antigone* 683-684). Normally the older and wiser character advises the younger to be more prudent, but in *Antigone* the roles are reversed: Haemon

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[36] The term I translated as "prudence" has the same root as *sōphrōsunē: to phronēin,* an infinitive one might also render as "to have understanding," "to be wise," "to be prudent" or "to think rightly."
[37] This word is *phrenas*, which can also be translated as "mind," "heart," or "will." It is linguistically related to the word *sōphrōsunē.*

foresees the consequences of his father's actions. In her "Sophoclean Tragedy," Ruth Scodel describes *sōphrōsunē* as inseparable from this kind of forward-thinking: "Normally one would associate *sōphrōsunē* with foresightedness, since those who anticipate the consequences of their actions avoid excess" (238). Giving this role of paragon of *sōphrōsunē* to a son, not to a father, allows for heightened dramatic irony.

If Sophocles' Creon represents the tragedy that ensues from lack of *sōphrōsunē,* the Odysseus of his *Ajax* depicts the virtue in action. Instead of reveling in his victory,[38] Odysseus plans a proper burial for Ajax, despite the protestations of Menelaus and Agamemnon. Cairns, therefore, holds Odysseus up as a model of the virtue:

> Thus the *sōphrosunē* of Odysseus effects a positive alternation in the fortunes of Ajax, an alternation reflected in the way that the action is framed by Odysseus' initial pity at Ajax's fall and final affirmation of his *arēte*, a word used to describe excellence in battle and in virtue. Ironically, it is another's *sōphrosunē* that restores the fortunes of a man who rejected *sōphrosunē* and could not bear to live on until his fortunes were restored. (318)

In this instance, *sōphrosunē* equates to rational, not emotional, behavior. Odysseus does not yield to any shameful impulses toward revenge; rather, he contemplates Ajax dispassionately, an act that leads to compassion. This compassion is directed at Ajax, but it is generous enough to encompass all of humanity: Odysseus recognizes the fallen hero as emblematic of the human condition in his vulnerability. It is not foresight that drives Odysseus to be empathetic, but respect for another human being. This, too, falls under the rubric of *sōphrōsunē.* On the artistry and the ethics of the *Ajax*, Kitto writes, "Sophocles was not simply making brilliant drama, but was at the same time, through this brilliant drama, talking good and important sense" (186).

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[38] The Achaeans award Odysseus the arms of Achilles, thereby valuing his cleverness over Ajax's strength. Humiliated, Ajax commits suicide.

According to Douglas Cairns, *sōphrōsunē* has another key element besides foresight: *aidōs.* This Greek word remains somewhat elusive, with wide-ranging translations that include respect, awe, reverence, shame, sense of honor, dignity, and regard. All possible renderings, however, suggest restraint and awareness. As Cairns puts it, "A proper sense of *aidōs* thus forestalls hubris. Frequently associated with *aidōs* is the virtue of *sōphrosunē*, literally 'sound-mindedness' or 'safe thinking,' but more generally a virtue of self-control or self-restraint in the face of temptations such as food, drink, sex, power, or prestige" (313). This concept is as relevant today as it was in the Bronze or Classical Age—and just as applicable to tragedy in the twenty-first-century sense because victims must be mindful of their thoughts as they recover. In his *Transforming Tragedy,* in fact, Edward Hickling cites training the mind as an indispensable element of recovering from trauma: "One of the oldest, most central parts of cognitive therapy is to not ignore the thoughts that come up, but to address them head on. To challenge them, and to try to see where they might be wrong, and how those wrong interpretations are causing us to limit our lives and to suffer" (111). The consequences of our rejecting *sōphrosunē* might not be as dramatic as those of Creon, but they are significant nonetheless. "Unbridled" thoughts, to borrow a modifier from Phaedra, can impede recovery, as well as damage relationships and lead to despair.

The opposite of *sōphrosunē* is action without forethought. Throughout the tragedies, characters and chorus members alike advise deliberation before action, a practice of particular importance when all the facts have not yet come to light. In Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, for example, Heracles' wife Deianeira realizes too late that she has acted impetuously. Years earlier, Nessus, a centaur who died at Heracles'

hands, gave Deianeira a love potion to use if her husband's affections ever strayed. Now the hero's wife learns that her husband prefers the lovely captive Iole to her. Therefore, she unwittingly poisons Heracles with the "love potion." When clues lead her to suspect—with dawning horror—what she has done, she tells the chorus, "I don't advise anyone to proceed with zeal when the matter is unclear" (*Women of Trachis* 669-670). Her own ill-advised haste causes her husband's death. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, another death occurs because of ill-advised haste: Theseus believes his wife Phaedra's accusations against Hippolytus and curses his son, a favorite of Artemis. The goddess appears to rebuke Theseus for acting without full knowledge of the situation: "You have appeared evil both to him and to me: you didn't wait for assurance or a prophet's voice; you didn't prove your case or give enough time for examination, but all too quickly uttered a curse and killed your child" (*Hippolytus* 1320-1324). The words of a goddess are, of course, even more authoritative than those of the chorus. She reinforces the sense of restraint espoused by her twin brother, Apollo, who reminds mortals that anything in excess leads to danger.

It is all too easy to dismiss the aforementioned scenarios as having no bearing on our own lives because of their fantastical elements: centaurs, love potions, cameo appearances from goddesses. However, we have all worried before having all the facts and spoken without knowing the full situation. Such is the case in Euripides' *Helen*: Having heard a rumor of her husband Menelaus' death, Helen resolves to die herself. The advice Euripides' chorus gives the famous beauty, therefore, is perhaps more relatable: "After learning the situation, then you can have joy or sorrow about your fate. Before you know anything certain, how will grieving help you?" (*Helen* 320-323).

Unlike other characters in tragedy, Helen heeds the chorus's warning and prevents any needless disaster.[39] Learning from her, we, too, can save ourselves hours of anguish by listening to the advice of trauma specialists like Edward Hickling, who counsels, "But, it is possible to see how by being human, we react in ways that we can too soon leap to conclusions, not because of facts, but because of what we think are the facts" (230). When we analyze a situation carefully before acting, we are practicing the ancient virtue of *sōphrōsunē*.

The counterpart to careful action, of course, is careful speech, a description of which is encapsulated in a line of choral advice from Sophocles' *Electra*: "In such matters consideration[40] serves as ally to speaker and listener alike" (990-991). In this scene Electra and her sister Crysothemis discuss the funeral offerings they have just discovered on their father's tomb. Electra, viewing this as an auspicious sign of her brother's return, attempts to persuade her less zealous sister to exact revenge on her father's murderer, Aegisthus. The chorus, as is their wont, advises meditation before action. In Aeschylus' version of the Atreus myth cycle, Orestes, who has endured a concatenation of tragic situations, exemplifies the way such events can shape one's manner of talking. He has just murdered his own mother in requital for her murder of Orestes' father, Agamemnon—an act committed as revenge against Agamemnon for having sacrificed their daughter Iphegenia. The gods are forced to intervene in this intractable problem, family therapy not yet being an option. Standing before Apollo, Athena, and a chorus of avenging spirits, Orestes says humbly, "With misery as my teacher, I have learned when it is proper to speak—and likewise when to remain silent"

[39] Such forestalling of disaster has prompted critics to suggest that some Euripides plays be classified as melodramas rather than as tragedies (Kitto 311).
[40] The Greek word is *prometheia*, the virtue after which Prometheus is named.

(*Eumenides* 276-279). Because Orestes has endured a lifetime's worth of tragedy in his short years, he speaks with restraint, careful lest he call down additional tragedy upon his head.

Such a deliberative approach to speech is approved by the chorus of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*. In this scene, Oedipus has just accused his brother-in-law (to use shorthand for a uniquely complex lineage) Creon of attempting to orchestrate Oedipus' downfall. Creon defends himself, explaining that his current situation suits him perfectly, especially when compared with the stresses of kingship. His calm logic impresses the chorus, whose members remark, "He has spoken well, lord, like a man who is careful not to fall. For those who think quickly are liable to falter" (*Oedipus Tyrranos* 616-617). Creon, for his part, has proved himself worthy of their approbation. When Oedipus presses Creon to explain Tiresias's oracular pronouncements, Creon replies simply, "I don't know; and when I do not understand something prefer to remain silent about it" (*Oedipus Tyrranos* 569). The phrasing is reminiscent of Orestes' pronouncement in *Eumenides*.

Kingship, perhaps, does not readily foster the virtue of *prometheia* (forethought), as the Creon of Sophocles' *Antigone* evinces none of this humble hesitation. However, Sophocles' portrayal of Theseus in the *Colonus* adheres to the paradigm of a wise and cautious statesman. When Oedipus is impatiently beseeching the Athenian king to receive him, Theseus responds patiently, "Teach me, then. I shouldn't speak without understanding" (*Oedipus at Colonus* 592-594). Undoubtedly there is a touch of hagiography—and pride—in the Athenian tragedian's portrayal of Athens' legendary king. Nonetheless, the scene does adhere to the tragic ideal of a rational man who

practices restraint and careful speech. This tragic ideal of a rational aritstocracy also appears in Euripides' version of the cycle of Oedipus stories, *Phoenician Women*. In an early scene Jocasta tries in vain to prevent her sons (and Oedipus' sons) Polynices and Eteocles from warring against each other for the cursed throne of Thebes. She tells Polynices, "Wait a minute. Justice doesn't follow haste. Quite the contrary: cautious speeches most often yield something wise" (452-453). Less experienced with personal tragedy than Orestes, Polynices does not yield to his mother's warnings. He chooses haste, and therefore chooses destruction.

Restraint in speech is most difficult—and most necessary—during periods of intense anger, a point that psychologists emphasize as much as the tragedians do. Christopher Peterson explains, "Optimal self-regulation of emotions does not mean suspending our feelings, good or bad, but only taking charge of them" (144). Being human, we will experience anger, but we have control over how that anger manifests. The extant tragedies furnish numerous examples of characters indulging their anger, but they also provide us with examples of laudable self-control. As usual, the chorus articulates the philosophy meant to guide us. In Euripides' *Andromache*, Hector's widow is employed in the house of Neoptolemus, son of the late Achilles. Andromache and Neoptolemus have a child together. Now that Neoptolemus has wed Menelaus' daughter Hermione, Andromache and her son present a problem. In an early scene in the play, Peleus, Neoptolemus' grandfather, and Menelaus have a heated argument about Andromache's presence in the household. The chorus intervenes to tell them, "Out of an unimportant matter the tongue contrives great strife. Those mortals who are wise guard carefully against this, lest they quarrel with loved ones" (642-644). When the two men

continue to argue vociferously, the chorus moves from generalization to imperative: "Stop this rash talk now—by far by the best thing—so the two of you don't fall together" (691-692). Disaster is staved off only with the *deus-ex-machina* intervention of Peleus' goddess-wife Thetis. Otherwise, all-too-human anger would have precipitated calamity. Unfortunately, no such intervention occurs in another Euripides play, *Hippolytus*. Here Theseus (elsewhere depicted in tragedy as a model of restraint) curses his son Hippolytus, whom he believes guilty of raping Phaedra, Theseus' wife. Succumbing to his rage, Theseus curses his son, using one of the "favors" his father Poseidon bestowed on him. The chorus is horrified by this, skipping over their habitual aphoristic statements and proceeding right to commands: "My lord, by the gods, retract your prayer! You will

know your error soon enough! Believe me!" (891-892). Theseus, in the throes of anger, does not retract his prayer; therefore, Hippolytus dies. While Artemis does appear to survey the scene with cold eyes and rebuke Theseus, she does not—cannot—undo the damage wrought by Theseus' curse.

With the death of Theseus' son, the *Hippoytus* functions like a *reduction-ad-absurdum* example of the danger angry words can pose; in most cases, angry exchanges are portrayed as needlessly exacerbating already painful situations. The chorus expresses this idea at the end of Sophocles' *Ajax*, when Menelaus refuses to bury the disgraced titular hero. Ajax's half-brother Teucer responds with a volley of insults, after which the chorus observes, "I don't approve of such speech during hard times. Harsh words—just but severe—sting" (1118-1120). In Euripides' *Alcestis*, Admetus has a similarly vitriolic exchange with his father, Pheres. As the play opens, Admetus' wife Alcestis stands at the threshold of death: she has agreed to sacrifice her life in exchange for that of Admetus.

High-level connections evidently being as useful in ancient literature as in contemporary life, Admetus once received a dubious favor from Apollo, whereby someone could take his place at his fated time of death. When this time arrived, only his wife proved willing to make the requisite sacrifice. The play begins immediately after this agreement. Admetus, mad with grief, lashes out at his father Pheres, whom the son views as treacherous for not having volunteered to make the trade himself. The chorus, as usual, serves as arbiter in this argument, mediating much as a family therapist would: "Admetus, you have enough misfortune already! Don't provoke a quarrel with your father!" (*Alcestis* 673-674). Admetus, unfortunately (and perhaps predictably), fails to heed this advice and reaps a harvest of abuse himself. Pheres, provoked beyond measure, tells his son, "You have insulted me too much. Because you have attacked me with such hot-tempered words, you will not depart unscathed" (679-680). Superimposed upon Admetus' already unbearable grief, then, is a bitter argument with his father: he has brought this additional pain upon himself. Now the chorus rebukes Pheres: "All too many evil words have been spoken, both now and before. Old man, stop abusing your son!" (706-707). Imperative verbs heighten the urgency of the request, as the audience is accustomed to hearing the chorus speak abstractly at first and progressing to direct commands only in rare instances. A messenger in Eurpides' *Hippolytus* offers similar advice to Theseus, albeit with less urgent phrasing: "Reflect on it. If you want my advice, you will not be cruel to your unfortunate child" (1263-1264). That this advice goes unheeded heightens the cathartic impact of the tragedy; after all, Theseus had only to listen to the messenger, and his son would be alive. The wisest among the audience

members hear the command directed at them as well: do not add more pain to an already painful situation by arguing with family members.

The tragedies do liberally depict inappropriate communication among characters, but they also provide some guidance for how characters should interact appropriately. Agamemnon, who elsewhere in tragedy hardly serves as a paragon of discretion, shows commendable self-restraint in *Iphigenia at Aulis*. As the tragedy opens, he is reeling from the news that he will have to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis. If he does not, the Greek fleet cannot sail to Troy. His brother Menelaus, furious at Agamemnon's hesitation, engages in a personal attack. The Greek commander responds with measured gravitas; unlike Admetus or Pheres, he does not return to launch his own verbal missiles in counterattack but addresses Menelaus with logical arguments. He opens the speech by saying, "I want to reproach you in the right spirit and briefly, not staring you down shamefully or speaking excessively. Rather, I will be reasonable and brotherly; a good man wants to be respectful" (378-380). The chorus approves this speech by noting its difference in tone from that of Menelaus. The effect of this speech on Menelaus is immediate and striking: the man begins lamenting, in a markedly more subdued way, his lack of familial support. Curiously, each brother ends by changing the other's mind, something that can only be done when they address each other calmly and rationally. This dual change in perspective also lends the plot additional complexity, which renders it more intriguing. Perhaps most importantly, it allows the Trojan War to occur.

The tragedians suggest that even extreme suffering does not give one license to abuse another person. In the annals of suffering, only Philoctetes can compete with

Oedipus: his shipmates abandoned him on a solitary island because his festering wound proved too unpleasant a traveling companion. In Sophocles' play, those erstwhile shipmates have returned because Philoctetes—and more specifically, the bow Heracles gave him—is needed to defeat Troy. He rejects their invitation to return to the city, reviling them. The chorus, while sympathetic to the unfortunate man, remind him, "It is right for a man to speak on his own behalf, and not right to respond with spiteful, hurtful speech" (*Philoctetes* 1140-1142). The implication is that more can be accomplished—enemies reconciled, compromises made—without such incriminations.

Euripides adds another piece of advice for handling conflict: focus on the issue at hand rather than raising the specters of old quarrels. Trying to mediate between her warring sons, Eteocles and Polynices,[41] Jocasta tells them, "I want to give you two a piece of wise advice. When a friend is angry with his friend and meets him to discuss the matter, he should only focus on what brought him there, not mentioning any prior issues" (*Phoenician Women* 460-464). The young men fail to take her advice, and they both perish by the play's end. In the midst of such strife, a dispassionate spectator has the greatest likelihood of making an accurate judgment of the matter at hand. In a particularly striking instance, a messenger dares to judge the actions of a god. Euripides' *Andromache* ends with the death of Neoptolemus, whom Apollo slays. This act is in recompense for words Neoptolemus spoke years earlier: he blamed the god for his father's death.[42] The messenger muses, "Like a worthless man, he mentioned ancient quarrels. So how could he be wise?" (*Andromache* 1164-1165). It is bad enough that the messenger compares Apollo to a man—an unthinkable violation—but the man in the

[41] That Polynices' name means "many quarrels" in Greek does not bode well for her efforts.
[42] In fairness, Apollo did guide the arrow that struck Achilles' heel. Neoptolemus' crime was to voice his displeasure at the god's action.

simile is a worthless man. And why would the messenger make such a comparison? Because Apollo succumbed to the all-too-human temptation of harboring a grudge for a man's words. The messenger expresses contempt for Apollo[43] because such behavior does not befit a deity. Ideally, neither does it befit us mortals.

What, then, should we do to conquer impulses to address others angrily? According to Theseus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, we must gain possession of our own thoughts. When Oedipus tells the Athenian king of his fears that men will forcibly remove him from Athens' sacred environs, Theseus dismisses this as an unviable threat. Reasonable, self-controlled men can surely come to agreement in a civilized manner. The esteemed king of Athens tells the fallen king of Thebes, "Many threats and angry words have been uttered in vain, but whenever the mind is self-possessed, threats disappear" (658-660). S*ōphrōsunē,* then, serves to prevent destructive speech before it occurs.

As manifested in speech and in general, anger is portrayed as incalculably dangerous. For one thing, it dispels that most Athenian virtue, the one the Delphic Temple commands its citizens to practice: moderation.[44] The chorus, a cautious group that often advocates a moderate path, tells Andromache, "Your quickness to anger conquers your ability to discern[45] and banishes moderation from your mind" (*Andromache* 364-365). Her verbal assault on Menelaus, whose daughter Hermione plans to wed Andromache's paramour Neoptolemus, is not "wrong" in the ethical sense; rather, it is unwise in the sense of contrary to her best interests. If she provokes Menelaus to anger himself, the result for Andromache can be nothing but disastrous. In other plays, too, anger is described as self-destructive. When Oedipus rails against Creon, who is

[43] One imagines that the messenger's next trip to Delphi will not end well.
[44] Along with the maxim "know thyself," "nothing too much" was inscribed at Delphi.
[45] I translate the Greek word *diagnosis* as "ability to discern."

allegedly plotting against him—and Tiresias, *in absentia*—Creon remarks, "It's clear that you are yielding hostilely, for you are severe in your anger. Such temperaments cause most pain to themselves, and justly" (*Oedipus Tyrannos* 673-675). Oedipus illustrates this principle with staggering concreteness when he turns his anger against himself, blinding himself and banishing himself from Thebes. The more mature Oedipus of the *Colonus* admits to having indulged his temper excessively in his youth, citing in particular the extreme punishments he contrived for himself: "In time, when my distress had mellowed, I learned that my anger was excessive in punishing my former errors" (437-439). Sufficient time is necessary to remedy anger, as Oedipus demonstrates.

Unfortunately, anger prompts hasty action done in a haze of emotion—and leads to years of regret. One of the most spectacular instances of blazing anger in Greek tragedy is that of Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, who murders her husband Agamemnon upon his return from Troy. In his *Electra*, Euripides depicts a mellower Clytemnestra years after the crime, much as Sophocles depicts a mellower Oedipus. She confesses to Electra, "How miserable I am from my resolutions! I took my rage against my husband further than I should have" (*Electra* 1109-1110). She is vastly different from her Aeschlyean incarnation. But we, too, might be vastly different from a self that yields to anger. And we, too, might have little left but regret. Citing Buddhist influences, Peter Trachenburg reminds us that "…the most effective antidote to defiled emotions is simply not to act on them" (488). We must give ourselves that time to heal from our anger, which must indeed be regarded as an affliction. When Creon is enraged over the burial of Polynices, he receives similar advice from his son Haemon: "Let go of your anger and let it transform. Even a younger person can give sound judgment. It's optimal if a man

possesses knowledge himself. Since that doesn't always happen, though, he can learn from others who advise him well" (*Antigone* 718-723). Because Creon will not listen to reason, preferring instead to feed the fires of his rage, Haemon himself becomes a victim of his father's anger.

Throughout the extant tragedies, characters routinely fail to listen to reason, as Haemon counsels Creon to do. These displays of willfulness notwithstanding, the skill of listening well is praised and advocated by chorus members and characters alike. In Euripides' *Children of Heracles*, the hero's descendants are persecuted by his cousin Eurystheus, who oversaw the twelve *athloi,* or labors. When the children seek refuge in Athens, Eurytheus' herald outlines the reasons King Demophon should refuse to offer them sanctuary. After his speech, the chorus remarks, "Who can judge what is right or recognize what is fair until he has truly learned both sides' stories?" (*Children of Heracles* 179-180). The word used for story here is *logos,* a word rich with nuance. Christopher Pelling draws our attention to two of its interconnected meanings: "*Logos* was here a key concept: *logos* in the sense, as we would translate it, of 'reason,' the capacity to think things through; and particularly *logos* in our sense of 'speech'" (83). When characters listen fairly to their opponents' stories, they are concurrently listening to reason. Christopher Peterson cites this ability as an indispensable trait for anyone hoping to lead a successful life: "We have also learned that we need to tell students about appreciative listening, how to listen carefully to what is said and then to respond in a way that builds on what has been conveyed as opposed to disagreeing with it or dismissing it" (27). Citizens of twenty-first-century America benefit as much from a reminder to listen carefully as did their fifth-century counterparts in Athens.

In such a place, where spirited debates were part of society, characters depicted by Athenian tragedians readily accept the reality that they cannot convince an opponent without some *agon*, or verbal struggle; they ask only to be heard. As Pelling reminds us, "This was a rhetorical culture, one in which listening to speeches—performances—in the assembly or law-court was another central part of citizenly behavior" (83). It is not surprising, then, that Athenian tragedians should reference the debating protocols of those institutions, such as they were. When Oedipus is lambasting Creon for his yet-unproven disloyalty, Creon references those unwritten protocols: "Listen impartially to my response, and then decide *after* (italics mine) hearing it" (*Oedipus Tyrannos* 543-544). They might be opposing lawyers in court. Ironically, Creon's son, Haemon, poses a question on the same theme to the Creon of Sophocles' *Antigone*: "You want to say something but hear nothing?" (757). In *Antigone*, Creon is older but not wiser. In fact, he is markedly more unreasonable, suggesting that experience and not time per se ages a man. The careful listening absent from these *agones* is a skill valued off the stage and outside the political arena; indeed, it is a universal value, to the extent that a value can be universal. The skill can be cultivated through practice, but tragedy may hasten its arrival. Edward Hickling, speaking about the impact his personal tragedies have had on him, observes, "I believe they also helped me become a better psychologist, to listen better and to respond more fully to those I work with" (84). Learning to listen well is indeed the indispensable partner of careful speech—and one more type of wisdom that tragedy can bring.

Along with anger, willful stubbornness precludes mindful listening. This vice is the chief hamartia of *Antigone's* Creon. Tiresias, the blind prophet, tries to warn the king

against pursuing vengeance, instead advising him to yield: "Making mistakes is part of being human. When a man does err—if he is not insensible or unfeeling—he tries to make amends for the trouble, not remain stubborn. Willfulness will earn someone the reputation for stupidity[46]" (1023-1038). By the play's end, Creon would earn a reputation for something far worse than commonplace stupidity: he is unyielding to the point of rendering himself deaf to threats. Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's would-be bridegroom, prophesies that his father's stubbornness will kill him along with Antigone: "Then she will die, and in dying will destroy someone else" (751). Instead of examining Haemon's cryptic proclamation, Creon continues on his course of anger, promising his son, "Fetch the hateful thing so that she may die—right here, right now—before her bridegroom's eyes!" (760-761). The same playwright, Sophocles, would make the same character, Creon, urge Oedipus to give up his stubbornness: "If you consider stubbornness without sense a valuable possession, you're not thinking straight" (*Oedipus Tyrannos* 549-550). Oedipus is no more open to the advice than Creon is to Haemon's council. On the surface, these two Creons might strike the reader as an artistic inconsistency. However, observation alone shows us that people behave differently at different points in their lives. In the throes of emotion, of course, people are less likely to behave rationally. Or, as Shakespeare puts it, "One man in his time plays many parts" (*As You Like It* II.7.141). This time, Creon will invite calamity into his life with his stubbornness, not Oedipus.

It is not only the tragic art but also nature itself that teaches us how to yield to circumstance. In both *Antigone* and *Ajax*, Sophocles underscores his themes with similes

[46] The word used for stupidity is *skaiotēs*, which carries connotations of mischief and awkwardness along with stupidity. The root comes from the Greek word *skaios*, meaning "left," much as our word sinister derives from that direction.

that compare human nature with nature proper. When Haemon tries to convince his father to relent, he invites Creon to take his cue from trees:

> Don't cling to this one disposition, imagining that you alone are correct. Anyone who thinks he alone possesses the ability to speak or think reasonably is revealed, in fact, to possess nothing. There is nothing shameful in a man—even a wise man—learning something and being flexible. You can see this with trees: those that yield to the river's torrents preserve their branches, while those that resist lose even their roots. (*Antigone* 705-714)

The first few sentences suggest the futility of human reason and even hint at nihilism: reason doesn't exist, at least not for humanity, whose hapless members wrongly suppose they possess it. But the latter sentences of the speech negate the former, confirming that humans can, in fact, gain wisdom. And flexibility is an indispensable component of wisdom. Because he does not behave like the trees in the simile, Creon's life is uprooted, like the unbending tree. This result is unsurprising; after all, he is behaving contrary to nature. As Kitto observes, "This idea of a universal rhythm, ruling in the physical world and in human affairs, alike, appears, too, in Sophocles' formal similes, and gives them additional weight; as for example when Haemon reminds Creon that it is the branches which bend that are not broken. This is not mere illustration, but an appeal to Law" (Kitto 146). Haemon, then, calls the universe itself as witness to lend credibility to his argument. Strangely, Creon himself uses a similar argument on Antigone several lines later, hoping to dissuade her from burying her brother: "But know that a spirit too unyielding will certainly fall, and the strongest iron—forged in fire, dry and hard—you will most often see brittle and shattered" (*Antigone* 473-476). Creon is so far gone in his stubbornness that he will not even listen to his own reasoning, let alone someone else's.

Like Creon, another of Sophocles' inflexible characters, Ajax, gives a paean to flexibility. Having just learned of his crime, Ajax repents his former fury and gives a poetic account of nature's capacity for yielding:

> Even the most marvelous and powerful things submit to authorities; snowy winters cede to fruitful summers, and night's eternal cycle retires so the light of day and her white horses can shine. The blast of terrible winds stills the sighing sea, and omnipotent sleep loosens the binds of his prisoners; he doesn't hold them forever. How, then, can we not learn how to be sensible? (669-683)

Just as Creon does not make the connection between his stubbornness and Antigone's, Ajax does not consider himself part of the nature he describes so eloquently. The terrible blasts of his own anger have subsided, but he stubbornly clings to his anger, turning it toward himself. The result is his death by suicide. Sophocles seems to suggest that humans doom themselves to misery when they follow such an unyielding course. Likewise, the chorus of Euripides' *Hippolytus* makes a pronouncement that recalls Sophocles' similes. In fact, it equates a flexible nature with happiness. The chorus pronounces judgment on Hippolytus' chastity (which is extreme and stubborn—and therefore unwise) and prays for a more flexible temperament than his: "I wish destiny might answer my prayer by giving me happiness and a mind undefiled by pain! I wouldn't have unyielding notions or even incorrect ones, but a disposition that adapts readily to each day—thus would I always be happy in life!" (1106-1118). Although the tragedy offers no evidence that such a disposition ultimately brings happiness, both Hippolytus and Theseus serve as cautionary tales on the danger of stubbornness.

Sōphrōsunē and tragedy are interrelated: personal tragedy will hasten the trait's development, but exercising timely *sōphrōsunē* can forestall tragedy. Therefore, we would do well to cultivate *sōphrōsunē* in our everyday lives with careful speech, attentive

listening, and measured forethought before the specter of tragedy arises. Then, perhaps, we may conduct ourselves with grace. For all his failings in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the Creon of Euripides' *Phoenician Women* offers advice no less valuable now than it was to the original spectators of fifth-century Athens: "Think it through, if you are wise!" (735) Whatever "it" is, any situation benefits inestimably from sound judgment.

Chapter 5

A HUMBLE AND MODERATE LIFE

Any observer of human behavior will note our widespread tendency to covet what we don't have and to fail to appreciate what we do. This trait is recognized in our folk wisdom and even in our pop music. Recently, however, Positive Psychologists have explored this phenomenon in earnest and sought to debunk, through research, the misapprehension that riches and power bring happiness. Not surprisingly, given the Delphic maxims, Athenian tragedians concur with Positive Psychologists on the necessity to avoid excess, citing moderation and humility as the ingredients for a happy life. Like *sōphrōsunē,* internalization of this truth is a strength of temperance, one of those character traits that "protect us from excess" (Peterson 144). Through envy and greed—both for power and for riches—numerous characters in tragedy destroy their lives and serve as negative examples for contemporary Americans who unwisely do likewise.

Even people who know next to nothing about Greek Tragedy have heard of hubris, which the Liddel & Scott lexicon defines as "wanton violence," "insolence," "overweening pride," and "lewdness" (1841). Despite the varying shades of nuance in these definitions, all hint at a singularly unattractive quality. Hubris, in all its manifestations, suggests excess and lack of proportion. Douglas Cairns describes the trait as the "antonym" of *sōphrosunē,* explaining that hubris "regularly denotes ways of conducting oneself that demonstrate an inflated sense of one's own importance and a corresponding disregard for others' claims" (313). His wording is similar to one of the phrases Christopher Peter used to describe a universal character trait, modesty / humility:

"not regarding oneself as more special than one is" (Peterson 144). Kitto offers *phronēsis*, or wisdom, as a second alternative to hubris's antithesis: "*Phronēsis* implies knowing what you are, knowing your place in the world, being able to take the wide view, with a due sense of proportion" (149). If *sōphrosunē* is a social virtue, then hubris is a social vice: those who practice hubris tend to destroy others along with themselves.

It is not surprising that tragedy's kings are particularly susceptible to this trait, given their access to power and the sycophantic tendencies of royalty's inner circle. In Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, the chorus remarks on this formula: "Whenever destiny is favorable to bad men, they become arrogant—as if they will always prosper!" (463-464). However, neither power nor followers can protect kings from the disastrous consequences of hubris. Aeschylus explores the dangers of this quality in his earliest surviving play, *Persians*. King Xerxes has just suffered a spectacular defeat at Salamis; in fact, the Greek victory is so stunning that Darius, Xerxes' father, is summoned from Hades to weigh in on the situation. He blames Xerxes' hubris for the disaster: "The piles of bodies, now voiceless in death, will nonetheless serve as visible reminders to mortals three generations hence—reminders of this: that humans must not think themselves wiser than they actually are. The seed of [Xerxes'] hubris has yielded a crop of delusion. Now we are all reaping a harvest of tears" (818-824). Xerxes calls down irrevocable ruin because he has transcended the limits established for mortals. Namely, his invasion of Greece necessitated the construction of a land-bridge between Europe and Asia, connecting what the gods had divided. As Kitto puts it, "The poet, wanting a clear symbol for hubris, uses the sharp distinction between Europe and Asia; here are the bounds laid down by Heaven" (38). Xerxes also violates the tenets of Greek wisdom

established at Delphi: he failed to know himself (as mortal) and behaved excessively. As Euripides' Helen says in her name play, "Daring the impossible is not the province of a wise man" (811). This suspicion of overweening pride is a central tenet of the Athenian ethos, an outlook that may have something to do with the city's democratic structure. Peterson explains, "The values emphasized in a nation are strongly associated with its political and economic institutions" (188). In democratic Athens, equality was valued—at least theoretically—and tyranny despised. In opposition to the Athenian stance, modern Americans tend not to fear the trait; indeed, the can-do spirit of Xerxes' land bridge campaign would doubtless win accolades and inspire envy. Christopher Peterson, in his assessment of Americans' most prevalent values, has discovered (through subjects' self-reporting) that "strengths of temperance are infrequently endorsed and seldom praised" in the mainstream United States (144). Because the ancient and modern value systems diverge at this juncture, we arguably have even more to learn from the tragedians on this point.

One facet of hubris is overestimating one's own power to control the world, as we see with Xerxes. According to the doctrine of suffering as set out by Greek tragedians, human beings are wise to recognize their limited influence on a cosmic scale. As discussed in Chapter Two, "The Suffering of Mortals," the Greek tragedians emphasized the ephemeral nature of human fortune. Power, like everything else, is fleeting. In Sophocles' *Ajax*, no less a figure than the goddess of wisdom herself reminds the audience of this principle. Athena tells Odysseus, "Don't bother taking pride in your strength or wealth. A single day can raise or lower the scale of mortals' possessions" (128-132). Ajax illustrates the principle starkly: in one day he falls in stature from the

Greeks' strongest living warrior to a disgraced man constrained by fate to commit suicide. King Pentheus of Euripides' *Bacchae* experiences a similar change in status. When the play opens, Pentheus has not yet brought about his destruction by refusing the recognize Dionysus as a legitimate deity. The long-suffering prophet Tiresias, accustomed to being ignored by tragic heroes, tells him, "Listen to me, Pentheus: don't be so confident that worldly power has value for mortals, and don't suppose you are wise if your notions are diseased" (309-312). Words, however, are easy to dismiss; divine retribution, impossible. At the end of the play, Pentheus' grandfather Cadmus suffers for his progeny's sins: he becomes the visible symbol of worldly power brought low, telling the chorus, "Now I will be cast from my home, dishonored—I, the great Cadmus, who sowed and harvested the Theban race" (*Bacchae* 1313-1315). The tragedians return to the symbol of the fallen royal leader to exemplify the frailty of human power. In another Euripides play, *Andromache*, Hector's widow warns Menelaus not to count too much on his power: "As you are great in Sparta, so I was in Troy. If I'm faring badly now, don't gloat about it. This might be your lot" (461-463). She warns not only Menelaus but all of us that we might experience a similar fate.

The warnings against hubristic behavior are paired with advice that all people would be wise to follow: be content with what you already possess instead of overreaching to acquire more. In Aeschylus' *Persians*, Darius's spirit continues his meditations on the disaster after rebuking his son for excessive hubris: "No one should be so proud that he squanders the good fortune he already possesses, desiring some elusive bliss" (823-827). This tragic flaw, which prompts us to devalue what we actually possess and imagine that something else will complete our happiness, seems ingrained in human

nature. Kitto, in his own meditation on Xerxes' behavior, remarks, "It is nothing supernatural; it is disastrously natural" (41). The chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* makes a similar observation in their ode that immediately precedes the king's death: "Even when they're flourishing, mortals are insatiable" (1331-1332). They continue with ominous musings on Agamemnon's success at Troy and the penalty he might pay for deaths he wrought there. Like Xerxes, Agamemnon suffers for his hubristic military actions. If any formula can be applied to Greek tragedy, it is that hubris leads inevitably to nemesis, or retribution. It may come in the form of supernatural justice or, as Kitto phrases it, "disastrously natural" consequences.

A desire to accumulate wealth also prompts people to risk losing what they already possess so that they might gain more riches. Throughout the tragedies, various insightful characters comment on the transitory nature of wealth and advise the greedy to abandon whatever foolhardy enterprise promises to add to their material prosperity. For example, in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, Oedipus' widow Jocasta tries to dissuade her son Eteocles from fighting his brother Polynices.[47] Presently Eteocles possesses half the kingdom of Thebes and, most importantly, his life. After praising the virtues of equality in wealth and social standing, Jocasta asks him,

> Do you want to undergo many hardships because you have many possessions in your house? What good would that do? It would have the name of good only. "Enough" suffices for the reasonable. Mortals do not acquire possessions to be truly theirs; rather, we keep the gods' property and attend to it. When the gods want it back, they take it back. Wealth is not certain but evanescent. (552-558)

[47] Eteocles and his brother Polynices swore an oath to share the kingdom of Thebes, each ruling for a year and then relinquishing power to his brother. When Eteocles' year had ended, he refused to yield the throne and Polynices raised an army to fight him. The *Phoenician Women* concerns the fabled battle of the Seven against Thebes, covered in Aeschylus' play of that same title.

Half the royal wealth of Thebes certainly constitutes "enough" by any reasonable estimation, but Eteocles fails to listen to his mother's logic. Predictably, Eteocles' willingness to gamble away his good fortune ends badly. Joscasta's counsel is more than intuitively wise: the empirical findings of psychologists support it. In writing *The High Price of Materialism*, for example, Tim Kasser spent a decade studying materialist pursuits and concluded that such activity makes people unhappy, depressed, and anxious (Peterson 181). In the case of Eteocles, the penalty is even more dire: his grasping leads to his own death and the death of his brother. For others, such pursuits may result only in lost time (but then, time is priceless).

Research done in Positive Psychology reveals that such plans to acquire great wealth, even if they end successfully, do not deliver the happiness they seem to promise. After all, according to Peterson, "material affluence is at best a small ingredient of the good life" (291). The value of material prosperity is not to be dismissed outright—such a view would be as illogical as Eteocles' view that doubling his material wealthy is worth risking his life—but regarded with moderation. Another of Euripides' wise old women, the nurse in *Medea*, utters this prayer after seeing her royal mistress wallowing in misery: "May I never have a wealthy life that distresses me or riches that pain my heart" (598-599). She recognizes that wealth can only serve to enhance an already happy life. Conversely, the greed that leads Eteocles astray is described elsewhere in Euripides as a kind of madness: gold and riches seduce mortals; once attained, they induce their possessor to commit injustice. In Euripides' *Heracles*, the chorus looks on as Thebes' unlawful ruler, Lycus, threatens to kill Heracles' family while he is off completing his Labors. Thebes' throne has yet again been seized by a greedy tyrant. The chorus

observes, “Gold and good fortune leads mortal minds astray, bringing unjust power. For no one dares to consider Time as he disregards custom and indulges his lawlessness—and shatters wealth’s dark chariot” (774-780). A reciprocal relationship exists between wealth and power: possession of power facilitates the acquisition of wealth, and possession of wealth confers power. Lust for both—or either—can therefore be considered as manifestations of the same mania.

The most effective way to temper greed and hubris is to cultivate humility and modesty (Peterson 144). The first step to achieving humility is the recognition that “fate subdues even the strong,” as Theseus tells his friend Heracles (*Heracles* 1396). In his *Book of Calamities*, Peter Trachtenburg reminds us that this truism is not a truth confined to Greek tragedy but one that encompasses all of humanity: “One characteristic common to all suffering I write about is that it entails a loss of power, at times even the power to frame one’s anguish in words” (31). Physical strength is no defense against fate, a reality exemplified by the fallen heroes Heracles and Ajax. Because tragedy is concerned with dramatic reversals of fortune, the heroes must, by necessity, be blessed by fortune as the plays open. In this case, Heracles and Ajax are both blessed with superhuman strength, and it follows logically that their reversals of fortune would entail a loss of that power. Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis* details the death of Heracles at the hand of his unwitting wife, Deianeira, who believes she is simply administering a love potion. In his agony, Heracles cries out to his son, “Pity me, pitiful as I am in so many ways, wailing and crying out like a girl. No one—no one—can say that he saw me doing so before; I didn’t even sigh when beset by evils! But now, in such condition, I’m found to be weak wretch” (1070-1074). The most powerful of all Greek heroes—one hitherto immune to

tears—is brought low by fate and weeps. How, then, can we expect to escape a similar transformation? Heracles' tears become a symbol of the humble—and human—attitude the hero has been forced to adopt. Superhuman demigod no longer, Heracles observes, "Truly, I have experienced myriad toils. I left none unfulfilled, but never did my eyes become fonts of tears. I didn't believe I would ever reach this point of shedding tears. But now, I suppose, I must become a slave of fate" (*Heracles* 1353-1357). Ajax, second of the Greek warriors after Achilles, also learns that his strength was something of an illusion: it endured as long as fate allowed. Like Heracles, Ajax weeps for the first time and must subsequently reevaluate his identity. His concubine Tecmessa tells the chorus, "He always held that weeping was the province of the cowardly and melancholy man. … Now, felled by bad fortune, he sits no words, no food, no drink" (319-320; 322-323). Ajax will not live long enough to integrate his tears into his conception of himself; nor will Heracles. For the short time they continue to live, they will remain strangers to their former selves. Peter Trachtenburg explains that misfortune often renders us strangers to ourselves and others:

> Even people we know and love become strangers when they suffer. I think of my father on his deathbed, his moans so weak they were almost inaudible. He always had a bad back, and as a little boy I used to sit by his bedside and watch in pity as he lay staring miserably at the ceiling. But his pain now inspired not just pity but horror; it was cracking open his personality, his humanity, and exposing those things as brittle shells. I tried to look at what was pulsing among their shards but couldn't bear to for very long, and so I looked away. (578)

Like Trachtenburg's father, Heracles and Ajax seem to "crack open," revealing that they are human after all.

In addition to possessing good fortune, the characters of tragedy must also be noble, in part because the plots must be "elevated" (per Aristotle) and in part because the

reversals of fortune will be more pronounced. As Halliwell explains, "Tragic characters, for one thing, should be 'better than people of the present': not idealized prototypes of humanity but (mythically) magnified figures whose 'great renown and prosperity' (1453a10)[48] makes them especially vulnerable to acute shifts of fortune" (Halliwell 403). Greek tragedy teems with examples of high-ranking characters made humble despite their pedigrees. Heracles has perhaps the most high-ranking father a human possibly can have: Zeus, called "father of gods and men" in epic. Bewildered, the dying Heracles wonders aloud how one with such an illustrious lineage could be so vulnerable as he is on his deathbed: "With no strength, torn to shreds, I am undone by blind fate—I, called the son of the best mother, proclaimed son of Zeus among the stars!" (*Women of Trachis* 1103-1106). Likewise, in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Hecuba learns how insufficient a bulwark a noble ancestry is against the tide of Fate. She proclaims to the chorus of her fellow Trojan women, "Greatness of my ancestors, now humbled, what a nothing you turned out to be!" (108-109). The word "humble" has etymological roots in the Latin word *humus*, meaning ground; humbling, therefore, suggests a lowering or even a prostration.

In another Euripides play, *Suppliant Women*, the king of Argos prostrates himself before Theseus, the king of Athens. Adrastus hopes to persuade Theseus to come to his aid. Creon, who ascends to the throne immediately following the Seven against Thebes expedition, refuses burial to those who fought with Polynices against the city. With him are the suppliant women, mothers of the unburied warriors. Having been defeated, Adrastus wisely recognizes his inferior position and adopts a suitably humble tone with Theseus: "King of Athens, I consider it shameful to fall on the ground and clasp your knees in supplication: I am an old king, once fortunate. All the same, I have to yield to

[48] Here Halliwell directs us to the relevant passage in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

circumstance" (164-167). Misfortune, it seems, begets humility, even in those kings formerly imbued with hubristic stubbornness. Such is certainly the case with Oedipus, whose starkly changed personality strikes the reader immediately in the *Colonus*. In the opening speech, he tells his daughter Antigone, "I ask for little and receive less than a little, but that is enough for me. My misfortunes, my noble nature and time, which has long been my constant companion, have taught me to bear this condition" (5-8). Compare this man to the stubborn and confident ruler in the *Tyrannos*, and they hardly seem the same person. In these portrayals, humility may not initially come across as a particularly desirable or attractive virtue. After all, no one would change places with Oedipus, and Adrastus must grovel before a more powerful ruler. However, Oedipus' attitude is the crucial thing. He is serene; he is satisfied with little. Moreover, his nobility, far from being a burdensome reminder of past glory, has prepared him for his changed state. It is no longer an external status because he has internalized his nobility.

Perhaps because Greek tragedy habitually shows the downfall of those in high station, an immoderately blessed life is described in the plays as dangerous and therefore undesirable. In the *Antigone* the chorus articulates this viewpoint: "Then, now and always this rule applies: for every mortal, ruin accompanies a great lifestyle" (610-614). Conversely, those enjoying moderate good fortune pass through life safely. In the same ode, the chorus goes on to praise the modest life: "The small man passes through his lifetime without disaster" (625). Having but a short distance to fall, the small man cannot experience the spectacular downfall of an Oedipus or a Creon. Nor will the ordinary man attract negative attention from gods. Extraordinary humans, on the other hand, often experience divine retribution for thinking themselves godlike. Ajax, for example,

incurred Athena's wrath by inviting her to assist other Greeks on the battlefield; he did not need her divine aid. The messenger in Sophocles' *Ajax* recounts this anecdote to Ajax's concubine, Tecmessa, interspersing commentary on the hero's situation: "Extraordinary lives aren't profitable; bad fortune from the gods casts them low, as the prophet once said—whoever was born with human nature but doesn't think like a human" (758-762). Ajax lacked the requisite humility to pass his life unscathed, and his pride proved his downfall.

The absence of noteworthy traits also confers a sort of valuable anonymity in society. That anonymity, in turn, brings freedom. In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Agamemnon speaks to an old man who is literally anonymous, in that he is not given a name. The Greek commander admits, "I envy you, old man; I envy any man who passes his life anonymously, without danger or fame. Much less do I envy those in honored positions" (16-19). Men in honored positions, like Agamemnon, are natural objects of envy and malice; people are all too willing to rejoice in the downfall of their superiors. The chorus of Sophocles' *Ajax* reflects on this truism after witnessing the titular hero's downfall: "If you shoot at great spirits, you will not miss your target. If someone spoke such things against me, no one would listen. Jealousy creeps on him who possesses what it wants" (154-161). The many (*hoi polloi* in Greek), therefore, are protected from jealousy by their lack of enviable qualities, while the great assume—rightly or wrongly—that all around them desire their elevated status. In the *Tyrannos*, Oedipus accuses the innocent Creon of intrigue, crying, "Wealth and power and surpassing cleverness in an admired life, what ill-will you generate! (380-382). Creon's logic cannot overcome Oedipus' suspicions. Jealousy, along with fear of it, is too engrained in the human condition. "The many" are

dangerous not only because of their ill-will, but because of their multitudinous opinions. No less a figure than Agamemnon, in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, concedes that commoners' judgments can shape a ruler's destiny: "The noble is also perilous; being honored, though sweet, brings pain when it comes. At times what is destined does not raise you up but rather overturns your life. At other times your downfall comes from the numerous, unappeasable opinions of men" (21-27). The great may rule over their subjects politically, but they themselves are subject to envy, gossip, and pressures. Later in the same play, Agamemnon again laments his exalted state when he is forced to sacrifice his daughter for the army's purposes: "Low birth has its uses. People who have it think little of crying, and they can speak freely! But anyone with a high-born nature is unlucky in these things. Our pride rules over our lives, and we are subjects to the multitude" (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 446-450).

The Agamemnon of the *Iphigenia* is strikingly different from Homer's Agamemnon. According to Bruno Snell, this difference comes from philosophical contemplation: "The man who has begun to examine and ponder his actions will find glory, honor, and all that used to guide human action dissolving into nothing" (403). The Homeric values of *timē* (honor) and *kleos* (glory) do not withstand philosophical scrutiny or self-awareness; they are too centered on the individual's claim to greatness at others' expense. By the time Euripides wrote *Iphigenia at Aulis* (circa 407), the Athenians had too much experience with democracy and philosophy to retain such Bronze Age ideologies. The crux of Snell's argument is that *Iphigenia at Aulis* represents "a transition from art to philosophy" (396). This marks the culmination of a tradition begun with Aeschylus: "As man's consciousness passed through these various stages [decision-

making as a source of "urgency and perplexity"], the result was that the characters of Euripides' later plays came to differ from Aeschylean characters in that they possessed a considerable and necessarily more developed 'self-awareness'" (396). The Athenian philosopher is less likely to glorify rank and position than a chieftain in epic; hence the difference between Homer's Agamemnon and Euripides'. When Snell calls Agamemnon "decidedly unheroic" (397), he is speaking of literary conventions, not necessarily making a value judgment. He explains, "Every grand and lofty impulse which had ennobled Homeric man is in Euripides reduced to mere pettiness and whim" (399). The result is an Agamemnon that's closer to Hamlet than to his Homeric precursor.

Following this philosophical tendency will lead characters (or, for that matter, people in general) to conclude that moderation is the best course. Indeed, in Plato's *Republic*, Odysseus chooses to be reincarnated as a man without distinction. Aristotle draws on this tradition with his famous golden mean: every virtue is, in fact, a mean between extremes. Bravery, then, would fall in the middle of a continuum between rashness and cowardice (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book III). Central to the ethos of all tragedy, from Aeschylus to Euripides, is the idea that moderate behavior pleases the gods and constitutes righteous behavior; therefore, it is the safest path for mortals. Characters in tragedy learn this not from a philosophy lecture but from life experience—and most often learn it too late. In an example that strikes many modern readers as counterintuitive, Euripides' Hippolytus is punished for being too chaste. In rejecting moderate sexual pleasures, he offends Aphrodite. Phaedra's nurse tries to explain why this approach does not suit moral life: "It's not necessary for mortals to polish their lives to excessive perfection. Neither would you cover a house with a roof of precise quality.

… If you have more good than bad, being a human being, you've surely done well" (*Hippolytus* 466-472). His stepmother Phaedra, who falls on the opposite end of the spectrum, draws a parallel between their extreme approaches to sexuality: "By becoming my partner in this madness, he will learn to be moderate!" (730-731). Any extreme behavior, then, invites the wrath of the gods, at which point characters learn to be moderate whether they want to or not. It is fitting that Aeschylus chooses primordial goddesses—the Furies, daughters of Night who oversee vengeance—to articulate the principle: "The god[49] grants power to moderation in everything" (*Eumenides* 529-530). The statement carries an implicit subtext: what is immoderate is distasteful to the gods—and displeasing the gods is dangerous.

In a universe fraught with uncertainty, adopting a moderate lifestyle is the safest path to avoiding calamity. Such a life should not be viewed as lacking anything; rather, it is the most desirable option. Wise characters in tragedy—both young and old—recognize this truth. After observing her mistress, Medea's aged nurse concludes, "Better to be used to living equally with others! Well, then, may I age in security, not greatness. The name of moderation is said to come first—indeed, it is infinitely superior to all else for mortals. Anything out of proportion is worthless to them" (122-128). Another Euripides character, Ion, a young priest of Apollo, makes a similar wish: "May I have moderation and no grief" (*Ion* 632). He is speaking to Xuthus, an Athenian who learns from an oracle that the foundling Ion, raised by Apollo's priestesses, is his son. (In fact, Ion is the son of Apollo and Xuthus's wife Creusa.) Xuthus wishes to bring Ion back to Athens and establish him in style. Ion, who is wise beyond his years, declines, preferring his moderate life at the temple to a grander one in Athens. He tells Xuthus, "Listen to the

[49] Lowercase *theos*, perhaps referring to Zeus.

good things I've had here: first, peace, most dear to mankind, and not much trouble" (632-635). Ion accepts that some trouble will come to people in life; all he can hope for is a moderate number of problems and a measure of peace. Precisely because his expectations are moderate, he is happy. Even the most unfortunate of Greek protagonists, Oedipus, ends his life happily because he asks little. After his death,[50] Oedipus' daughter Antigone describes his end as ultimately favorable: "He died in a foreign place, just as he wanted, and he rests forever under the shade. He is not unlamented, nor does he lack mourning" (1706-1708). Like Ion, Oedipus' moderate wishes are granted, and he manages to find peace despite the great suffering he has endured. Psychologist Albert Ellis would approve of Antigone's words. In his book *How to Make Yourself Happy and Less Disturbable*, he writes, "No matter what conditions exist in my life—yes, even poverty or fatal illness—I can still find some enjoyable pursuits if I think I can and if I try to find them" (17).

Moderation, then, is not only comprised of external realities; it is a state of mind. Part of being human is accepting that we have limited control over our reality. What we can control is how we choose to view those realities. In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Achilles tells Clytemnestra, "I know how to grieve moderately in calamity and to rejoice moderately in prosperity. Such mortals can count on passing through life properly and intelligently" (920-923). This is advice to Clytemnestra disguised as an observation about himself. As Achilles discovers Agamemnon's plan, he knows that Clytemnestra's grief and rage will be terrible. The queen's unwillingness to moderate her grief and rage does, in fact, lead to further suffering for her family. Her right to rage and grieve so is not questioned.

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[50] This term is used for the sake of convenience. In actuality, a god's voice summons Oedipus, asking him why he lingers when it is time to go. Oedipus then disappears, leaving no body.

Certainly no modern reader would fault Clytemnestra for hating her husband's action. However, her mindset leads to the alienation of her other two children, Orestes and Electra, and her own death. Even Philoctetes, who by any reasonable estimation is justified in hating the Greeks who left him on the deserted island, is reminded by the chorus to "be moderate!" (*Philoctetes* 1183). The verb used is *metriazō*, which carries the connotation of a measured response. In fact, one of the Liddel & Scott definitions of the verb is to "keep measure."

This is sound advice for the ages. The connection to music exists in the word itself: an etymologically related word is *metrikos*, one learned in meters—as the chorus would be. The verb carries within it a timeless truth: a measured life is a life of full of harmony.

Chapter 6

COMPASSION, CONNECTION, AND FORGIVENESS

The wisdom delineated in Chapters Four and Five is directed toward improving the self. Of course, temperance and moderation benefit more people than the cultivator of such traits, and any self-improvement is ultimately a boon to the community. However, compassion is a quality directed primarily outward—and is arguably the most life-enhancing of the character strengths developed in the crucible of personal tragedy. Edward Hickling goes so far as to say that "compassion and kindness are two building blocks that can help transform one's worries and anxieties into something that can be carried and lived with" (201). In the wake of tragedy, a network of supportive, compassionate people is a critical factor in resilience (Peterson 125). The ability to practice compassion, therefore, is an integral aspect of any person's character, particularly during difficult times. The tragedians have a great deal to say about the nature of this quality and the powerful role it plays in life.

The words "compassion" and "sympathy[51]" have the same root meanings in Latin and Greek, respectively: "suffering" (*passio*, *pathos*) and "with" (*con*-, *syn*-). The Greek word *pathos* is characteristically complex. Along with "suffering," it can mean "what one has experienced," "misfortune," "emotion," and "condition" (among other definitions). Its close cousin, *pathēma*, is included in Aristotle's famous stipulation that tragedy should effect catharsis of the emotions (*pathēmata)* by inducing pity and fear (*Poetics* 6.27-28). This experience is not the barren activity of the passive spectator but a

[51]"Empathy" is etymologically related to "sympathy"; the words are often used synonymously. The prefix en- means "in," suggesting that someone experiencing empathy would be in a state of suffering (along with someone else).

rich cognitive process with benefits extending beyond the theater. Elaborating on Aristotle, Halliwell calls the phenomenon "a transformation in which a tragic audience's cognitive understanding interacts with a highly charged emotional response" (401). The primary emotional response is compassion, as viewers "…enjoy becoming vessels for the pity that wells up at the sight and sound of heroic characters who lament compulsively over their own psychic wounds" (Halliwell 401). It is impossible to watch Hecuba's suffering and remain unmoved; even Hamlet temporarily forgets his own troubles when the players tell her story. (One must be a Polonius to glance at the clock during the performance.) Far from being merely a distraction, however, watching tragedy yields an "overall ethical benefit that accrues from such an intense yet fulfillingly integrated experience" (Halliwell 405). "Ethical" is a noteworthy word choice: it derives from the Greek word *ethikos*, meaning "arising from habit, accustomed." (English speakers use it almost interchangeably with "moral," which similarly derives from the Latin for "custom"). Perhaps, then, repeated exposure to tragedy will cultivate a habit of compassion. Ideally, the ability to feel pity for Oedipus or Ajax would translate into a greater capacity for showing compassion to "real" individuals. This hope is not as far-fetched as it might initially seem. Recent research (2006 and 2009) in cognitive psychology supports the notion that reading literary fiction (Greek tragedy or otherwise) fosters empathy and the ability to consider other people's perspectives (Paul).

The texts themselves depict compassion as both an instinctual quality in sentient beings and the result of experience. In Euripides' *Electra*, for instance, a disguised Orestes listens to the troubles his sister has endured. He has reacted strongly to the tale of her suffering because, he explains, "Observing others' calamity stings mortals" (290-

291). This tendency toward compassion does not spring from human frailty. In the same speech, Orestes goes on to tell Electra, "Compassion does not exist in ignorance, but in the wise" (295-296). The wise, after all, understand how mortals suffer in this life and realize that compassion is the appropriate response to witnessing that suffering. Suffering and wisdom have been connected in Greek tragedy at least since Aeschylus, and compassion is intertwined with both: suffering leads to wisdom, but it also yields a greater capacity for compassion. In fact, Hickling includes "having compassion for others" in his Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory, which invites survivors to self-assess their personal development following a tragedy (88). The qualities are also interrelated because wisdom born of suffering fosters compassion. In his exploration of the intersection between tragedy and philosophy, Bruno Snell observes, "Clear thought and subtle knowledge are a curse, and the curse is the *oiktos* [compassion]—the grief and pity for the world" (402). Because of its intimate connection with suffering, compassion is therefore not necessarily a positive feeling for whoever experiences it, as its root, *pathos*, suggests. In fact, Orestes uses the verb *daknō*, the same word used to describe the bite of dogs and the sting of insects, when he describes the effects of observing others' calamity. However, while compassion may be painful at the moment, the experience produces long-term positive effects.

Paradoxically, even the gods, though largely immune to suffering themselves (there are exceptions), are not immune to feeling compassion for mortals. After Orestes and Electra have avenged their father's murder, Clytemnestra's deified brothers, Castor and Polydeuces, appear to tell the siblings how they must atone for the matricide. Observing their tearful embrace, Castor tells Orestes, "In me and the immortal gods lies

pity for suffering mortals" (*Electra* 1329-1330). But Castor was human before his apotheosis, and the lingering memory of human pain may account for his still-compassionate nature. Shared experience is certainly one aspect of compassion—for both gods and human beings. In *Prometheus Bound*, the Titan clearly feels alienated from the other gods, who cannot conceive of his punishment, having never suffered themselves. Early in the play, the chorus (comprised of immortal Oceanids, water spirits) advises Prometheus to admit his fault to Zeus and beg forgiveness. He responds, "Anyone distanced from troubles readily advises and warns the one actually suffering them" (*Prometheus Bound* 263-265). His rebuke carries important subtext: those who have not endured pain themselves cannot empathize with his situation and therefore have no right to comment on it. The Titan is lonely in his suffering indeed; the gods rarely suffer at all, let alone to such an extent as Prometheus does. Demeter is another of the very few immortals to have suffered real anguish, having lost her daughter Persephone to Hades. That is why, when their sons' bodies lie unburied in the environs of Thebes, Euripides' chorus of suppliant women pray to her for help, invoking that shared experience of loss.

This same chorus also uses the appeal of common experience when beseeching Theseus' mother, Aethra, to intercede on their behalf: "You once bore a son too, my lady, making your bed dear to your husband. Give me your understanding—give some compassion, seeing that I, miserable as I am, grieve for my son's death" (*Suppliant Women* 55-58). She does understand, and therefore she does intercede. Even those characters whose experience seems unique in the annals of tragedy manage to find common ground with other characters. The Oedipus of Sophocles' *Colonus* recognizes

that his fate sets him apart from others. Knowing that his fellow men view him as tainted (indeed, he views himself that way), he physically—and symbolically—distances himself from King Theseus whenever they meet. "Only mortals who have experienced such a thing can commiserate," he explains (1135-1136). Theseus invariably responds humanely to Oedipus, citing their common experience and their shared humanity as reason enough for helping the unfortunate man: "I know that I myself was raised as a stranger, like you, and in that state I contended with the greatest hazards—unlike anyone else, foreigner or not—so that I wouldn't decline to help a fellow exile. Besides, I also know that I'm a man, and consequently I have no more claim to tomorrow than you do" (562-568). Theseus's shared experience of exile—along with the hardships he experienced in exile—has made him more open to Oedipus. His suffering has taught him both wisdom and compassion.

It is significant that the enlightened Athenian king mentions their shared humanity, for that universal experience—being human—is a major theme throughout the tragedies. Even strangers have that much in common, if nothing else. When Hector's widow Andromache laments her loss, the chorus empathizes with her: "Listening, I pity you. Anything unfortunate is also pitiable for all mortals, even if the sufferer happens to be a stranger" (*Andromache* 421-422). As the chorus expresses, empathy springs in part from the recognition that human fortune is fleeting and that the same fate may befall any of us. Peter Trachtenburg echoes this idea in his *Book of Calamities*: "Implicit in the word 'compassion' is the recognition that all fortune is temporary, maybe even illusory" (Trachtenburg 473). Only chance sets us apart from the afflicted. Philoctetes reiterates this notion when he appeals to Achilles' son Neoptolomus, who has been sent to

retrieve—and exploit—the suffering man so that the Greeks might defeat the Trojans: "Pity me, perceiving that everything is fearful and precarious for mortals: at one time things are going well, and then it's just the opposite. When someone is free from sorrow, he still has to behold horror; when he's living well, then it's really necessary to contemplate it, lest disaster take him unawares" (*Philoctetes* 501-506). This strategy works, as it activates Neoptolemus' instinctual empathy. In allowing himself to feel pity, Neoptolemus behaves heroically. As Scodel explains, his conduct is in keeping with Sophocles' philosophy: "It is wrong to deceive or force one's friends, or to deprive a hero of the honor he deserves, and the bow[52] itself is a numinous object that should be respected. Piety in a broad sense includes all these concerns. So the elision of pity and heroic deeds is no accident, but lies at the center of Sophocles' view of the human condition" (Scodel 249).

However, Neoptolemus does remain conflicted throughout the play, perhaps, as Scodel suggests, because of his relative youth and inexperience: "Neoptolemus, though tormented by his pity for Philoctetes, still takes a long time to act on his feeling, probably because he is too young to recognize Philoctetes' fate as one that would happen to him" (Scodel 248). The more experience Neoptolemus gains, the more readily he will empathize with suffering and recognize his own vulnerability to a similar fate. This in turn will enrich his character, as he understands the interconnected nature of the human experience. As psychiatrist Mark Epstein explains, "But feeling our way into the ruptures of our lives lets us become more real. We begin to appreciate the fragile web in which we are all enmeshed, and we may even reach out to offer a helping hand to those who are struggling more than we are" (Epstein 57). Ruptures leave us feeling fragile, a

[52] The Greeks cannot win victory without this bow, which Philoctetes inherited from Heracles.

state that in turn alerts us to the fragility of all existence. After examining our inner ruptures, then, our attention is directed outward, rendering us more empathetic members of the community—or "fragile web."

Epstein raises an important point: the intangible feeling of compassion very often translates into tangible acts of kindness. Edward Hickling states more definitively, "First, compassion and kindness are not feelings. They're actions" (202). This statement suggests a moral imperative to act upon compassion. Characters in Greek tragedy endorse the importance of assisting those in need of help—sometimes self-servingly, when they themselves are in need of assistance. For instance, when Clytemnestra is desperately trying to prevent the sacrifice of Iphigenia, she tells Achilles, "There is certainly dignity in a good man helping the unfortunate, even if they are strangers to him. Pity us, for we are suffering pitiably" (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 983-985). As his son Neoptolemus is swayed by Philoctetes' pleas for compassion, Achilles is determined to defend Iphigenia after hearing Clytemnestra's appeals. (His determination is rendered moot by Iphiegenia's willingness to sacrifice herself on the Greeks' behalf and her subsequent rescue by Artemis.) The value of helping others is also endorsed by those in the position of benefactor. Oedipus, at the height of his powers, is desperate to cure the plague he has unwittingly unleashed on Thebes. He entreats Tiresias to join him in working toward a remedy, reminding the prophet, "Helping others is the finest work a man can accomplish" (*Oedipus Tyrannos* 314-315). He says this matter of factly, as though the maxim were indisputable—which, in a sense, it is. In fact, the value "most consistently distinguished around the world," according to Positive Psychologists, is "benevolence: preservation and enhancement of the welfare of others in one's immediate social circle" (Peterson 182).

The promotion of helpfulness has pragmatic as well as ethical implications. After all, the beneficiary of kindness may need kindness himself one day. Having established a relationship of reciprocity, he can expect help in return. When Tecmessa is begging Ajax to consider her fate (and the fate of their son) before he commits suicide, she tells him, "Kindness always produces even more kindness. When the recipient of kindness allows his memory to fade, he is not acting nobly" (*Ajax* 520-524). Failing to return a kindness is therefore an ignoble act, one unbefitting a hero.

In its noblest form, compassion is directed toward enemies. After all, the universal virtue of benevolence, as Peterson defines it, refers to helping those "in one's immediate social circle." But what of those who stand outside the circle—or indeed, those who fight against those in the circle? Humane treatment of the enemy is something of an anomaly in the ancient world. As Griffith explains, "Reciprocal bonds of favors (*charis*) bound one family to another and demanded recompense over the passage of time. Likewise hatreds and grudges (*echthra*) could persist for decades and through generations: 'help friends (*philoi*), harm enemies (*echthroi*)' and 'do back to others as they do to you' were almost universally held maxims throughout the fifth century" (Griffith 343). Still, the tragedians suggest that compassion for the enemy is not only a possibility but the most honorable option. For instance, Iolaus, Heracles' nephew, is horrified that King Eurystheus would wish to kill the hero's children. The family takes refuge in the city of Athens, a city invariably (and anachronistically) depicted as an enlightened democracy in the tragedies. Iolaus tells Demophon, Athens' king, "Wise men should wish to engage an enemy who is also wise, not one with barbaric pride. That way he receives compassion and justice" (*Children of Heracles* 458-460). Receiving justice

and compassion is not outside the realm of possibility, then, at least according to Euripides. The two qualities are interrelated; in fact, a wise enemy would be expected to behave compassionately, suggesting that compassionate treatment equates to justice. Aeschylus, too, explores this manifestation of compassion in his *Persians*. Merely depicting the falls of Xerxes was an unorthodox move on Aeschylus' part. Certainly, the play is primarily a celebration of the spectacular Greek victory at Salamis. But Xerxes is also a figure worthy of the audience's compassion, as scholars of tragedy point out: "Reminding us of the compassion that Achilles shows Priam in *Iliad* 24, Pelling (1997a) explains, '[Xerxes'] fate can still capture something of the human condition, and exemplify a human vulnerability which the audience can recognize as their own' (16)" (Debnar 8). This is Greek tragedy at its most challenging and thought provoking, forcing audiences to experience the opposing emotions of triumph and pity at the same time.

The apotheosis of compassion toward a fallen enemy comes in Sophocles' *Ajax*, with Odysseus' benevolence toward his former comrade-in-arms. While they are not, strictly speaking, enemies—both are warriors in the Greek army—Ajax does try to attack his fellow soldiers because Odysseus is honored above him. Even Athena calls Odysseus Ajax's "adversary" (*enstatēs*) in a conversation with the disgraced hero, which prompts Ajax to boast of how he tortured and killed Odysseus (so he believes). According to the heroic code, Odysseus would be expected to exult in his higher status and seek revenge. Instead, he transcends the mores of his situation and advocates that Ajax be buried honorably. He tells Athena, who stays to speak to her favorite after visiting Ajax, "I feel compassion for the poor man, even though he is my enemy, for he is wedded to calamity. I'm not thinking any more of him than of myself: for mortals are nothing more than

phantoms,[53] no more substantial than a reflection in the water" (*Ajax* 121-126). This is a remarkably generous assertion in addition to being a striking poetic image. It is also something Athena cannot understand, not being an insubstantial phantom but an immortal goddess. Here Odysseus is philosophical, not merely clever—although the Greek word *sophos* covers both meanings. He sees an image of himself in the ruined Ajax merely because they are both men. Cairns explains this insight in terms of Aristotelian reversals: "But Odysseus does not rejoice; instead, he feels pity (121-26), because the pattern of alternation that has so reduced the once resourceful Ajax (118-19) is for him a sign of the ephemerality that he and Ajax share with all human beings" (Cairns 318). Ajax's reversal of fortune is part of humanity's lot.

Closely connected to compassion toward the enemy is forgiveness toward erring kin. According to Cairns, the Athenian society that produced the tragedies would likely exhibit forgiveness in a favorable light: "Athenian society, with its legal mechanisms for containing vengeance, exhibits a marked tendency toward compromise and conciliation rather than retaliation" (Cairns 307). Conciliation is not quite the same thing as forgiveness and reconciliation, but they are in the same family of values.[54] It is not surprising, therefore, that Athenian playwrights should depict scenes of forgiveness, the most memorable one coming at the end of Euripides' *Hippolytus*. The chaste young prince, wrongly accused of a rape that leads to his stepmother's suicide, is cursed by his father Theseus and dies as a result. (Theseus' father Poseidon duly translates Theseus' hasty wish into reality, exemplifying the gulf between human fathers and divine ones.) Although the play closes with a touching scene of forgiveness between father and son,

[53] *Eidōlon*, which also denotes an image, is the same word Homer uses for the ghosts in Hades.
[54] Conciliation generally refers to mediation between two warring parties, not healing after the fact.

Hippolytus does not start out disposed to overlook others' faults. When the Nurse tells Hippolytus of Phaedra's passion for him, he literally spits in disgust. The Nurse begs him, "Forgive! All people are likely to make mistakes, child" (615). Hippolytus responds by launching into a tirade against women. Moreover, he informs the Nurse, only the oath she has extracted from him prevents him from telling his father the whole story. At this point Hippolytus is still as chaste and spotless as the goddess he reveres, Artemis; he is therefore unable able to pardon weakness in others, being unacquainted with it himself.

By the time Hippolytus lies dying, however, he has gained enough life experience to forgive more readily. His own actions have brought about a suicide (albeit unwittingly) and incurred the hatred of his father. In the end, he becomes acquainted with regret and learns the real reason for his downfall: his own cold chastity. Understanding from Artemis that Aphrodite orchestrated the disaster, Hippolytus realizes that he and his father are joint victims of the gods. "Therefore I lament my father's misfortune too," he says (Hippolytus 1405). However, Hippolytus does not forgive Theseus because his father is innocent and Aphrodite alone is guilty. Rather, the recognition that Hippolytus has stumbled himself makes him more open to forgiving someone else who has erred. He tells Theseus, "Because of your error I mourn for you more than myself" (1409). Because such forgiveness necessitates wrongdoing and weakness, it is a uniquely human attribute. Bernard Knox explains why:

> The play ends with a human act which is at last a free and meaningful choice, a choice made for the first time in full knowledge of the nature of human life and of divine government, an act which does not frustrate its purpose. It is an act of forgiveness, something possible only for human beings, not for gods but for their tragic victims. It is man's noblest declaration of independence, and it is made possible by man's tragic position in the world. Hippolytus' forgiveness of his father is an affirmation of purely human values in an inhuman world. (Knox 331)

Hippolytus may have been a pawn of Aphrodite, but he ultimately proves himself superior to her callousness.

Unfortunately, Hippolytus does not live long enough to reap the benefits of his spiritual largesse. The benefits of forgiveness are legion—both for the giver and receiver of forgiveness. In twenty-first-century America, psychologists are quantifying these benefits with empirical data. According to psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, "Forgiving people are less likely to be hateful, depressed, hostile, anxious, angry, and neurotic" (172). Indeed, Hippolytus is a far more attractive figure when he forgives his father than when he maintains a fierce hostility toward Phaedra. As both Theseus and Hippolytus learn, "[Forgiveness] can deepen our sense of shared humanity (that we are not alone in experiencing hurts) and strengthen our personal relationships and our wider connection with others" (Lyubomirsky 173). Like compassion, then, forgiveness involves awareness that we belong to a community that includes all people.

The ability to forgive serves a practical function as well: it helps to keep a social network cohesive. This network of social support, which is "provided in a mutually caring relationship," is especially important in times of tragedy because it "buffers against the effects of stress" (Peterson 255). The tragedians concur with psychologists about the indispensability of such support. Orestes, recalling the terrible vengeance he was forced to exact on his mother, tells his cousin Hermione, "Family is a powerful thing. In times of trouble there nothing better than a close loved one" (*Andromache* 985-986). The idea is explored in Aeschylus' *Persians* as well. Instead of focusing on her own grief, the Persian queen turns her attention to her son Xerxes, imagining his distress. She prepares to receive him graciously as he arrives home, despised as he is by the kingdom.

After gathering clothing for him, she remarks, "We will not forsake those most dear to us in times of distress" (851). The queen has every logical reason to blame Xerxes for his defeat at Salamis, but reason is superseded by the instinct to love those close to us. Like compassion, this instinct is a hallmark of human nature: "The capacity to love and be loved is viewed by contemporary theorists as an inherently human tendency with powerful effects on well-being from infancy to old age" (Peterson 249). Even the horror of Oedipus' situation does not prove stronger than familial bonds. His daughter Antigone (and to a lesser extent his other daughter, Ismene) dedicates her life to his comfort and well-being. Cedric Whitman notes that "…in the scenes where the old man praises his daughters (337ff., 1365-68), one detects the nucleus of a world in which Oedipus is accepted and honored. With them, Oedipus stands on his own terms, commanding and receiving freely their love and honor" (235). In the years that follow his tragedy, they are his life support—and indeed his life. Because of his daughters, Oedipus does not die despised, and he can recover, to the extent that this is possible, from his trauma. At least, he can continue. As Whitman puts it, "Oedipus makes for himself a world of souls that can respect him in his tribulations, and when he departs, he is no longer isolated, but prized" (Whitman 235-236). Having left Thebes, Oedipus exists outside the *polis* system; his world is not defined by geography but by his small, close-knit family group.

Oedipus' situation is not an isolated incident but indicative of a broader truth substantiated by psychological research: the external incidents that befall us do not necessarily determine happiness; rather, our network of close relationships is the greatest indicator of the good life. Citing research conducted in 2003, Christopher Peterson writes, "[Psychologists] Harry Reiss and Shelly Gable went so far as to conclude that

good relationships with others may be the *single most important* source of life satisfaction and emotional well-being" (261). A more unfavorable external situation than Oedipus' is difficult to imagine, but thanks to his daughters, he achieves a measure of contentment and peace. Oedipus is not the only beneficiary of the close relationship he has with his daughters. When it comes to happiness, providing such support is every bit as important as receiving it: "It is not an equitable relationship that is rewarding but rather one in which a person can provide love and support, whether or not the score card comes out even" (Peterson 257). Technically, Oedipus is indebted to Antigone, who presumably delays marriage to care for her father. However, she benefits from the relationship in inestimable spiritual ways. Recognizing—and even embracing—tragedy can bring family members closer together, as it does for Oedipus' family. In fact, tragedy can strengthen and reinforce the bonds among family members because the connections made during that time are so authentic. Mark Epstein warns, "When we resist the underlying traumatic nature of things, we cut ourselves off from ourselves and from others" (Epstein 39). While no one would invite tragedy to occur, it can paradoxically bring about greater life satisfaction in the form of close relationships.

Having a strong social network also affords the opportunity to commiserate with others and receive comfort from them. The importance of this outlet cannot be overstated, as those undergoing trauma can experience feelings of alienation: "Traumatized people are left with an experience of 'singularity' that creates a divide between their experience and the consensual reality of others. Part of what makes it traumatic is the lack of communication that is possible about it" (Epstein 54-55). Making an effort to facilitate communication can mitigate the sense of alienation, at least to an

extent. No one can fully comprehend another's pain, of course, but talking the problem through provides a sense of sharing the burden. Hippolytus elaborates on this principle after his stepmother's suicide: lack of communication, he says, hurts both those who suffer and their loved ones. Observing that his father is struck dumb with horror, he tells Theseus, "Silence has no place in bad times. The heart, which yearns to hear everything, is found guilty of curiosity then as well. It isn't right for you to conceal your misfortune from those close to you, father—those closer than close" (*Hippolytus* 911-915). Hippolytus will not like what Theseus has to say—namely, accusations and imprecations against him. However, he is correct in his general assertion that commiseration soothes the afflicted. This is borne up by a twentieth-century psychology experiment with the hypothesis that people who are anxious or worried are more likely to seek out company:

> Psychologist Stanley Schacter's (1959) interest in affiliation led him to investigate the maxim that 'misery loves company.' He recruited psychology students to participate in an experiment and then told them that they were to receive a series of painful electric shocks. Other research participants in a comparison group were not told this. For students in both groups, there was a 10-minute delay while the researcher supposedly set up the experimental equipment. The participants could wait alone or with others. Which did they choose? Compared with those not expecting to be shocked, those in the experimental group preferred to pass the 10 minutes in the company of others. We thus seek out others when we are anxious, presumably because other people decrease our worries. (Peterson 264)

The wise-beyond-his-years Ion knows this instinctively, telling his yet-unknown stepfather, "May it never happen, but if misfortune does occur, it helps to see a kind person" (*Ion* 731-732). In another Euripides play, which chronicles the terrible psychological aftereffects of matricide, Orestes and Electra provide an idealized portrait of mutual support. Orestes, in particular, suffers both physically and spiritually. According to Christian Wolff, the two states are linked: "Inwardly [Orestes] appears overcome by guilt, the effects of which erupt in physical illness resembling epilepsy"

(342). He therefore depends upon Electra to care for him. In turn, he becomes her comforter when she is overwhelmed. Orestes tells his sister, "When you see me disheartened, soothe the terrible disorder of my mind and console me. When you lament, I'll be there with loving advice. Such help is good for loved ones" (*Orestes* 296-299). While this exchange does not alter the reality of their external circumstances, it does uplift the siblings spiritually.

Along with familial support, friendship plays a critical role during times of trauma—at least ideally. A true friend will be present and supportive throughout a tragedy, whereas false friends fall away. In fact, according to Euripides, a tragedy provides the gauge by which to measure the strength of a friendship. Hecuba, who can speak to this as well as anyone, tells the chorus, "Good friends are seen most clearly against the backdrop of misery; success has its own friends" (*Hecuba* 1226-1227). This is a striking image: a (presumably) dark backdrop against which a friend shines, bringing light. Orestes makes a similar statement, albeit a less poetic one, when he tries to persuade Menelaus to help him: "Friends have the name but not the deeds of friendship if they aren't friends in misfortune" (*Orestes* 454-455). In another Euripides play, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Menelaus is the one reminding Agamemnon that men of character do not abandon their friends in time of need: "A good man must not change his ways when he's flourishing; he must remain steadfast to his friends when he is most able to help them in his prosperity" (345-348). These characters, being suppliants, would naturally employ such rhetorical devices to win sympathy. However, Theseus articulates the same sentiment when he is in a position to help the ruined Heracles, who has killed his family in a fit of madness sent by Hera: "I hate when gratitude towards friends grows old—

when someone wants to profit from a friend's prosperity but abandons him in misfortune" (*Heracles* 1223-1225). Because Theseus lives up to his own noble ideals about friendship, he provides inspiration, both to Heracles and to the audience:

> The commitment to friendship on the part of Theseus that persuades Heracles, in Euripides' eponymous play, that life is worth living, even after disgrace, is a striking but not isolated parallel. Plays like these remind us that Greek *philia* was not necessarily a narrowly utilitarian exchange of benefit for benefit (Konstan 1997, 57), and that tragedy can be ethically uplifting as well as unsettling. (Cairns 311)

This ideal of friendship from the ancient world endures today. Positive psychologists, polling subjects about their best friends, found that "…respondents described their best friends as dependable, honest, loyal, and committed" (Peterson 267). Theseus certainly meets these criteria.

Portraits of the salutary effects of noble friendship, like the one between Theseus and Heracles, abound in Greek tragedy. Such portraits are particularly salient in Euripides. As Justine Gregory notes, "The importance of friendship, especially in dark times, is a recurrent Euripidean theme" (264). In addition to depending on his sister Electra, Orestes leans on his friend Pylades, who proves a most faithful companion in all versions of the Orestes story. In Euripides' *Electra*, Orestes arrives at last in Argos, inquiring about the state of his kingdom and speculating on how he might reclaim it. An anonymous old man is skeptical about the young man's chances for success because he has only his sister for an ally. He also expresses doubt that any friend would stand by Orestes in his current situation: "It's quite a find—a friend who's your partner in good and bad" (*Electra* 606-607). He is unaware that Orestes possesses a friend like Pylades, who is joined to him as surely as any blood relative could be. In Euripides' *Orestes*, the messenger actually likens Pylades to a brother when he relates Orestes' trial to Electra:

"Pylades and your brother moved together: one mute and weak with sickness, and the other grieving equally with his friend like a brother, attending to his ailment with care" (880-883). Flanked by his loyal sister and this friend "like a brother," Orestes proves successful. Perhaps that is why he advises the chorus, "Acquire comrades, not just relatives. A man who's a kindred spirit, though unrelated, is a better friend to possess than myriad kin" (805-806).

At the end the play, a chorus member uses yoking imagery to describe the central role Pylades plays in Orestes' life—one of many instances of figurative language used to capture friendship's nature. He directs Electra's attention to her brother and his friend: "Here comes your brother now, the death sentence against him confirmed, and most faithful Pylades—a man like a brother—who is guiding Orestes' weak limbs carefully, as if harnessed to him" (1012-1017). They are spiritually harnessed to each other, which makes the simile particularly apt. Euripides likes this yoking image enough to use it as a metaphor in *Heracles* as well. Speaking to his mortal father Amphitryon, Heracles describes his relationship with Theseus as "a yoked pair of friends, one of the two unfortunate. Old man, one must acquire such a friend" (*Heracles* 1403-1404). Again, too, we see the injunction to acquire friends as a bulwark against the effects of calamity; Heracles puts forth his own situation as evidence, just as Orestes does. According to Heracles, his partnership with Theseus is unequal—as unequal as a damaged leg is to a healthy one. He tells Amphitryon, "I have destroyed my house dishonorably. Being totally ruined myself, I will follow Theseus as a useless appendage" (Heracles 1423-1424). This "joining" simile is even more striking than Euripides' vision of friendship as a yoke willingly donned. After all, an appendage cannot easily be removed from its

body; nor can the friendship between Theseus and Heracles be easily dissolved. The Greek word for appendage, *epholkis,* is etymologically related to the verb *ephelkō*, meaning to lead or pull forward. In his dark time, Theseus helps his friend move forward literally and figuratively.

Given the inestimable support Theseus provides, it is not surprising that Heracles follows this simile by remarking, "Whoever wishes to acquire wealth or power more than good friends isn't being wise" (*Heracles* 1425-14266). The idea of a friendship being priceless, and thus infinitely more precious than wealth, recurs elsewhere in tragedy. Of his invaluable friend Pylades, Orestes says, "There's nothing better than a true friend—not wealth, not power. The great price of a noble friend cannot be calculated" (*Orestes* 1155-1157). This insight is supported by psychologists who study the factors that contribute to life satisfaction: "Although the surface features of friendship obviously change, having friends is a consistently robust correlate of life satisfaction and well-being" (Peterson 265-266). Wealth, on the other hand, has no long-term effect on happiness: "We think money will bring lots of happiness for a long time, and actually it brings a little happiness for a short time" (qtd. in Lyubomirsky 16). In terms of investing in a happy future, friendship yields much greater dividends than money. This is confirmed by a study on the long-term effects of wealth: "In a study of 792 well-off adults, more than half reported that wealth didn't bring them more happiness, and a third of those with assets greater than $10 million said that money brought more problems than it solved" (Lyubomirsky 44). Heracles and Orestes, it turns out, are wiser than they know.

At the moment of Orestes' crisis, when he feels abandoned by all, he spies Pylades and makes an astute observation: "In times of misfortune, a trustworthy friend is a more precious sight than calm seas to the sailor" (*Orestes* 727-728). This trope, more than any other, captures the relief a loved one's support and compassion can bring during the storm of trauma. It also encapsulates tragedy's wisdom about interpersonal relationships—namely, that nothing is more important. Writing on the *Antigone*, Kitto has this to say about the play's wisdom: "'By far the biggest part of happiness,' says the Chorus, 'is wisdom.' And what is this? To reverence, in all humility, those deep human instincts: respect for the dead, loyalty to one's kin, the love that joins a man to a woman—in a word, 'the laws established' (113)" (Kitto 131). Wisdom, in other words, tells us how we should treat each other. It is true that our established customs (an alternate translation of *nomoi*, laws) regarding relationships have changed a great deal since Sophocles wrote the Antigone. But much has remained the same, too. Compassion and love are still the greatest gifts we can give each other—and ourselves.

Chapter 7

JOY IN THE MOMENT, HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

We intuitively accept that experience—especially experience with personal tragedy—makes us wiser. Conversely, it seems somewhat counterintuitive that tragedy can also make us more attuned to pleasure and appreciative of the present moment. But that is precisely what occurs. In order to flourish, victims of tragedy must go beyond relishing the present moment and approach the future with a positive mindset. Cultivating realistic optimism and embracing hope can help people heal, as both the tragedians and psychologists attest.

The first step in this healing process is recalibrating the false assumption that we will live forever. No human literally believes this, of course, but we think and behave as if we did—something the tragedians understood. The chorus in Euripides' *Bacchae,* one of Euripides' last plays, emphasizes the brevity of mortal life and the wisdom of accepting this reality of existence. Failure to do so constitutes overreaching—wanting, at least unconsciously, to be godlike. The chorus reminds us, "Being clever and not thinking like a mortal do not equate to wisdom. Our life is short. In light of this, whoever chases greatness does not appreciate his present circumstances" (395-396). Indeed, Pentheus is punished precisely because he does not think like a mortal when he rejects Dionysus in that same play. But neither do we think like mortals when we assume that we have infinite years to enjoy our time on earth. In order to flourish, humans must recognize their limitations, one of which involves time: in truth, all anyone truly possesses is the present moment. Later in the play, after Dionysus reveals his plan to

exact vengeance on Pentheus, the chorus meditates on the vicissitudes of human life and returns to the theme of the present moment: "Whoever escapes the storm is fortunate; he has come out of the sea and reached the harbor. Whoever rises above hardship is blessed. One man outdoes another in wealth and power. Myriad men have myriad hopes; some are fulfilled in happiness and others depart. But I pronounce happy anyone who is happy today" (902-912). Given the reversals of fortune that plague human existence, happiness is not guaranteed to last beyond a single day. This is a common enough refrain in the gnomic wisdom of Greek tragedy. Here, though, the phrasing takes on a more positive form: not reminding us that we should count no man happy until he is dead, but inviting us to celebrate what happiness we do have, however ephemeral.

The Heracles of Euripides' *Alcestis* gives similar advice to a gloomy manservant who mourns his queen's death:

> Come here, so you may become wiser. Don't you understand the nature of mortal existence? I don't suppose you do. How is that possible? But listen to me. All men are debtors to death, and no one really knows if he's going to be alive the next day. Our future fate remains unseen; it cannot be learned or seized by cunning. Now that you've heard and learned all this from me, cheer up! Drink! Count on this day as yours, but everything else belongs to fate! (779-789)

Heracles' speech is embarrassing given the circumstances; he does not know the queen has just died. However, despite his general buffoonery at this point in the play, the hero talks good sense. In fact, classicist Anne Pippin Burnett regards him as providing an alternate ideal of life, the opposite of Alcestis' "heroic negative statement" (270). "The day's best pleasure," she writes, "may be an exercise of virtue" (271). The ability to experience pleasure is rarely called a virtue. If anything, pleasure has slightly negative associations in Judeo-Christian culture, and calling someone hedonistic is an insult. However, Positive Psychologists do recognize pleasure, which they describe as the

"enjoyment of food, sex, and leisure," as a "value distinguished around the world" (Peterson 181). How can pleasure be classified as a value? Don't all people naturally experience pleasure and appreciate life's little enjoyments? Not necessarily—or at least, not for long. The phenomenon of adaptation is to blame for this:

> When we repeatedly encounter the same pleasure-producing stimulus, we experience increasingly less pleasure in response. Adaptation is a familiar experience for all of us, even when it takes us by surprise. Perhaps we hope that *this* pleasure will show no adaptation. Adaptation to pleasure is so widespread that theorists have proposed that we live on a hedonic treadmill, meaning that we continually adapt to improving circumstances to the point that we will always return to a point of relative neutrality. (Peterson 54)

In other words, we are so conditioned to adapt to pleasures that we lose interest shortly after our exposure to them. The ability to overcome this evolutionary tendency—the ability to relish the ten thousandth sunset, to savor the hundredth glass of wine—can therefore be counted as a virtue because it "takes dedicated willpower" to "stop taking [ordinary pleasures] for granted" (Lyubomirsky 191). Even in the darkest times, pleasure can be found if one is aware of it. At the end of his life, for instance, Oedipus, blind and exiled as he is, tells Creon, "I won't live badly, even in this state, if I experience pleasure" (*Oedipus at Colonus* 798-799). This practice is certainly worth the trouble, as it facilitates lasting joy. According to Sonja Lyubomirsky, "In all these studies, those participants prompted to practice savoring regularly showed significant increases in happiness and reductions in depression" (191).

Fortunately, wealth is not a prerequisite to this kind of enjoyment. Euripides' Ion, explaining why he enjoys his simple life as a servant in Apollo's temple, tells the wealthy Xuthus, "Delight is the same, whether you enjoy great things or take pleasure in small ones" (*Ion* 646-647). He demonstrates remarkable wisdom in repeatedly appreciating his

humble surroundings. It may seem cruel that evolution has rendered us so inured to daily pleasure—inured to such an extent that Ion's gratitude for the little things is remarkable. However, Peterson reminds us that "adaptation protects us from being overwhelmed by the external stimuli that produce our sensations. Pleasure can be as distracting as pain, and it is good—survival-wise—that these experiences are brief and tempered and allow us to get back to the rest of life" (54). While this makes sense "survival-wise," the phenomenon can also lead to restlessness and diminish joy in living. After all, life without any pleasure is hardly a life at all. At the end of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the messenger who reports Haemon's death ends his speech with commentary about Creon's loss: "When men surrender their pleasures…well, I don't even call that living, but death-in-life. Be wealthy, if that pleases you—live a king's life, in fact. But if joy does not accompany riches, I wouldn't give you the shadow of smoke for all of it, in exchange for my pleasure" (1165-1171). Because he has brought about his own son's suicide, Creon can no longer take pleasure in life. At least, that is the messenger's assessment of his situation. And life without the prospect of pleasure is no life at all.

Greek tragedy is full of lament over untimely deaths like Haemon's, but several characters voice the injunction to cease lamentation after an appropriate time and resume appreciating the joys life has to offer. In *Agamemnon*, for example, a herald arrives to report on Troy's fall. The chorus expresses sympathy for the hardship soldiers endure in war—especially in a war that has lasted ten years. The herald concedes the truth of their description, which enumerates the difficulties he and his comrades have faced. However, on the very night Troy has fallen he already longs to consign the experience to the past: "Why should the living count the dead one by one, wallowing in misfortune? We're

better off putting all this behind us" (*Agamemnon* 570-572). He has suffered enough and sees no reason to prolong the suffering by dwelling on it. He is ready to trade that suffering for pleasure. It is even more striking when the ghost of Darius—who has just lost a battle, in opposition to the victorious herald in Agamemnon—makes a similar point in *Persians*. He advises his erstwhile counselors, "Even now, with disaster around you, give your soul the gift of some pleasure each day" (*Persians* 840-841). Darius' advice is sound. Actually, psychologists concur that this is one of the best outcomes of tragedy: appreciation of the present and its pleasures. In some cases, "people report finding a fresh appreciation for each new day and renegotiating what really matters to them in the full realization that their life is finite" (Peterson 49). After tragedy, an ordinary day appears infinitely valuable, where it might previously have seemed lackluster.

Trauma can also affect how people view the future. Before tragedy's victims can think about their future prospects, however, they must overcome the natural and understandable pessimism they feel during a crisis:

> All things being equal, wrote Schwarz and Strack, people base their judgments of overall life satisfaction on how they are *feeling* at the present moment. Flushed by a momentary triumph or thrown for a loop by a recent setback, people may accordingly report that life per se is good or bad. More generally, these writers argued that a happiness judgment is based only on the information readily available to people at the moment the judgment is solicited, and what is salient at the moment is easily manipulated. (Peterson 85)

This would certainly account for the lamentations and pessimistic pronouncements about mortal life so common in Greek tragedy. Even in the midst of a crisis, though, some characters reasonably point out that the current situation cannot last forever. This is a healthy outlook, and perhaps even one that most people will instinctively embrace. According to Positive and evolutionary psychologists, people are generally optimistic,

having developed the trait originally to cope with the types of calamities depicted in Greek tragedy:

> Tiger even speculated that optimism drove human evolution. Because it entails thinking about the future, it first appeared when people began to think ahead. Once people began to think ahead, they could imagine dire consequences, including their own mortality. Something had to develop to counteract the fear and paralysis that these thoughts might entail, and that something was optimism. By this view, optimism is inherent in our makeup, not a derivative of some other psychological characteristic. Tiger went on to characterize optimism as easy to think, easy to learn, and pleasing—what modern evolutionary psychologists describe as an "evolved psychological mechanism." (Peterson 117)

In addition to our evolved optimism, common sense is at work in realizing that present misfortunes are transitory; after all, observation teaches that nothing lasts forever. A positive change can be as unexpected as the initial calamity. In Sophocles' *Electra*, Chrysothemis comforts her sisters Electra: "Courage, my dear. The same destiny does not last forever. In the past fortune was hostile to us, but this day might just as easily give us the advantage" (916-919). Tragedy, as Aristotle explains, entails a negative reversal of fortune—but not all changes in human fortune are necessarily negative, as Crysothemis suggests. In Aeschylus' treatment of the Electra story, the chorus of the *Libation Bearers* ventures a cautiously optimistic verse after Orestes avenges his father's murder: "Fortune's dice might yet present a fair face for all to see" (*Libation Bearers* 969-970). This chorus fares reasonably well in its hopeful wish: Orestes' fortune turns out as positively as it possibly can, with an acquittal of matricide in a divine court (and the Furies transformed into benevolent deities, another positive change). The dice metaphor, which twenty-first-century Americans still employ to signify risky situations, appears in Euripides as well. In his *Suppliant Women*, Theseus' mother Aethra urges her son to intercede on the suppliants' behalf. Citing Athens' current prosperity as reason enough to

trust in divine providence, she tells Theseus, "Seeing the people of Cadmus faring so well, I trust in their next throws of the dice. For the god turns everything upside down and back again" (330-331). The chorus is heartened by this observation, as it should be. In fact, Hickling cites realistic optimism as essential to trauma recovery. He advises patients, "Be realistically optimistic about life—hold beliefs that things can change for the better, and that you have the ability to help with that change" (178). We must not view ourselves as passive recipients of fortune (either positive or negative), as helpless as the dice tossed onto the table by the hand of fate.

Several characters in Euripides actually experience positive reversals of fortune within the plays.[55] Ion, who is fortunate enough to see such a happy ending, cries not in hope but in gratitude, "Fate, you have altered myriad mortal lives, rendering them unfortunate and then fortunate again!" (*Ion* 1512-1514). In his reunion scene with his mother Creusa, he also expresses a wish that many characters in tragedy might utter: "May we be as fortunate in our future fate as we were unfortunate in the past" (*Ion* 1456-1457). In Ion's case, however, he already possesses evidence—in the form of his mother, returned to him against all expectation—that the future does promise better things. Creusa, for her part, offers a somewhat superstitious hope that surely she has endured her allotted measure of suffering: "We are whirled around in the winds of change, from good fortune to bad and back again. Let them be still now. Our previous misfortune was enough; now may a favoring wind remove us from our troubles, child" (*Ion* 1504-1508). That is, she believes that she has already met her quota for suffering and will consequently fare better forthwith. (Hecuba and Oedipus might view this pronouncement

[55] See Chapter One, page 12, for a discussion of these types of plays and how they differ from tragedy proper.

with a skeptical eye; in pure tragedy, as opposed to the tragi-comedies of Euripides' later years, mortal suffering is inexhaustible.) Actually, adopting such a passive perspective, as Creusa does, may hinder people from becoming active agents in their futures. Peterson explains that realism—and even rational pessimism, if you will—has its roles in life:

> More generally, optimism in the form of wishful thinking can distract people from making concrete plans about how to attain goals (Oettingen, 1996). Unrelenting optimism precludes the caution, sobriety, and conservation of resources that accompany sadness as a normal and presumably adaptive response to disappointment and setback (Nesse & Williams, 1996). (Peterson 126)

It is, however, expected and even appropriate that mother and son should exercise a bit of "unrelenting optimism" on such a joyous occasion.

In another of these tragi-comedies, *Helen*, the famous beauty is reunited in Egypt with her husband Menelaus. The chorus makes an uncharacteristically optimistic statement (in much of tragedy proper, the chorus is as philosophically and eloquently gloomy as Hamlet) about the future: "Assume what is destined will be better, whatever happens" (346-347). Later in the play, the chorus again offers an optimistic assessment of the balancing out of fate: "If you meet with happy fortune in the future, that will balance out what came before" (*Helen* 698-699). This is perhaps an overly simplistic view of the realities of the situation: for ten years, people have suffered and died for Helen and Menelaus, and nothing can balance that out. Assuming that "what is destined will be better" has a touch of naiveté that fails to acknowledge the prior horrors. As regards this brand of optimism, psychologist Albert Ellis advises taking a more realistic and measured approach: "Realism is a fairly good Aristotelian mean between extreme pessimism and extreme optimism. To be realistic is to fully acknowledge the undesirable aspects of life, to view them as 'bad' or 'obnoxious,' and to motivate yourself to try to change them"

(Ellis 81). Here the chorus—along with Helen and Menelaus—would do well to acknowledge, with fitting sobriety, the calamities their prior actions have wrought. The best approach, again, is to use moderation, as described by psychologist Martin Seligman:

> You can choose to use optimism when you judge that less depression, or more achievement, or better health is the issue. But you can also choose not to use it, when you judge that clear sight or owning up is called for. … Optimism's benefits are not unbounded. Pessimism has a role to play, both in society at large and in our own lives; we must have the courage to endure pessimism when its perspective is valuable. (qtd. in Peterson 127)

Helen and Menelaus need to "own up" to their past. Only then can they move forward into their future.

On balance, however, optimism is a desirable trait to cultivate, particularly in the wake of tragedy, because "however measured, [it] is usually linked to desirable characteristics, like happiness, perseverance, achievement, and good health" (Peterson 119). A definition of optimism, as psychologists conceive it, will clarify why the quality benefits us so much: it is "a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future—one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his [or her] advantage, or for his [or her] pleasure" (qtd. in Peterson 115). Even in pure tragedies, which do not end with positive reversals of fortune but with disaster, some characters choose to view the future as desirable or advantageous. In Aeschylus' *Persians*, for instance, Xerxes' mother has accepted that the destruction to the Persian army cannot be wished away, but she instinctively looks ahead: "I know the past can't be undone, but the future may bring something better" (525-526). This outlook is healthy and represents an appropriate use of optimism. In fact, it mirrors advice given by professional psychologists. When he counsels victims of tragedy on building resilience,

Hickling advises, "Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances may be a little better" (63-64). This outlook is precisely what the chorus of Eurpides' *Electra* advises Agamemnon's children to consider: "Perhaps our fortune, just barely creeping forward, will stand tall" (402-403). This anthropomorphic vision of fortune vividly illustrates how the future can raise up victims of tragedy from the depths of their despair. Visualizing a desirable outcome is another practice that psychologists recommend. Hickling also recommends, "Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear" (64-65). Evidence suggests that positive visualization about the future is not a naïve position in the midst of tragedy. Actually, concrete data supplements the anecdotal evidence that people can go on to feel *happier* following a tragedy:

> These researchers also interviewed 29 individuals who in the preceding year had suffered an accident that left their limbs permanently paralyzed. Their present life satisfaction was rated as 2.96, lower than that of the lottery winners (4.00), but probably not as low as one might have predicted. And their expected *future* happiness and their pleasure in everyday activities were slightly *higher* than that of the lottery winners (4.32 versus 4.20 for future happiness and 3.48 versus 3.33 for everyday pleasures). (Peterson 54)

These findings give us reason to hope that tragedies by no means end our lives.

Hope itself is an idea often explored in tragedy. As classicist Elizabeth Vandiver reminds us, modern Americans raised in the Christian tradition regard hope—grouped as it is by St. Paul with faith and charity—as unambiguously positive ("Mortals and Immortals"). However, hope did not necessarily conjure the same associations in Greek thought. The word in question, *elpis*[56], is usually translated as hope but has other meanings as well, according to Liddel & Scott: "expectation," "anxious thought about the future," and "confidence." The chorus of *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* captures this

[56] The same word is used in the aforementioned verse, 1 Corinthians 13:13.

nuanced view of hope when it speculates on the strangers who have arrived on the shores of the Taurians: "Hope is a pleasure, and much to mortals' misery they also find her insatiable. They wander on the sea and traverse barbarian cities in order to obtain an abundance of riches—a common expectation. The desire for wealth is ill-suited to some, but it comes to others in moderation" (414-421). Hope, then, should be approached with moderation—a common theme in Hellenic thought. Otherwise it could seduce mortals into committing unwise actions.

Hope is indeed portrayed as seductive in the tragedies—and even personified by Euripides as a seductive woman. In *Phoenician Women*, Jocasta questions her son Polynices about his self-imposed exile from Thebes. She comments on the role hope must have played during his absence: "Hope nourishes exiles, as the saying goes" (396). Polynices rejoins, rather cynically, "Hopes that regard you with beautiful eyes, full of promise about the future…" (397). In this case, his hopes are proven barren indeed: the end of his exile means the end of his life. Before he engages in battle with his brother Eteocles, however, Polynices is merely cynical and not outright despairing. Conversely, Iolaus of *Children of Heracles* regards his situation as truly hopeless. The evil Eurystheus, who oversaw the labors of Heracles, now threatens to kill the hero's children, along with Iolaus, their uncle. When he learns that even the divine oracles are against them, Iolaus cries, "Wretched Hope! Why did you cheer me up before, if you weren't going to continue your kindness?" (433-444). Here hope is again personified, depicted not as seductive but as fickle. In either case, she is not to be trusted.

Elsewhere in tragedy, however, hope is portrayed as steadfast—the last thing to abandon mortals. Euripides explores this theme in his *Trojan Women*. After the fall of

Troy, Andromache tells her mother-in-law Hecuba, "I don't even have hope, the thing left for all mortals, nor do I trick my mind into expecting anything positive, even though it's pleasant to do so" (*Trojan Women* 681-682). Like Iolaus, she regards hope as inherently untrustworthy. Hecuba rebukes her daughter-in-law gently, "Death and life aren't the same, child. One has nothing, but the other has hopes" (632-633). In her view, hope very nearly equates to life itself: as long as we are alive, we will have hope. (This recalls Cicero's succinct phrasing: "Dum spiro, spero," or "As long as I breathe, I hope.") It turns out that Andromache is right to despair. According to Erich Segal, "Hector's widow is doomed to endure what she herself describes as a fate worse than death: life without hope" (245). Eventually, Hecuba loses all hope as well. Earlier in the play she could hope that Astyanax would grow up or that she might be given to a kindly master. With these two last hopes removed, she suggests that the surviving Trojan women leap into the flames of the burning Troy, using the dying city as their collective funeral pyre. According to D.J. Conacher, the motif of hope—its resurfacing and eventual extinguishing—is woven throughout the *Trojan Women*: "In this last *kommos* between the Queen and her women, as the smoke from the burning city rises in the background, we have reached the end of that rhythm which false and intermittent hope has lent to the theme of suffering" (339). Hecuba represents the extremity of suffering in her total absence of hope—perhaps the most extreme example in extant tragedy. Hellenic audiences would have been fascinated by this, as Conacher explains: "This feeling for the nobility of an Oedipus, or a Hecuba, derives in part from the aura of almost superstitious awe with which the Greeks surround those necessarily great personages who had suffered the ultimate in woe and yet endured" (339). Perhaps Euripides, that

philosopher-tragedian, was using the queen to illustrate—or at least explore—an idea: does this utter absence of hope represent the most tragic of all situations? If so, does this make the *Trojan Women* the most tragic of Euripides' plays by both ancient and modern standards? Audiences certainly responded strongly to it. In one anecdote from the ancient theatrical world, "The ruthless tyrant Alexander of Pherae was so ashamed to be crying at the sorrows of Hecuba that he had to leave the theater before the *Trojan Women* was over" (Segal 244). As Hecuba shows, hope can be dangerous when illusory but even more dangerous when altogether absent: without it, people cannot move forward at all, or they go on in a sort of demi-existence. Perhaps this is why Peterson advises, "When there is room for doubt, people should fill the gap with hope" (128). Even, the subtext hints, if those hopes are illusory.

Hope's association with a positive future is what makes it so indispensable to recovery. Professor Stephen K. Levine reminds us that all tragedy is ultimately about the future, into which its victims progress: "Any book about trauma has to be a book about memory and how we live with the pain of the past. At the same time, it has to be about the future; our past changes as we reimagine it in terms of new possibilities for the future" (16). We cannot imagine these possibilities without hope. As the Pandora story suggests, hope is as bound up with human life as calamity is. Indeed, the two, calamity and hope, are wedded as well. Even the melancholy chorus of the *Libations Bearers* includes a beautiful paean to hope within their dirge about the state of Clytemnestra's house: "But then hope—so beautiful when it appears—lifts me up, gives me strength, dispels my pain" (415-417). Deliverance does in fact come in the trilogy's third play, the

Eumenides, when Athena removes the curse that has plagued the House of Atreus. In the meantime, even imagining a different future is enough to dispel the chorus's present pain.

The other tragedians join Aeschylus in praising the power of hope. In *Women of Trachis* and *Heracles*, Sophocles and Euripides, respectively, include passages about the logic behind hopeful thinking: change is a part of nature, its great constant, and things may yet change favorably. Both of these plays revolve around the pan-Hellenic hero and his two wives: his first, Megara, whom he unwittingly kills in a fit of madness, and his second, Deianeira, who unwittingly kills him in a fit of jealousy. In both, too, Hearcles' absence creates problems for the family. The chorus of *Women of Trachis* expresses sympathy with Deianeira's plight and urges her to hope that Heracles will return to protect the family: "Neither night, with its glittering lights, nor calamities, nor riches last forever for mortals. Both delight and loss depart suddenly and then return. That's why I tell you, my lady, always to hold fast to hope" (133-139). Life's most basic rhythms are evoked with rich imagery: glittery night makes way for day, just as the night of tragedy eventually yields to the dawn of deliverance. Hope dwells in that promise of change. In *Heracles*, Amphitryon encourages his daughter-in-law Megara to hope for Heracles' return. Perhaps he is also trying to convince himself that his son will soon arrive home from his twelfth Labor. Their worry over Heracles' absence is likened to a storm that will pass: "Mortals don't always meet with disasters, just as the winds do not always blow with force. Likewise, the fortunate do not remain fortunate to the end. All things are torn asunder from each other. The best man is whoever trusts in hopes; the coward lacks this resource" (95-106). Megara requires only her observation of natural phenomena as proof that their suffering cannot last forever. She must now make the brave choice to trust in

hope. Cowardice and hope are antithetical, Amphitryon tells his daughter-in-law. Bravery is required to move past a tragedy, as Hickling explains:

> The very nature of trauma is it will grab us and make it hard to move forward. Our mind wants to make sense of things that don't make sense. It cries out to do so. It is our mind again that replays the events over and over, searching for clues that can help us find order and understanding in things that don't make sense. And once there, any future is colored in a way that makes it all too easy to seem dark and without hope. (148-149)

Amphitryon is right. Sooner or later, we will all be required to make this choice between bravery and cowardice, hope and despair. If we are wise, we will pair this hope for the future with wonder for the present, and therefore transcend the pain of the past.

Chapter 8

LIFE, DEATH, AND HONOR

Approximately two millennia before Hamlet pondered, "To be or not to be: that is the question," Euripides' Orestes mused in a similar vein: "To die or live—little words concerning great things" (*Orestes* 758). Like Hamlet, the tragedians were preoccupied with the nature of life and death. In particular, they explored the paradox that people can simultaneously find life infinitely precious and yet long for the release of death. In some instances, tragedy's characters do believe that life is infinitely precious, and yet they discover something still more precious: honor. Such is the nobility of humanity, honed by experience and won by suffering. Three Greek words, considered together, correspond to our concept of honor. The first is *timē*, which connotes the public admiration won from what we would call honorable behavior. Similarly, *aischynē* is a sense of shame that would result from dishonorable behavior. The third is *aidōs*, which is more of an internal sense of honor and perhaps the closest equivalent to honor as we conceive it. *Aidōs* would prompt someone to respect others and yield to the demands of conscience. All three are bound up with questions of life and death.

We twenty-first-century Americans spend a great deal of time trying to avoid the topic of death, distracting ourselves and even inventing euphemisms to serve as linguistic collaborators in our collective avoidance of mortality. However, tragedies, real or fictional, bring people (or characters) within close proximity of death. They do not, therefore, facilitate such denial, as Dr. Hickling explains: "Tragic events often force us to confront our mortality. This is often one of the most basic things that we desperately try to forget. Escaping death strips away the shroud that covered the illusion that

somehow either death will elude us, or death is a very long way away" (Hickling 215). The tragedians certainly had occasion to meditate on how a mortal should respond to death's approach, whether death approaches oneself or a loved one. First and foremost, the universality of death is emphasized, particularly in Euripides' works. All humans are mortal and will die. A profound understanding of that fact, as opposed to mere intellectual knowledge of it, must permeate our conduct.

If everyone will die, mortals must not grieve excessively for one death—even for the death of one most beloved. Euripides' *Alcestis* revolves around just such a death, that of a wife so noble that she sacrifices her own existence so that her husband Admetus might live. Even at the height of Admetus' grief, the chorus reminds him that he is far from alone in his plight: "Admetus, you need to bear this misfortune. You are neither the first nor the last of mortals to miss a good wife" (416-419). Ritualized mourning is appropriate and expected, but it must not exceed the bounds of moderation. Electra receives essentially the same rebuke in her title play by Sophocles. Believing her brother Orestes dead, she laments extravagantly for nearly fifty lines before the chorus interrupts: "Remember that you were born from a mortal father, Electra, and so was Orestes; do not bewail his death exceedingly. We all pay this penalty eventually" (*Electra* 1171-1173). In both instances, the chorus functions both as spectator and advisor, supplying the voice of reason.

Mortals are not alone in receiving this reminder from the chorus that all people die; the chorus even admonishes the immortal sea goddess Thetis when she recalls the death of her son Achilles with excessive lamentation: "Stop grieving over the dead. The gods have ordained this judgment for all people: they must die" (*Andromache* 1270-

1272). In one instance, a mourner even needs a gentle reminder that she is not dead herself, and that it's incumbent upon her to live. When Helen believes that Menelaus has died, Theoclymenus, the Egyptian pharaoh to whom she has been entrusted for safekeeping, advises her: "Poor dear, don't wear yourself out ceaselessly or grieve excessively for Menelaus. You look upon the light, while death has befallen him. He cannot live again through your weeping" (*Helen* 1286-1288). Of course, Theoclymenus has a vested interest in persuading the beauty to cease her lamentation: he hopes Menelaus' death means that Helen will be available to marry him. However, his desire does not alter the logic of his argument that people might forget to stop living while in the depths of mourning. Consider Electra: she has invested so much energy in her inordinate grief that she has none left for any other aspect of life. She serves as a living monument to her dead father—and a warning to us. According to Orestes of *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, the same principle applies to excessive mourning for one's own death: "I don't consider anyone wise who laments the near proximity of Hades with no hope of salvation. To one misfortune he adds another: he incurs the charge of folly and dies anyway. We must allow our fate to happen" (486-489). We should accept the reality that we will die just as we would accept any other tragedy: with as much grace as possible.

In some instances throughout the tragedies, death is not only tolerated as an inevitability but viewed as a welcome relief from suffering. Indeed, Heracles' unnamed daughter, on the point of sacrificing herself to save the rest of her family, shudders to think that the pains of life might extend beyond this world. With her death fast approaching, she wonders aloud "if there is anything below the earth" (592). She

continues with what could be interpreted as hopeful or fearful: "But may there be nothing. If we mortals have cares there, being dead, I don't know where anyone can turn for relief. For death is considered the ultimate remedy for evils" (*Children of Heracles* 593-596). Elsewhere in Greek tragedy, this view of death as the great deliverer of troubles helps to alleviate the mourning that accompanies a loved one's death. For instance, when the Greek herald Talthybius tells Hecuba that her daughter has been sacrificed to Achilles, he tries to comfort the queen by reminding her that Polyxena's pain has ended: "Fate has grasped her; she will be delivered from suffering" (*Trojan Women* 270). Because Talthybius is Greek, this pronouncement may very well strike the reader as a self-serving excuse. However, not long after, Hecuba comforts herself—and her daughter-in-law Andromache—with the same thought when she remembers all the men who died to protect Troy: "The tearless dead forget their grief" (*Trojan Women* 606). She does not even entertain the possibility that her sons' grief might continue beyond this life. (She would undoubtedly shudder, along with Heracles' daughter, at the possibility.)

Andromache, for her part, takes up the queen's theme and applies it to all of humanity; better, she says, to die than to suffer the pain that attends being alive: "I tell you, not being born is the same as dying; dying is better than living wretchedly. A dead man feels no more pain than the unborn, perceives no evils" (*Trojan Women* 636-640). This sounds like the despair, even the depression, of a person who has suffered a traumatic event. It is quite a different thing to be grateful that a loved one is no longer suffering than it is to prefer death over life. But the tragedians do flirt with this pessimistic notion. The chorus of *Oedipus at Colonus* pronounces a stark verdict on

existence: "By any account, not to be born surpasses all else, and the next-best fate is to return quickly to the place one came from soon after appearing. After all, when youth is present, bringing with it easy thoughtlessness, what stroke of calamity awaits?" (1224-1232). By the chorus's reckoning, non-existence is preferable to existence—whether one is Oedipus or a typical mortal. Interestingly, Oedipus himself never makes such a nihilistic pronouncement. Even in the throes of his anguish in the *Tyrannos*, he wishes that he himself had died as an infant and therefore avoided his fate, but he exhibits no desire to blot out human existence entirely.

The chorus's pronouncement in the *Colonus* echoes a mythical story about Silenus, one of Dionysius' satyrs, that is recounted in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. According to legend, King Midas once asked the wise creature about the best lot for mankind. The satyr replied thus: "Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do ye compel me to tell you what it were most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is beyond your reach forever: not to be born, not to *be,* to be *nothing.* But the second best for you—is to quickly die" (Nietzsche 38). While the philosopher acknowledges that the "Greeks knew and felt the terror and horror of existence" (39), he also asserts that tragedies "offer the metaphysical comfort…that, in spite of the flux of phenomena, life at bottom is indestructibly powerful and pleasurable" (87). Nietzsche's assessment is worth bearing in mind during characters' most pessimistic speeches, which often give the sense of being formulaic or ritualized lamentation rather than true desire for death. For example, Admetus, who clearly values his life enough to seek a surrogate to die for him, cries, "I wish I could die! Oh, miserable mother who bore me. I'm jealous of the dead…I desire their lot. I long to dwell

among them! I take no pleasure in seeing the sun's rays or walking on the earth" (*Alcestis* 866-870). Given Admetus' prior conduct, it is hard to take his histrionics at face value. Admetus himself recognizes this human tendency to embrace death only in words. When he confronts his father, Pheres, about the old man's reluctance to take Alcestis' place, he maintains that the elderly are simply posturing when they claim to welcome death: "The old pray for death falsely, objecting to age and long life. If death does draw near, no one wants to die; nor is old age a burden" (*Alcestis* 669-672). Pheres retorts, "Do you take pleasure in seeing light? Do you suppose, then, that your father doesn't? I consider the time spent below as long; the time spent living is brief but sweet all the same" (*Alcestis* 691-693). The sun's light is so often equated with life itself in this bright Mediterranean culture. According to Pheres, the brevity of our time under the sun does not make that time tragic but even more valuable.

As the exchange between Admetus and Pheres suggests, life is ultimately revealed in the tragedies to be precious beyond compare, albeit fraught with suffering. When Iphigenia begs Agamemnon to spare her life, she reveals how much humans cling to their existence, despite all their rhetoric to the contrary: "One reason cuts down and conquers everything else: looking upon the light is the sweetest thing; what's below is nothing. Whoever prays for death is mad" (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 1250-1252). Sunlight is again invoked as a contrast to the realm shrouded in darkness: death. This darkness refers to both the absence of light and the mystery surrounding death. Even when bemoaning the nature of existence, as the Phaedra's nurse does, characters readily concede that mortals inherently enjoy looking upon the earth: "The whole of mortal life is painful, with no repose from troubles. Whatever is dearer to us than life is permanently cloaked in the

darkness of clouds. We appear lovesick for whatever shines upon the earth, being ignorant of another kind of life; the things below the earth are unknown to us. Thus we are carried away by idle stories" (*Hippolytus* 189-197). The darkness and mystery of death serve only to heighten the allure of life by contrast. Or, as the chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone* puts it more bluntly, "There is no one so stupid that he desires death" (*Antigone* 220). The verb employed here is *eraō*, the same used to denote sexual desire. Similarly, Phaedra's nurse uses the word *duserōtes* to describe lovesick humanity, a word that calls to mind a foolish adolescent no wiser in his choice of lover than we humans are in loving life so blindly.

Nonetheless, we do love life in general and in particular our own souls. Before she dies, Alcestis tells her husband, "Well, then! Remember to be grateful for this favor. I won't ask you to repay it (for nothing is more valuable than life)" (*Alcestis* 300-301). I placed the aside in parentheses to suggest just how accepted the notion is. In several of his other tragedies Euripides compares the soul to material fortune. The soul, of course, is counted as more valuable than any and all treasure. When Orestes pleads with Menelaus to help save his life, he emphasizes that his uncle need not help in any other way: "If you save my soul,[57] you save my most valuable property" (*Orestes* 644-645). Similarly, Adrastus, king of Argos, meditates on the dead who have perished in the ill-starred battle featured in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*: "For mortals there is only one expense that can never be recovered: a human life" (*Suppliant Women* 775-777). This assessment is all the more poignant with the specter of corpses strewn around the battlefield. Adrastus' victory in convincing Theseus to help him bury the fallen heroes is bittersweet.

[57] The word for soul is *psychē* (whence psychology), which can refer to life, self, mind, spirit, or soul.

Even if they had died in a victorious battles (the warriors did not even have this honor), all such victories are Pyrrhic ones.

Despite all the reverential words about life, tragedy does offer examples of characters who seem to welcome death or even to hasten toward it. Often the action serves the double function of simultaneously ending a painful situation and upholding a moral standard. Antigone articulates this philosophy to Creon in defense of the dangerous actions she takes to ensure her brother's burial: "When someone lives with so much suffering, as I do, isn't death welcome?" (*Antigone* 463-464). This mindset is at once lofty and pragmatic, not quite suicidal but perhaps approaching it. Heracles' unnamed daughter makes a similar statement in *Children of Heracles* when faced with the option of allowing herself to be sacrificed or placing her family in danger—something she could not live with. She asks her uncle, "Isn't it better to die than to meet with such a despicable fate?" (525-526). She is no more suicidal than Antigone is; rather, she is willing to die if the common good demands and deems this fate preferable to alternatives.

In Euripides' *Hecuba*, the chorus seems to condone suicide outright under certain conditions. In one instance, Hecuba has just exacted vengeance upon Polymestor, the Thracian king to whom she entrusted her young son Polydorus during the Trojan War. In an act of almost unimaginable treachery, Polymestor killed the boy and seized his treasure. In retaliation, Hecuba, with the help of her fellow Trojan women, kills the king's sons and blinds Polymestor. When the ruined man expresses a wish to descend immediately to Hades, the chorus assures him that this is understandable and even permissible: "A man may be forgiven if he escapes from his wretched life when his

troubles are more than he can bear" (*Hecuba* 1107-1108). Within this moral framework, suicide is not necessarily a dishonorable option. However, King Theseus responds quite differently when Heracles asks, "So why must I go on? What's the point of a life if it's unprofitable, unholy?" (Heracles 1301-1302). His life is unholy because he has slain his family, struck with Hera-sent madness and believing them enemies. Theseus listens respectfully, allowing Heracles "to vent," as we might put it. He responds with logic, pointing out that all mortals suffer and that the hero's misfortune, while great, is by no means unique: "You must reflect on whether you should die because these things. If the gods granted mortals lives undefiled by pain, but ruined yours alone, I would advise you to destroy yourself without delay instead of suffering so badly. But no mortal is free from misfortune" (*Heracles* 1312-1314). Logic is all well and good, but what ultimately persuades Heracles is the promise of receiving the future Athenians' hero worship. The promise of such honor wins out, and perhaps it makes all the difference. After all, another hero in a comparable situation, Ajax, chooses to end his life because shame has replaced the honor he once enjoyed among the Achaeans.

Suicide, as we conceive it, occurs in Greek tragedy when characters experience shame or dishonor, not calamity per se. The shame derives from a loss of *timē*: a sense of honor that comes from communal regard. Even Philoctetes, alone on his deserted island with no hope of reprieve, festering with wounds and with resentment, chooses to live. Conversely, we see shame-related suicides with Jocasta of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Phaedra of *Hippolytus* and, most memorably, with Ajax in his title play. The despondent hero goes so far as to say that even desiring a long life is dishonorable after enduring certain types of suffering:

> It's dishonorable for a man to want a long life when that life brings only uninterrupted misery. What delight can he experience as the passing days ebb and flow, drawing him near to death and back again? He's not worth anything, a man who warms himself at the fire of empty hopes. The noble man either lives honorably or dies honorably—that is all. (*Ajax* 473-480)

This is the very picture of depression, rendered even more poignant with images from nature: the endless and repetitive tide of days, the fire that does not warm. Ajax differs from many other victims in Greek tragedy in that his calamity brings him shame as well as suffering. Like Medea, Ajax cannot bear the idea that his enemies will mock him (Knox 274). He has also lost face in a warrior culture that greatly values *timē*. Indeed, as Karl Reinhardt points out, Ajax's world is built around honor, and he is shaped by that culture to such an extent that he cannot be separated from it: "The inflexible fighter becomes the inflexible soul; the man deprived of his honor becomes the man deprived of the world" (Reinhardt 163). Having lost what he values most, Ajax invites death to take him, "Shadows that are my light, darkness most radiant to me, take me—take me to be your inhabitant!" (Ajax 394-396). Unlike Admetus, Ajax is earnest in his desire, and so he dies.

Ajax's decision points to a greater truth adumbrated throughout Greek tragedy: only honor is worth more than life itself. Depending on the tragic situation, the English word honor refers either to *timē* (and the closely related *aischunē*) or to *aidös*. In the warrior ethos, *timē* is everything, but the concept certainly transcends the battlefield. In *Children of Heracles*, Iolaus says just as much: "Good men esteem a sense of honor (*aischunē*) more highly than life itself" (200-201). It is easy, of course, to utter noble sentiments, but various characters' actions throughout the tragedies support this ideal espoused by Heracles' nephew. Ajax and a host of female characters—Alcestis, Antigone, Iphigenia, Princess Polyxena of Troy, and Heracles' unnamed daughter—

choose an honorable death, as they conceive it, over life. Other characters accept the risk of death if they follow the paths they deem honorable. For them, as Anne Burnett points out, "The difference between life and death is nominal, that between a virtuous act and a shameful one absolute" (Burnett 271). In Sophocles' *Electra*, for instance, the eponymous heroine explains this mindset to her newly returned brother Orestes: "Alone I would not have erred either way: I would have saved myself honorably or died honorably" (1319-1321). She accepts the possibility of her demise, choosing honor over both life and death. She rejoices that Orestes has returned to help her exact vengeance, but she would not have permitted herself to fail in her duty had he not turned up.

Another of Sophocles' strong heroines, Antigone, resolves to cleave to her principles, determining to bury her brother even if the act costs her life. She grimly tells her sister Ismene, "But let me and my ill-advised actions suffer this fearful thing. Whatever happens to me, it will not be an ignoble death" (*Antigone* 96-97). This is not empty rhetoric about nobility but a promise backed by concrete action. As Kitto explains, "[Antigone] is doing much more than championing one code against another; she is giving her whole being for her brother's honor" (Kitto 129). Eteocles in *Seven Against Thebes* follows a similar pattern of expressing an ideal and completing the promise of his words with action. Chorus members beg him to remain in the city rather than fight her brother. Other citizens can do battle, they explain, whereas only he can be king. He responds, "If one must endure a calamity, at least let it not be one of dishonor. This is the only advantage that remains even after death" (683-684). Eteocles accepts the calamity that has befallen his city: namely, that his brother Polynieces has challenged Eteocles' right to rule and raised an army to invade the city. What Eteocles can't accept is

failing his city on such an occasion. Were he to behave so dishonorably, his life would lose value, both in his eyes and in the eyes of Thebes' citizens. Moreover, there are no guarantees about an afterlife for human beings, but honor is everlasting according to the warrior ethos, celebrated in the songs of bards—and the works of tragedians.

The willingness to sacrifice oneself for honor—not to gamble that death might occur but to embrace it—is portrayed as the highest expression of virtue in several extant tragedies: *Alcestis*, and *Children of Heracles* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Interestingly, all of these cases involve females, many of them quite young. As Justine Gregory notes, "Euripides' adolescents are often high-minded and idealistic—particularly those who embrace a sacrificial death for the sake either of their community… The nobility displayed by these young people makes their deaths all the more affecting" (Gregory 262). As might be expected from idealistic adolescents, this noble heroism is delineated in speeches preceding their deaths. In Euripides' treatment of Heracles' story, the hero's daughter discovers that a female sacrifice to Persephone is required to save the family. She unhesitatingly offers herself, explaining that her death will have more meaning than her life: "Not being in love with my own life, I have discovered something most honorable: how to leave life gloriously" *(Children of Heracles* 534-535). Her uncle Iolaus is astonished by her ready bravery and proclaims this the quintessence of nobility: "After hearing the great speech of this girl, who is willing to die on behalf of her brothers, how can I respond? Who could ever think or voice nobler principles?" (536-538). He is too overcome to expound upon the subject, but the chorus is not and offers commentary, commanding that no one weep at the girl's noble death. In place of death, she will have the immortal reputation for honor: "The unhappy girl takes part in an

honorable death in defense of her brothers and country, and a glorious reputation among men will be hers. Excellence marches through many hardships" (619-625). A wistful choice of adjective, unhappy, reveals the ultimately tragic nature of the death she chooses. Honor may be nobler than life in theory, but it still seems a consolation prize.

The daughter of another Greek hero, Agamemnon, does not accede immediately to her fate, as Heracles' daughter does, but needs time to reach the same conclusion. Iphigenia begins her play in ignorance, believing herself to be Achilles' intended bride. Upon learning her father's true intentions—to sacrifice her so that the army might travel to Troy—she begs for her life. But then she has an epiphany: her life will be more honorable, and therefore more valuable, if she willingly sacrifices it. It is still her life, even if it is cut short. In a fine dramatic stroke, she has resolved this right when her mother and Achilles are planning her rescue. Iphigenia interrupts their planning to deliver a long and logical speech justifying her decision. She tells her mother, "It is resolved that I'm to die. Well, then, I want to do this gloriously, banishing any ignobility" (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 1375-1376). We can debate the value of this sacrifice; indeed, it fails to hold up under our scrutiny if we apply our own moral constructs to the situation. Sacrifice a child so that more blood might be shed? Listen to the injunctions of a goddess, as interpreted by a priest? Agamemnon is a monster; the priest is a madman. Send the child back to Argos, we might advise Agamamnon—and, while you're at it, consider sending the army back as well. Fair enough. Euripides' audience, weary of the Peloponnesian War, might be inclined to agree with our assessment (Vandiver, "Euripides on War and Women"). What we can appreciate, however, is Iphigenia's ability to achieve transcendence, to think beyond her own needs and consider the larger

importance. Bruno Snell compares her to Antigone but views the girls as different: "[Antigone] derives her idealism from the fact that she sees life as simple and grand. Iphigenia, on the other hand, rises above an existence that is chaotic and dies for an idea. Just as the sense of life's misery originates in the keen intellect that has grasped the futility of human action, so too is the transcendence of this life a product of contemplation" (403-404). Her sacrifice comes down to perspective: she views the sacrifice as meaningful, and so it is imbued with meaning. Dr. Hickling, in his assessment of tragedy's aftereffects, claims that crises, like the one faced by Iphigenia, can indeed help to crystallize our belief systems, facilitating "spiritual change and deepening of beliefs": "Meaning is important, and we each can find this in our own spiritual path and search for values and meanings in our daily life" (178). Antigone and Iphigenia may have had different ideals, but they approached those ideals with similar bravery. Perhaps they were surprised themselves at their own heroism. Only a crisis can reveal our potential, as Stephen Levine writes: "We show ourselves most clearly when we are in crisis, when everything else falls away" (27).

As the examples of Antigone and Iphigenia suggest, determining meaning is a highly individual process. Ultimately, our moral and spiritual perspectives are unique, although they are certainly shaped by culture. Iphigenia's notions of sacrifice are shaped by the warrior code in which she was raised, and Antigone's beliefs about burial are grounded in her culture. But transcendence—recognizing the importance of something beyond our individual lives—is an enduring idea that can be applied to both girls' conduct. In his analysis of Iphigenia's decision, Bruno Snell uses the verb "transcend" to describe Iphigenia's behavior, comparing her favorably to the older and more

experienced Agamemnon: "She has the ability to infuse the events with a deeper significance, to see that the matter transcends her future as well as that of Helen and Menelaus. She can recognize that something higher is at stake, and in doing so leaves her father's pathetic perplexity behind" (Snell 399). We instinctively respect Iphigenia's high-minded resolve (whether or not we agree with her logic) and with good reason. Transcendence is one of the "core virtues widely endorsed" in "influential religious and philosophical traditions," as surveyed by Positive Psychologists (Peterson 139). To the extent that values can be "near-universal," as Peterson phrased it, these core virtues are. According to him, transcendence is valued in traditions separated by vast distances of time and space: Buddhism, Athenian philosophy, Christianity, the nonliterate Maasai (in western Kenya) and Inughuit (in northern Greenland), to name only a few (139). Transcendence like Iphigenia's and Antigone's is most evident (and most needed) during times of crisis, as Peterson notes: "Certain strengths are evidenced only when someone 'rises to the occasion' that presents itself. One cannot be brave except in frightening circumstances" (150). Although no one would welcome a crisis, it does afford an opportunity to access the best aspects of one's character.

Antigone and Iphigenia display their laudable character traits very publicly before the polis and the army, respectively—relatively unusual places for Ancient Greek women to exercise influence. Alcestis, conversely, has the opportunity to exercise heroism within the domestic sphere. Although her actions take place within the home, news of her conduct spreads throughout the town, winning her honor. Describing her action, Anne Burnett uses the same term (*aristeia*) applied to warriors in the *Iliad* at the very acme of their fighting prowess: "She is given public praise as the best of women, whose death

will be the fullest expression of her aristeia" (Burnett 258). *Aristeia* refers either to excellence (in terms of character or behavior) or to prowess (generally prowess on the battlefield). Either way, excellence carries a sense of bravery. Women, it seems, can be as heroically brave as Diomedes or Hector—perhaps more so in the case of Alcestis, who preserves life instead of ending it. Like Iphigenia and Antigone, she is faced with a choice that requires heroism: she will end either widowed or dead, depending on whether or not she chooses to die in Admetus' place. Burnett explains why she finds death preferable: "Alcestis chose to die rather than to live as Admetus' widow (the two existing possibilities, once Pheres and his wife had declined) because she saw that in these circumstances her death would best serve that to which her life was dedicated, her marriage. She states this with cool idealism" (259-260). Another hero, Heracles, prevents her choice from becoming a permanent tragedy. He, too, has his ideals.

Fortunately, nobility and heroism do not always require the sacrifice of one's life. Evidence from the tragedies and from psychology supports the idea that crises and trauma hone character, something that endures long after the crisis has ended. It might be more accurate to say that such events force us to function on a higher level. As psychologist Christopher Peterson writes, "Crisis may or may not be the crucible of character, but it certainly allows the display of what virtue ethicists refer to as corrective strengths of character" (156). A "corrective" transformation of this kind is most evident in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, when Achilles' son Neoptolemus discovers the kind of man he wishes to be. He is forced to formulate his moral framework and act upon those convictions in a single day—a dramatized (and dramatic) form of a real psychological phenomenon. In "The Role of Suffering in Human Flourishing," Elizabeth Hall and her

colleagues write, “Through the process of struggling with adversity, changes may arise that propel the individual to a higher level of functioning than that which existed prior to the event” (43). In Neoptolemus’ case, the young man has been conscripted by the Greek army, along with Odysseus, to help retrieve the suffering Philoctetes. This act will allow the Greek army to defeat the Trojans. A forerunner of Machiavelli, Sophocles’ Odysseus explains to Neoptolemus that they must engage in short-term deception to win long-term glory. (In other words, the ends justify the means.) Neoptolemus, uneasy about this from the start, deliberates his options: if Neoptolemus forsakes his mission, he will be despised as a traitor; if he forces Philoctetes to come to Troy, he will become dishonorable in his own eyes. “Everything is unpleasant when a man forsakes his own character and does things untrue to himself,” he says darkly during a conversation with Philoctetes (902-903). He is clearly troubled.

While the kind of transformation Neoptolemus makes is undoubtedly positive, it is not pleasant per se. He must make a terrible choice and endure its consequences, a situation characteristic of such dilemmas in ancient and modern times. Christopher Peterson explains that “the good life,” in terms of virtue, is not necessarily easy: “When we are highly engaged in fulfilling activities, when we are speaking from our hearts, or when we are doing something heroic, we may or may not be smiling, and we may or may not be experiencing pleasure in that moment. All of these are central concerns to positive psychology, and they fall outside the realm of happiology” (Peterson 7). However, the triumph Neoptolemus feels is evident when he announces, “My error I committed was shameful, and I will try to make it right!” (*Philoctetes* 1249). A note of something like jubilation is evident as well. The epiphany is bound up with both his sense of honor and

his sense of community; in being true to himself, he is also true to others, as Douglas Cairns explains: "[Neoptolemus'] concern for his self-image as a man of honor promotes not selfish pursuit of his own self-assertive goals, but concern for another person. The code of honor to which he subscribes is inclusive: it is disgraceful both to fail to meet one's obligations or to pursue success by excessive or improper means" (Cairns 312).

It is this level of authenticity Neoptolemus displays—this dedication to values and ideals—that ultimately constitutes real flourishing, according to Positive Psychologists: "We now realize that the good life at its core involves how one rises to the occasion" (Peterson 15). Paradoxically, even if Neoptolemus had suffered grievous consequences for his honorable behavior, he still would have achieved something akin to what we might call happiness. Whether or not this seems logical on the surface, psychologists' observations confirm that the development of character strengths yields greater life satisfaction overall:

> …those who experienced crisis showed elevated levels of certain character strengths relative to those who had not experienced crisis… These strengths in turn were associated with higher life satisfaction. The ultimate implication of the present results is that deliberate interventions targeting these strengths may help people not only survive but flourish following a crisis. (Peterson 156)

It is equally true that Neoptolemus achieves happiness because he is thinking not of himself but of the greater good—another truth confirmed by Positive Psychology. As Peterson reports, "Using different samples and different methods, we found that those who pursue eudemonic goals and activities are more satisfied than those who pursue pleasure" (78). Eudemonism is the intersection of the best self with the community at large. Elaborating on this concept, Peterson explains that "people should develop what is best within themselves and then use those skills and talents in the service of greater

goods—including in particular the welfare of other people or humankind writ large" (Peterson 78). Neoptolemus does just that when he decides to help Philoctetes.

I suspect that this is one reason Greek tragedy appeals to us: at its best, the genre depicts humanity as noble and strong, enduring even after being subjected to myriad misfortunes. In prologue of Euripides' *Orestes*, Electra's first words are a paean to that strength: "There is nothing terrible—no calamity, no destined misfortune—that man's nature cannot bear as a burden" (1-2). Cedric Whitman points out that Oedipus, too, opens the *Colonus* by mentioning his own strength and nobility: "In his very opening speech, Oedipus mentions 'suffering, time, and third, nobility' as the things which have given him his strength" (Whitman 234). Far from being the pathetic and passive recipients of fate, humans have the resources and the fortitude to flourish. Audiences and readers of Greek tragedy recognize that the seemingly intractable problems presented therein must end one of two ways, according to Herman Altena: "These plays either promise the possibility of a solution, or display man acting heroically in the face of his tragic condition…" (Altena 474). Either option is spiritually uplifting, which contributes to the enduring appeal of tragedy. Kitto explains why Sophocles in particular, with his great-souled heroes and heroines, resonates with audiences: "Sophocles leaves us with a great sense of the dignity of being a man. To have been great of soul is everything" (Kitto 130). Perhaps unconsciously, we see our own best selves reflected in the portraits of tragedy's heroes because the human aspects of the plays are so relatable and universal. Kitto explains this phenomenon as well: "The hero of pure tragedy of situation is Man, almost undifferentiated" (32). The hero, in other words, is us.

The setting is a world very familiar to us as well, with its reversals of fortune and its great sufferers. Tragedy is an unflinching portrayal of what can go wrong in life, and perhaps there is something appealing in that honesty. Even the most positive (and Positive) psychologists call for a clear-eyed view of life as it really is, not a denial or idealization: "As I have said, positive psychology does not deny the negative, and it may well be that what is most troubling in life can set the stage for what is most fulfilling" (Peterson 305). Only such an honest perspective "can set the stage" for what is best in humanity as well. Before the theatrical backdrop of black calamity, Man has the chance to shine all the brighter in the spotlight. Peterson points out that some of humanity's traits are only visible against this dark backdrop, just as the stars cannot appear without the night sky: "Strengths of courage entail the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal. Some philosophers have regarded virtues as corrective because they counteract some difficulty inherent in the human condition, some temptation that needs to be resisted, or some motivation that needs to be checked or rechanneled" (Peterson 142). He might as well have been writing about Greek tragedy, where characters struggle against Destiny—and at times themselves. While the gods do perform *deux-ex-machina* rescues in tragedy rather often, they are just as frequently elusive, indifferent, or downright cruel. In the end, the human characters in tragedy must trust in themselves. Cedric Whitman reminds us how this Greek worldview stands apart from the Judeo-Christian tradition: "There was no Messiah in Greek theology; if man was to come near to the divine, he must get there himself" (Whitman 242-243). If the tragic man can access the quasi-divine nobility within, his heroism will achieve a form of immortality, preserved in art: "Revaluated in the light of the sublime, tragedy becomes a

statement of a force that can rise heroically above such loss to affirm an inner human nobility—even, symbolically at least, a kind of immortality" (Halliwell 411).

What a privilege it is to be a human being, tragedy tells us. But it is not easy. Hickling asks his readers, "Who ever said it was easy or simple to be human? But, what else would we rather be?" (223). We can only answer this catechism with two words: no one; nothing. We are both infinitely fragile and infinitely strong, and indeed, the two traits are interconnected, according to Whitman: "The noblest in man is rooted in his essential weakness and subjection to change" (242). Within this world of change and uncertainty, people must actively *choose* nobility. In a way, Greek tragedy is a forerunner to existentialism, with its emphasis on responsibility in the face of despair and uncertainty:

> The mythical stories dramatized by the Greek tragedians recognize time and again that individual human beings are responsible for the world they create, even if irrational forces may at any moment undermine their efforts. Many modern theater artists feel that this emphasis on personal responsibility in a world of imponderable forces is particularly relevant as an alternative model of Western entertainment culture that shuns complexity and fosters indifference. (Altena 479)

I would venture to say that no art form is more relevant and more important in our time.

There is one Greek word that captures the essence of what it means to be a human being: *deinos*. Among its many possible translations are wondrous, marvelous, and strange—but also fearful, terrible, and dangerous. Psychiatrist Mark Epstein's take on the dual nature of life—at once so beautiful and so calamitous—is reminiscent of this protean word:

> Life is beautiful sometimes, for sure; in fact, it's totally amazing, every day a good day; but that doesn't stop things from being fragile or precarious, nor does it stop us from feeling all too alone. Of course, the line between normal everyday life and calamity seems extraordinarily thin sometimes, but regular life, even in its glory, is difficult. Things don't

> always go the way they should. Our friends and loved ones struggle. The specter of loss is always hovering. And we feel adrift, unmoored, fearful, and out of our depth. (Epstein 15)

Deinos appears frequently in tragedy and most famously in Sophocles' "Ode to Man" in Antigone. The word presents translators with quite a challenge: Are humans wondrous, terrible, strange, or marvelous? In the Loeb edition, Hugh Lloyd-Jones went with "formidable," an inspired choice not listed in the Liddel & Scott lexicon. I leave the untranslatable *deinos* untranslated in the opening line: "There are many *deinos* things, and nothing is more *deinos* than man" (332-334). This is not an unalloyed celebration of humanity as many readers might think, especially if the translator opts for "wondrous" or "marvelous." "The ingenuity of his craft is clever beyond all expectation," Sophocles marvels, but the line is followed by this qualification: "and he uses it sometimes for evil and other times for good" (*Antigone* 365-367). No one could argue with that honest assessment. Man is neither good nor bad but as complex as the word *deinos* suggests. In a genre so preoccupied with destiny and fate, it is no wonder that Sophocles celebrates our resourcefulness in the face of calamity: "He never goes defenseless to his destiny; against death alone has he found no escape" (*Antigone* 360-362). Much has changed since these lines were written, but they still resonate with readers. They are as close to timeless as anything I have seen in literature.

No word in tragedy captures the spectrum of human experience better than the adjective Sophocles chose to describe us. Yes, we will feel terror in our life, but we will experience wonder as well. If we approach the world as the tragedians did, we may find that we have the capacity to feel both emotions simultaneously. The Greeks, with their nuanced and artistic view of the world, saw the beauty in both wonder and terror. That is perhaps the best lesson they can teach us.

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

When I tell people the topic of my dissertation, they often ask me some variation of this question: "Why Greek tragedy? Isn't it, well…depressing?" I wonder what they would think if they knew the truth: that I turn to Greek tragedy when I am already depressed, the same way some of my friends turn to Xanax when they feel anxious. It immediately soothes me in a way other genres do not. I think it's because there's some comfort in knowing that other people have felt the way I do. Indeed, they have felt much, much worse. To me Greek tragedy is about connecting—maybe not to specific people, but to humanity in general. Somehow we humans have retained remarkable similarities, across physical oceans and gulfs of time.

Also, whatever I'm going through, at least I'm not Oedipus. There is that comfort in Greek tragedy, too.

When I was in high school, I first admired the artistry of the genre: the symbol of the porphyria cloth, so deftly woven into *Agamemnon*; the spectacle of humans grappling with Destiny, a formidable if elusive opponent; the plot of *Oedipus Rex*, the most masterfully executed plot of all time, in my estimation (and Aristotle's).

Then elements from tragedy figured into in my own life story, and my connection to it deepened. Six years ago my father knocked on my door and told me that my mother had died, suddenly and with no warning. I remember thinking, weeks later, that he was like a messenger from Greek tragedy—perhaps the Messenger from Aeschylus who told the Persians that their entire army had been destroyed. The loss was that unexpected and devastating to me. Oscar Wilde, less well known for being a skilled classicist than being

as brilliant playwright, remarked that life imitates art more than the other way around. Or perhaps we only notice the similarities after the fact, as I did with Greek tragedy.

At any rate, I learned firsthand what Aeschylus meant by wisdom coming through suffering. The experience altered me as irrevocably as the sacrifice of Iphegenia altered Agamemnon's home life. Of course I had experienced loss before that: your standard-issue disappointments with love, rejection letters, broken friendships. However, the intrusion of calamity, rendered surreal by its suddenness, alters one's consciousness. Ostensibly, my life continued as it had before my mother's death; inwardly, the path of my mind shifted. Since then, it has continued on a different course.

If I try to articulate the difference, I hesitate, fearing degeneration into platitudes. I will say that I view the ordinary much differently now. When I was younger I felt impatient with ordinary days, willing them to speed by so I could experience their more exciting counterparts: Christmas mornings, birthdays, trips to Paris. Now I feel a sense of gratitude at the end of an ordinary day, as imperceptible as the gradual fading of that day's light. Most of the time I barely notice it. Sometimes, though, I catch myself thinking, "Today was a peaceful day." I don't view this as becoming jaded or lowering my expectations. Actually, most philosophers would approve of the mindset, and tragedians certainly understood the infinite value of an ordinary day. After all, proximity to tragedy increases that value exponentially. In Euripides' *Alcestis*, a servant woman describes the queen as she waits for death: "She wants to see the sun's light this one last time" (205-207). This is the sort of line that I once would have skimmed over but now find achingly poignant. Despite my horror of clichés, I've actually found myself stopping to smell flowers.

After immersing myself for years in Greek literature, I've concluded that certain aspects of American culture set us up for disappointment. When we're children, Disney movies assure us that all will end well; we just have to wait ninety minutes. When we're adults, romantic comedies serve the same function in the same time frame. In both cases, one solution (usually a man) neatly wraps up the plot, and everyone is happy. We're left wondering why our lives don't follow the same pattern—and why, while we're at it, we don't look like Ariel or Mila Kunis. Consequently, we imagine ourselves the unfortunate exceptions, lone islands in a vast sea of prosperity. To voice this is to be labeled "pessimistic" or risk being told to "snap out of it." And so we end up watching Maury Povich to console ourselves that others are much more pathetic than we are.

By the same token, I often found myself vaguely disappointed at the aftertaste of many of the so-called Great Books. It was only recently that I realized why: many of the books that captivated me in my late teens and early 20s carried with them a message of disillusionment. Jay Gatsby's elusive green light of hope turns out to be a mirage, and so (reads the subtext) will your dreams. "Life isn't the way you hope it is when you're young," the books whisper wistfully. It is true that life isn't quite what we hoped it would be in our childhood. But when we read works that reflect life at its worst—as we understand the worst to be—and simultaneously celebrate its richness in spite of the tragedy, the act of reading becomes a spiritual phenomenon that transcends philosophy and intellectual reasoning. That is, when we approach life the way the tragedians would have us do, we will find that it infinitely surpasses what we could have conceived as children.

That's why Greek tragedy can be so refreshing after disillusioning literature and popular culture: it is pathetic not in the Maury Povich sense but the classical one, which suggests depth of feeling.[58] And it is above all artistic. People suffer and wail and curse their fate, and they do so in verse. I remember marveling that when Agamemnon is stabbed, he cries out in perfect iambs. That is the Greek ideal, which Friederich Nietzsche describes so magisterially in *The Birth of Tragedy*. He views this as the essence of Greek genius: to hear the story of Oedipus and recognize it as beautiful. As Professor Stephen Levine reminds us, "For Nietzche, only the tragic poet, not the philosopher, can look into the abyss and say 'Yes!'" (28).

Ultimately, Greek tragedy doesn't provide easy answers. You can't embroider any of its advice on a pillow. Instead, its wisdom is an intricate tapestry, woven with stories of characters who suffer and hope and find redemption. But these are our stories too. Perhaps that's why, in certain light, the figures on the tapestry look so familiar.

[58] The Greek word *pathos*, which means (among other things) emotion and passion, remains intact in its English transliteration.

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