

## The Recovery Of A Comprehensive View Of Greek Tragedy

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An accurate view of Greek Tragedy is currently very much a desideratum. While in the poetical world of Tragedy, a human individuality is formed through the imitation of the gods by participation in the life of Family and State, contemporary views obscure this divine-human dialectic. Falling within the logic developed by Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy*, they assume a human individuality complete in itself and make it the subject of the tragic action.<sup>1</sup>

At stake in the recovery of a comprehensive view of Greek Tragedy is not mere archaeological exactness, but a right understanding of our spiritual history, ancient and modern. Tragedy has played an essential role in the development of that Hellenic spirit which together with the Judaic has animated our Western and Christian civilization. Moreover, a profound enthusiasm for Greek Tragedy has captured the European imagination since the end of the eighteenth century, and a deeper interpretation than that of Nietzsche is necessary to make that enthusiasm comprehensible.

This article proposes, therefore, first to locate Tragedy in its general spiritual context, by presenting it as a further development of the spiritual world that the war between the Titans and Olympians has established. Second, it will argue that the Nietzschean view of tragedy does not respect the primacy of the Olympian gods in the formation of human individuality. Third, in a consideration of *Antigone* it proposes to suggest an interpretation of one tragedy in accord with the principles expressed more generally in the first two parts of the article. Lastly, it will seek to show that in its discovery of a rational humanity imitative of the gods lies the true interest of tragedy both as part of our history and our contemporary life.

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<sup>1</sup> This does not imply that contemporary critics are professed Nietzscheans or even have read him. Rather it means that in their treatment of the divine-human relation they are able no more than Nietzsche to maintain the centrality of the gods but instead put humans centre-stage, and reduce the gods to being expressions of human emotions and states, the remnants of a mythological world, or a senseless fatality. For example Denys Page (*Agamemnon*, eds. Denys Page and J. Denniston, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1957, p.xxii) can call the reconciliation of Athens and the Furies in the *Oresteia* only "an artificial contrivance." Sir Richard Jebb (*Sophocles, Part III*, Amsterdam, A.M. Hakkert, 1971, p. xx) reduces the *Antigone* to a conflict between the "duty of obeying the State's laws" and "the duty of listening to the private conscience." E.R. Dodds, in his edition of *Bacchae* ((Oxford, Clarendon Press, second edition, 1960, p. xiv) says that we see in this play that "we ignore at our peril the demand of the human spirit for Dionysiac experience." Dodds has thus reduced the awful worship of a god to human psychology.

First, the world of Tragedy, as that of Homeric Epic, assumes the result of the war between the Olympian gods and the Titanic powers, i.e. the more rational powers such as Zeus, Apollo and the like have overthrown the nature powers, and the undeveloped spiritual gods such as Dike and Nemesis, associated with them. The poet then shows a collision that is at once human and divine within the spiritual world that the triumph of the Olympians has created. This collision can result from a conflict within the *polis* or between an essential aspect of the *polis* and the earlier Titanic realm. The result is a unified divine-human cosmos.

The differences among the three great tragedians arise from their peculiar treatments of this unification, and especially from their differences in presenting the particular balance of divine and human through whose action the unification is accomplished. This can be best illustrated by well-known examples from each tragedian. In the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, the conflict appears first as a human conflict, between Orestes and his mother Clytaemnestra; the son asserts, on behalf of his father, the rights of marriage, by killing his mother, while Clytaemnestra asserts the inviolable tie of mother to son. This conflict is clarified first by the collision of the gods who embody these different rights, Apollo, who represents the Olympian right of marriage, and the Furies, who represent the more Titanic right of the blood-tie. Only Zeus' daughter, however, acting for her father, can reconcile these rights. She does so by giving the primacy to what Apollo represents, and then acknowledging the Furies by drawing them into the *polis* of Athens as necessary supporters of this Olympian institution. Thus, while the reconciliation can be effected only by Athena, only the *polis* can be the locus of that reconciliation.

Sophocles does not like Aeschylus show the realm of the Olympian gods in its foundation through the drawing of the Titanic realm into itself. Rather, assuming the establishment of the Olympian world, he shows the tragic hero discovering that he must reverence equally the gods of the upper world and the lower world, by living in both the State and the Family: the gods of the upper world protect the State, while the gods of the underworld protect the Family. Thus in *Antigone*, for example, Creon learns to his ruin that he cannot so govern the State as to make it sovereign over the family obligations of Antigone, and she learns that she cannot disregard the State in so fulfilling them.

This catastrophe joins together human activity with the realm of divine essentiality. Both Creon and Antigone have a total experience of divinity, which is revealed thereby as itself radically one. Creon has experienced first, the rational and active subjectivity of the ruler, which belongs to the gods of the upper world, and in the course of the play comes to experience the opposite extreme, the pure potentiality of Hades and the Family; the movement between these two extremes constitutes his tragic career. Antigone experiences the same unification of opposites but begins from the side of the Family, and ends with particular subjectivity. Thus in Sophoclean tragedy humanity realizes itself by experiencing at the same time catastrophe and actual imitation of the gods. Thus Sophoclean drama ends with the ambiguity that, while human subjectivity has no reality independent of divine life, humans and not gods make the divine reality actual.

Euripides presents a tragic world in which, at the same time, the division between Titanic and Olympian again appears and the relation between the drama and the spectator becomes explicit. In the *Bacchae* Dionysus himself causes the collision between the Bacchic unification with nature and the institutional life of the Family and State. At the beginning of the play the god announces to the audience, a type of address unique to Euripides amongst the tragedians, that his divinity has been slighted by his own family. Since he is a son both of Zeus and a mortal woman, this means that not only is participation in the life of family and State part of the due worship of Zeus, but also the mystical union with nature made real in his son. The play shows the dreadful consequences for humanity of not properly integrating this mysticism with the life of the polis, but as indicated before, the absolute necessity of this happening if the gods are to be properly acknowledged. The play ends with this dilemma facing not only the characters of the drama, but the audience as well.

Aristophanic Comedy then indicates that only an actual individual can unite the Titanic and Olympian elements concretely. No god and no merely poetic hero can accomplish this, but only the comic hero, drawn from the most vulgar elements of contemporary Athenian life, and then purged of this vulgarity. The comic hero reduces all divine essentiality to moments of his activity and thus marks the end of Greek religion.<sup>2</sup>

In each of the tragedians only the entire drama indicates to the hero and the spectator the true nature of human and divine life. At the beginning of the drama, the central characters have a limited, one-sided view of divinity, and their action is animated by a similarly partial view of humanity. Only the hero's (or heroes') experience of an opposed aspect of both human and divine life then indicates the true nature of each. Often the revelation of a deeper view of both humanity and the gods comes only at the expense of the heroes' death. In the *Women of Trachis* for example, both Deianeira and Heracles experience the whole realm of divinity; yet Heracles ends by commanding his own death, while his wife has already killed herself. Thus while it is always human action that leads to the disclosure of the divine and human natures, this action always arises only as a certain imitation of the gods.

If, then, one should imagine an allegedly complete and self-subsistent human individual as from the beginning the subject of the drama, this would altogether obscure the meaning of Greek Tragedy. Such an assumption, however, animates the various interpretations of Tragedy offered over the last century and a half, and has rendered tragedy altogether opaque to contemporaries. *The Birth of Tragedy*<sup>3</sup> by Friedrich Nietzsche offers the deepest expression of this contemporary view, and an examination of it, although brief, will go far in indicating why our age can little understand that Tragedy which draws us so powerfully.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Birds* indicates this explicitly; at the end of the play, the sovereignty of Zeus passes to the mortal hero.

<sup>3</sup> ] F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*, tr. F. Golffing, New York: Doubleday, 1956.

<sup>4</sup> George Steiner's book *Antigones* has a wealth of quotations to show the hold of *Antigone* on the modern imagination.

Nietzsche's view of tragedy is based on a distinction seemingly original with him, between the Dionysian and the Apollonian.<sup>5</sup> The latter is the *principium individuationis*, the former the ground of the human's sense of himself as joined to 'being', which is really a 'becoming'. Normally, says, Nietzsche, these two principles operate separately, but in Tragedy they are brought together. There, he argues, the human being in his assumed individuality has the veil removed from his eyes and discovers that his true existence is as nothing less than Being itself; the existence of a world over and above the truly free individual is thus revealed as utterly illusory.

The excellence of Nietzsche's view lies in his knowledge that Tragedy reveals a truth not previously known about human nature, and that this truth is the relation of humanity to ultimate reality. However, as the argument *supra* has indicated, Nietzsche misconstrues the nature not only of man and ultimate reality but the relation between the two. The nature of the gods and of men in Tragedy assumes the victory of the Olympian gods over their predecessors, the Titans; there then occurs both a human and divine movement toward a more concrete relation of these elements than indicated in this myth. While the hero moves toward a concreteness analogous to the gods, the action always revealed his action as depending on the gods as its ground. Thus Nietzsche's idea of 'being' as that which describes the human individual's true existence as the ultimate reality does not properly acknowledge the concrete rule of reason which is essential to Tragedy's account of both divinity and humanity. Nor can Nietzsche account for the difference between man and god that Tragedy also maintains.

Nietzsche's obscuring of the divine-human relation has its ground in his distinction between Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo does not simply represent a *principium individuationis*, nor Dionysus simply the union with Being. In *Oedipus the King*, Apollo illumines not only the man who solves riddles by human reason, but the seer who has an unmediated knowledge as a servant of the god. Apollo is the god both of the individual *par excellence* and of him who proves to be his nemesis. Nor is Dionysus alone the god who leads men to find their individuality in a mystic union with nature. As the patron of both Tragedy and Comedy, he leads men to a deeper sense of that individuality, in Tragedy to know their dependence on the Olympian gods whom they imitate, and in Comedy to know themselves as the true actuality of these same gods.

If the *Bacchae* of Euripides were the only tragedy extant, one might be moved to agree with Nietzsche's definition of the Dionysian. In that play Bacchus does lead those women oppressed by the rigidities of life in the *polis* away from the city to Mount Cithaeron, there to enjoy the wholeness of union with nature. The king who would rule by a purely technological reason nevertheless is attracted to the god but can experience his cult only at the expense of his utter ruin. Yet even the *Bacchae* does not fully support Nietzsche's position. Dionysian exaltation is presented not only as a great good but as the ruin of ethical institutions, King Pentheus suffering death at the hands of his unknowing mother. This ambiguous conclusion points to the need for a more comprehensive world that can do justice at once to realm of the institutions of the *polis* and a Bacchic mysticism of nature.

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<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-24.

In *Frogs* the comic playwright Aristophanes shows that this need for a more inclusive world is not something imposed from outside on the god Dionysus but lies in the very reality of the god himself. This play, produced about the same time that Euripides produced his *Bacchae* (405 B.C.) shows Dionysus in search of himself. He finds himself as he experiences those festivals that lead men to a knowledge of their individuality, and in all three of these, he communicates the life of the gods to men. First, as associated with the mystery cults, he helps men to participate in the life of nature. Then he experiences Tragedy as the festival of his that leads men to a knowledge of themselves as citizens. Since Dionysus does this as the hero of a Comedy, he has experienced the unification of both these ends, the mystical union with nature, and the political realm of citizenship, for human enjoyment.

A brief analysis of the *Antigone* will illustrate the points made above. The action of the drama shows the discovery of a total human individuality through the collision of the two central characters. Each begins the drama with a one-sided view of both community and the gods but discovers in catastrophe the fulness of both. The drama shows that only by a total imitation of the divine life on which humans depend can they realize a full humanity.

The action and the knowledge of the main characters is initially divided. Antigone knows only the Family while her action presupposes the principle of the State. Creon knows only the State, while his action presupposes also the Family. This duality governs not only the two heroes but all characters, and from the beginning the movement toward the overcoming of this one-sidedness animates the action. Antigone tells her sister Ismene that despite Creon's forbidding it, they must both undertake to bury Polyneices. Antigone takes no interest in the question that concerns Creon, of whether Polyneices died fighting nobly or traitorously; nevertheless, not with the inwardness of family feeling, she makes Ismene's willingness to act on behalf of their brother the measure of her being a true sister, not only to Polyneices but to Antigone as well. Thus from the beginning she implicitly unites the givenness of family life with the active principle of the State, while avowing consciously only the principle of the family.

Creon, from the directly opposite view, announces, as he enters to forbid burial for Polyneices, and to command it for Eteocles, that only in the ruler of the State can one see the full exercise of the powers of reason. Yet he demands complete obedience to his edict from all the citizens. He decides on the edict as a king, according to political reason; but he expects the kind of obedience that a father expects from his children, given out of trust and love, not self-conscious thought. He unites in his management of the State the givenness that belongs to family life with the activity that moves the State. Thus like his adversary, he acts only in part on a known principle, ignorant in his case of the family principle that also moves him.

Between the entrance of Antigone and that of Creon, Ismene and the chorus express views that fall between these two extremes. Neither seeks to sum up the whole world of Family and State according to the logic of one of these realms, but consciously to unite aspects of both. Thus while the allegiance of Ismene is primarily to her brother, she

recognizes if not the authority, at least the power, of Creon. The chorus, while it abhors the deed of Polyneices, cannot approve the proposed punishment; they hate his attacking the State, yet revere his family's right to bury him. These intermediate characters, although they recognize more directly the two realms that do the heroes, also do so less comprehensively than the heroes eventually do.

From the beginning of the play, then, each character potentially unites the two realms of Family and State. The totality of these characters and their activity depends on Zeus, whose being underlies the entire drama without his very directly appearing. Antigone appeals to him as the god whose reality is the underworld and the Family; she makes him actual by burying her brother in obedience to the dictates of that realm. For his part, Creon worships Zeus as the god who defends the State and the upper world; he gives reality to the divine essence by decreeing that no traitor can be given honour by anyone in the State, even his family.

While the two central characters make Zeus present in the most radical way, the other characters, although less comprehensively, also do so, through the peculiar form in which they unite Family and State. An entire spiritual world thus presents itself to the imagination of the spectator. He sees the divine essence diversely and yet entirely realized through human activity in the two main institutions.

As indicated above, the first of the play's three parts shows the positions of the opposed heroes as they are in themselves. The second part then shows them in direct conflict, and the third in catastrophe and knowledge, as the ruined heroes acknowledge the realm that each has earlier rejected. Thus after the exposition of their views as indicated above, Antigone and Creon confront each other, the guard having caught Antigone in the very act of performing the forbidden deed. Creon asserts his devotion to the political realm, and the gods above, against Antigone, his own niece, who is made guilty of a capital crime by this measure. Antigone, by saying that Zeus belongs truly to the world below, and that the family is the true institution, thus declares Creon's rule to be illegitimate, and this to his very face.

The third part sees Antigone coming gradually to recognize the State, and the gods above, and Creon to acknowledge the family and the gods below. The first stage in this transformation involves their conflicting attitudes to Ismene. She appears in order to claim some share in her sister's condemnation, and immediately upon seeing her, Creon declares her guilty of the crime. This can arise only from Creon's implicit sense of family solidarity, which is altogether new; he acknowledges the family, if only as a force opposed to him. Antigone, for her part, refuses to allow her sister to share in her punishment. Just as Creon had not decided to punish Antigone until he knew her guilty of an intentional act, so she regards feeling alone as insufficient and makes the commission of an external act the condition of Ismene's suffering punishment; after being prompted by the chorus, Creon agrees. Here then Antigone looks to the more active principle of the State as her measure.

The next scene, between Creon and his son Haimon, shows how both have been involved in the realms that their explicit theories cannot understand, and how each will suffer by following his view to the end. We see that Antigone, silent here, by being betrothed to Haimon has involved herself in the beginning of a new family, and does not live only in the community that she has received from her parents. Creon has also lived in the realm that he has not consciously defended, by founding a family. When he argues with his son the latter says he speaks on behalf of the world below, a position that Creon violently rejects. Yet the only position that Creon advances in this argument is that of obedience, both in the Family and State. This is the principle, however, of a patriarchal community, which can as truly be described as a family as a State. Like Antigone, Creon assimilated the one community to the other. Also like her, he has not sensed the contradiction to his original position that he has been living, and now articulating.

Only in catastrophe do the heroes come to explicitly reverence that which they had earlier spurned. Antigone's reversal comes first, as Creon sentences her to death by being immured in a cave. Before she is led away, she bemoans her unmarried state. Since she had defended the brother-sister relation, she now desires that state of marriage which is the actuality of this given state. She had earlier spoken as if this tie to a brother, received from their parents, were sufficient to define her. The scene with Ismene had shown her making action a necessary part of the familial tie, and now she completes this by stating her desire for marriage. In choosing her defence of her brother as her greatest good, she has deprived herself of that which necessarily develops out of this good. Moreover, Antigone says that she would defy the State only in this regard, on account of this relation's uniqueness; thus at the end she recognizes that the family relation forms one aspect of a spiritual whole. By being true to her one-sided devotion to her brother, she deprived herself of the enjoyment of the fulfilment of that relation, but has a deep knowledge of the whole world of ethical relations. The untimely loss of her particular life is the cost of this comprehensive insight.

Creon's ruin results from the opposite one-sidedness. Because he has tried to govern the family according to the principles of the State, he loses his entire participation in the life of the Family, his wife and son. The catastrophe begins after Creon has reached the culmination of his one-sidedness when he has sent Antigone away to die in a tomb. Teiresias then arrives to denounce him; he accuses Creon of confounding the upper and lower worlds, i.e., the realm of the State and that of the Family. Creon's attempt to free Antigone, urged by Teiresias, is unsuccessful, with her suicide having preceded his arrival. His wife and son thereupon also kill themselves, and Creon is left, as his son earlier had sarcastically said, as the ruler of a desert.

Thus both Creon and Antigone attain, in one way, what they have desired. Creon, having asserted the State as the governing principle of community, lives only in the State, his family having died. Antigone, for her part, having asserted the givenness of family life, is left only with that, the beginning of family life in marriage being impossible for her. At the same time, however, each realizes what he has lost. Through this realization, each has a knowledge of what he has not originally taken account of. Since each has begun with one of the two opposite forms of knowledge, each now has a knowledge not

only of the family and the underworld gods associated with it, but also the State and the gods of the upper world associated with it. Therefore, each has in his ruin a vision of the totality of human community and the gods who underlie it.

The limit of this vision lies in the starting-point of each of the two central characters. Antigone begins with the family and underworld, Creon with the State and upper world. Thus only in their complementarity, do they fully join the two realms together. It belongs more then to the spectator, than the heroes to draw the requisite conclusions. The division between family and state, lower gods and upper, as well as between female and male, are now seen to fall within a prior unity, fully manifested only in the catastrophe of the heroes. Human activity has shown this prior unity, but since humans reveal this only in their ruin, the true priority of the divine is also thereby shown.

Thus the Nietzschean view of Tragedy as showing the identity of the particular individual with 'being' cannot withstand the examination of a play central to the tragic world. The category of 'being' is sufficient neither to man nor to the gods, and it cannot describe the peculiar imitation of the gods that defines tragic humanity. Nietzsche's identification of man with ultimate reality belongs to his own time, not to the original world of Tragedy.

An accurate knowledge of that Tragedy in our time no more serves a merely antiquarian curiosity than did the intellectual interest in Greco-Roman culture of previous ages in our Western and Christian civilization. Whether to find a model in art and politics or to discover a philosophy ancillary to Christian theology, our ancestors saw their relation to aspects of the ancient world as necessary to their own self-understanding. In a similar vein, we cannot understand the historical origins of the Christian religion nor the nature of a Christian secularity without understanding the world that Greek Tragedy presents to our imaginations.

A knowledge of the peculiar form in which Greek Tragedy unites humanity with the divine is essential if one is to see the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as arising not from Judaism nor Hellenic ideas alone but a perfect unification of the two. As was indicated above, Tragedy can show men finitely imitating the gods that despite their movement away from a natural beginning, remain limited. The concept of the Trinity integrates a divine-human unification with an absolutely originative and creative first principle.<sup>6</sup> Tragedy, therefore, can indicate the finite moment of this concept, which Judaism cannot, and at the same time, show the need for its grounding in an originative principle, which only Judaism can supply.

Similarly the need to discover the relation of a Christian secularity to its origins has also been moving in the last two centuries' deep interest in Greek Tragedy. As the argument has shown, the hero in Tragedy experiences a deep unification of ends in his action. Through the hero's joining of family and State, and his experience thereby of the totality of the gods, the spectator has seen the relation of his own ethical world to the absolute world of religion.

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<sup>6</sup> John 1.

The need for an analogous unification of ends has been a moving, if unconscious, force in the cultural and institutional life of the last two hundred years. Several factors are at work here. First, now that all social institutions are felt to correspond to the subjectivity of individuals, the need to know the objectivity of institutions arises very strongly. Here, the reader of Tragedy would see individuals moved by a *pathos* that was at the same time his own and a divinity. Second, the world of the last two centuries has very much asserted the rights of the family and civil society against the sovereign power of kings and the like. This is felt however not only as liberation, but also the atomizing of society. The nature of the tragic collision, whereby the hero learns that he has onesidedly identified himself with only one community, can speak very strongly to those who feel this atomization.

Third, and perhaps most important, modern society has felt the need not only to be independent of ecclesiastical authority, but also to know the relation of a free society to religion.<sup>7</sup> The argument has indicated that in Tragedy the communities uniting men and women together are the very presence of the gods themselves. To an age struggling to find an analogous presence of the Christian god, Greek Tragedy is an ever-present beacon.

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<sup>7</sup> At the very dawn of the contemporary period *The Sorrows of Young Werther* shows the striving of an individual to live out the logic of the Trinity in his daily life.