

POETRY & POLITY: TRAGIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE NATURE OF POLITICAL ASSOCIATION

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1. Introduction

The Greek polis with its simplicity of form and its citizen homogeneity offers a fruitful model for investigating fundamental parameters underlying and determining the ethico-political nature of human association. To inquire into the nature of the polis is in essence to ask how the reasoning and feeling sides of the human psyche are found expressed in justice and friendship in human community.¹ In metaphysical terms, the polis is understood by Aristotle to be an essential unity that is a 'composite whole of parts'; an 'ethical substance' defined by him as the communion of citizens in a polity.² Although Aristotle thus gives the polis a logical structure for thought, he is in fact only making explicit the notion of a unifying polis ideal that is present throughout the Hellenic period, one expressed in the great civic festivals, in funeral orations, in myth and in the reforms of legislators like Solon and Cleisthenes.³

Since the polis takes form concretely in matter, inevitably it falls short of the ideal expressed through its essential nature. What is most especially the polis is identified with its polity as the rational ruling part that defines the common good. However, demanding a place within the structure of the rationally ordered whole are all those natural distinctions that mark the side of feeling and the private good of individual citizens and their families. In the resultant dynamic interplay between these parts of the political association

¹ In every human association (*koinōnia*), Aristotle observes, there seems to be some sort of justice and friendship, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1159b26-27.

² A *koinōnia politōn politeias*, Aristotle, *Politics* 1276b1-2. The 'formal cause', the polity (*politeia*), acting on the communion (*koinōnia*) of citizens (*politōn*) as 'matter', brings into being the 'whole', the polis as a distinct entity. On the ontology of composite objects, see Verity Harte, *Plato on Parts and Wholes*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). It is Aristotle, she notes, who first explicitly sets out the nature of the problem (11). On the polis as an 'ethical substance', see Fred D. Miller, Jr., *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 151.

³ See Sophie Mills, *Theseus, Tragedy and the Athenian Empire*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Robert Parker, *Athenian Religion: A History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Simon Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology," in John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 97-129; Arthur W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 2nd Edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

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instability readily arises with concomitant shifting balances of power. Each 'part' seeks to assert its own ascendancy, its own privileged relation to the good that, in the flux of the sensible world, appears as a 'whole' divided. As a result, the concord (*homonoia*) that is the mark of the just polis is disturbed.⁴ The sides of reason and feeling, no longer ordered together in justice and friendship in relation to a common end as their good, come increasingly into opposition, a disjunction which has at its heart the divided nature of man himself as 'rational animal'.

Fifth-century Athenian tragic drama offers an important insight into the historical decline of the polis, one that offers a rich resource to Plato and Aristotle as they subsequently undertake their own investigations into the essential nature of political association. Over the course of the period of around a century during which tragic drama actively flourishes in Athens, a movement takes place within which modal shifts in tragic understanding can be detected. Driven by the spirit of questioning received values which characterizes the fifth-century enlightenment, the dramatic portrayal of human freedom undergoes significant transformation; whereas in the post-Marathon glory days, freedom is embodied in the ideal of citizenship, it comes increasingly to be seen during the course of the century as the satisfaction of individual ambition and private gain. With the decline in effective power of the objective moral order of the justice of Zeus, which as causal principle has conferred a structure on the 'whole', the examination of the nature of political association focuses less on the ideal than on the perturbations that are destructive of it. The aetiology of this pathological process will be illuminated here through an examination of ethical issues explored in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *Bacchae*. These dramas reveal, I will argue, how the ideal of the polis as a 'whole' is disrupted as the 'parts' lose their inner coherence and order, to become by the end of the century no more than what Aristotle would call a 'heap'.⁵

2. Aeschylus' *Eumenides*

In *Eumenides*, the political community is examined from the perspective of a unified composite whole in which the forces of necessity and freedom are reconciled and there emerges, under the aegis of Athena as demiurge, a charter for the foundation of the just city in the idealized polis of Athens. *Nomos* and *physis* are at one in an objective rational order that is the good of the 'whole'. More than any other extant fifth century tragic drama, the *Oresteia* trilogy seeks to probe the underlying nature of political association to ask how justice is present within it as the ordering principle of human community. Clearly and consistently throughout the trilogy the language of justice (*dikē*)

⁴ On the association of justice and political friendship with *homonoia*, Plato, *Republic* 351d5; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1167a22-b16. See further, Jacqueline de Romilly, "Vocabulaire et propagande ou les premiers emplois de mot 'Ὁμόνοια,'" in *Mélanges de linguistique et de philologie grecques: offerts à Pierre Chantraine*. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), 198-208.

⁵ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1041b11-12.

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and its implications resound as the central and sustaining theme.⁶ In the development of a charter myth for the foundation of the ideal polis, Aeschylus asks questions about the nature of the just city that Plato will later raise in *Republic*.⁷ This is not of course to assert that the *Oresteia* is a philosophical treatise, but to note that its political considerations, concretely expressed through the medium of the poetic imagination, are a coherent expression of concerns shared by poet, philosopher, legislator, and historian alike.

As the mythical paradigm for the ideal of the just polis unfolds in the drama, drawn within its orbit is a historical present in which familial and tribal values, traditionally sustained by a justice based on blood loyalty, must respond to the challenge posed by the demands of the new all-encompassing unity, the ethical justice of the polis order. Coming into focus before the watching Athenians are the very dilemmas with which they have grappled in the political turmoil that has punctuated their march towards the democratic polis of the Periclean age.⁸ What emerges in the course of the *Oresteia* is an understanding that humans must be able to contain the beast within if they are to successfully traverse the gap between a world of tribal vendetta and the civilizing sphere of the polis. The irrational and instinctive aspects of human nature are to be subordinate to a new and rational form of justice which originates, not in the particular ties inherent in kin relationships and tribal autocracy, but in the ethical bonds resident in the institutions which assure the collective good of the citizenry as a whole, which are prior to the distinctions they properly contain.

The conflict and contradiction that pervade *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi* are focused, in *Eumenides*, on a seemingly intractable ethical dilemma in the soul of Orestes where justice is locked in battle with justice, so that to act justly is at once to act unjustly.⁹ If the difficulty that is presented here is to be successfully addressed, and justice is to claim its place as a unified and comprehensive principle of cosmic order active in human society, then the drama must show how these contradictory appearances of justice at war within Orestes can be effectively reconciled. In order to move beyond the dividedness of the appearances of justice and seek out the unity which can ground and

⁶ See on this Anthony J. Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy*, 2nd Edition, (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1999), 63; Alan H. Sommerstein, ed., *Aeschylus, Eumenides*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 19; Colin Macleod, "Politics and the *Oresteia*," in Colin Macleod, *Collected Essays*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 29.

⁷ See Simon Goldhill, "Greek Tragedy and Political Theory," in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, eds. Christopher Rowe & Malcolm Schofield, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 79.

⁸ Discussion on the political import of *Eumenides* has been reviewed in a balanced account by Desmond Conacher, *Aeschylus' Oresteia: A Literary Commentary*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 197-222. See also Podlecki, (1999) 81-100.

⁹ According to Apollo, the Erinyes will punish Orestes if he does not avenge the murder of Agamemnon, Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 283-4. However, they will also pursue him for committing matricide, *Choephoroi* 924-5.

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stabilize their opposition, Aeschylus brings on stage in *Eumenides*, to account in person for their ways towards men, the divine agents that are laying claim to administer justice at Zeus' behest: the Erinyes and Apollo. The division in the soul of Orestes is thus extended to expose a fundamental dichotomy within the order of the divine over the nature of justice. What is yet to be discerned is how there can be a mediation between the natural and instinctual chthonic realm of the Erinyes -- a world in which beast, man and god are conflated -- and the rational order of the Olympians: an ordering of nature and reason that will establish the proper relationship between beasts, men and gods.

With the radical opposition of the Erinyes and Apollo laid bare (198-231), the structure of the problem is in place. Each of these divine powers claims for itself the right to be in actuality the sole principle of just order for the family. The polar contrariety, which immediately divides and sets apart the Erinyes and Apollo, is a dramatic reflection of the opposed interests seen historically to separate the older tribal order centred on the family blood-tie from the emergent polis order. The Erinyes' justice, grounded in necessity, the ineluctable claim of individuals and families to the blood-right of revenge, is confronted by Apollo's position that the integrity of the ethical order, reflected in the complete primacy he accords to the marriage tie, is paramount. The Erinyes cast aside in dishonour the Olympian protectors of marital unions, Apollo claims (213-215).¹⁰ Yet, even while Apollo's justice, as it stands, may already be recognized as an advance in the sense that it offers a means of resolving the dilemma, in this case through ritual purification, it nevertheless remains the case that these two expressions of justice are essentially the same in that they are equally partisan and retaliatory; the anarchy the endless cycle of individual blood vengeance entails is countered by the despotism of an abstract rationality which seeks to equate itself immediately with a collective good.

Yet, taken on their own, the positions of the Erinyes and of Apollo are nevertheless incomplete. Although contrary, the Olympian and the Chthonian are at the same time held in a determinate relation to one another, one in which each side of the opposition contains implicitly that which characterizes the other. Hence, while reason may be distorted by passion in Apollo, it is also the case, as the Erinyes will come to amply demonstrate, that the forces of the irrational are open to being informed by reason.¹¹ Aeschylus makes clear, in *Eumenides*, a recognition that, if the tension and

¹⁰ Not only Aphrodite and Hera but Zeus himself thus suffer dishonour. Apollo's response to the privileging of the parent-child blood-tie by the Erinyes effects a recognition that the primary bonds which hold together the family as the basic social group are not those of blood but the ethically-based attachments that draw feeling and natural necessity within the sphere of the rational self-conscious.

¹¹ Apollo, the voice of divine reason, is abusive, contemptuous, and dismissive of the Erinyes in his encounters with them, arrogantly disdainful of their status as goddesses (179-197). In marked contrast to the torrent of invective poured upon them by Apollo, god of wisdom and foresight, the Erinyes are, in their response to this outburst, respectful, polite and unemotional, replying to Apollo's vituperative jibes with studied logic (198-231).

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opposition which persists between these forces is to be successfully ameliorated, it will not be by the complete rout of one protagonist by the other, the whole equated with one of the parts. What is needed is a measure that can comprehend and unify this primary contrariety so that the natural and the rational -- whether in the soul, in the family, in the city, or in the cosmos -- are not seen as opposed, but as contained within a whole that is comprehensive of their difference: the differentiated moments of a single activity which is the justice of Zeus, actualized in the human community as the ethical life of the polis.

Accepted by both sides as moderator, Athena incarnates the unifying measure that sustains the Athenian ideal. In *Eumenides*, Athena is represented as the idea of Athens personified.¹² In fact, Athena concludes, the matter is too great to be entrusted to mortals or god alone for judgement; a decision must be reached in concert (470-472). A resolution will be worked out between the city's divine patron, Athena (288), as Zeus' representative, and the best of her citizenry, chosen by Athena herself (487-8). In this ideal Athens, Athena herself assumes the functions of the ruler of the polis. In this role she will establish a court of justice to try the case, a mythical charter for the foundation of the historical Court of the Areopagus which is to endure for all time (483-484), providing a legal forum in which the arguments presented by opposing sides can be weighed and judged objectively under law: reason grounded in the justice of Zeus and informed by the exigencies of particular circumstance. Yet, it is important to recognize that the *appearance* of justice established through the mindless mechanical observance of external forms is not to be conflated with the *reality*.

The division in the human jury, which accords an equal respect to the competing claims of instinct and reason, is a further manifestation of the ambivalence already witnessed in the soul of Orestes himself, and of the polarity which is so patently on display in the clashes between Apollo and the Erinyes. In the individual, in the community, and in the divine, necessity and reason have countered their claims. Only in the person of Athena is this duality finally taken up and overcome in the justice of Zeus, the ordering principle of the political community as a 'whole'. Athena's casting vote is not to be seen as a decision unilaterally imposed, but one achieved only in concert with her citizens and arrived at following the outcome of their own deliberations. In accepting Athena's ability to lead them out of their dilemma, and direct the course of action, the citizens accord a priority to the authority of divine reason without effacing that natural difference that marks them as individuals. Through the practical wisdom that she embodies, Athena demonstrates that political reason begins with the universal of thought, the idea of what is good for the polis, and that, as ordering principle, gives form to the whole.¹³ This is the very essence of Athena, the cosmic justice of Zeus made actual in the life of Athens through the rule of rational law.¹⁴ In becoming the *logos* of the

¹² Sommerstein, (1989) 132-133.

¹³ What Aristotle refers to as *heteron ti*, the 'something else' that must be present to order the parts into a whole. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1041b 11-48. See also *Metaphysics* 1043b4-14.

¹⁴ Podlecki, (1999 63-100), notes Aeschylus' use of the language of the law courts throughout the *Oresteia*.

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institutions of the polis, exemplified here in the deliberations of the court of the Areopagus, reason ceases to be abstract and the just polis becomes actual.

Nevertheless, even a divinely mandated Justice embodied in the Laws and interpreted by a human tribunal consisting of the best of the citizens, is not of itself sufficient to maintain order and prevent discord (*stasis*) from breaking out in the polis when confronted with innate individual human desires and passions, ever-threatening to set private interest before the common good. Only when factional strife has been banished from the polis (977-978) does there arise the possibility that citizens bonded to one another in friendship will love and hate as one (a *koinophilēs dianōia*, 984-986). Athena has demonstrated her statesmanship with her decisive leadership of the court proceedings. Now, in her handling of the anger and bitterness of the Erinyes, she provides an exemplary model of how through, the power of persuasion (Holy *Peithō*, 885), the successful statesman is able to win over even the fiercest and most obdurate opposition and keep the ship of state on its true course. As she attempts to bring the Erinyes within the civilized order, Athena recognizes and appeals to their unspoken need for a broader recognition and acceptance. Hence she offers them a place of honour in her city and a cult of their own, a chance to be an integral element in maintaining the integrity of the polis.

Gradually, under Athena's wise guidance and persuasive power, the Erinyes are brought from a narrow concentration on blood vengeance to a broad social mandate that encompasses the natural side of human life (930-931). The emotional energy and drive they embody -- which, unfocussed, represents a powerful disruptive force threatening to tear the polis apart -- will, when harnessed in the service of the common good, prove equally potent in catalysing the cohesive bonds of friendship that bind the citizens together as one. Both sides, reason and passion, must be present in a human community.¹⁵ As chthonic powers, Athena indicates, the Erinyes possess not only the capacity for destruction but also a contrary and contrasting potential for beneficence.¹⁶ Henrichs argues that "the Erinyes require the existence of the Eumenides to achieve their full meaning, and vice versa."¹⁷ Understood in this way, the polar contrariety of the Erinyes-Eumenides reveals the goddesses as a dyadic potency capable of being actualized for benefit or harm, pleasure or pain. In *Eumenides*, this potential is actualized

¹⁵ Plato and Aristotle will lay great emphasis on the significance of passion (*thumos*) properly oriented as a cohesive force rather than a potent source of discord (*stasis*).

¹⁶ There is no evidence prior to Aeschylus that the two groups of deities (Erinyes and Eumenides) shared a common function. Sommerstein (1989, 11) suggests that Aeschylus is here "making a startling innovation."

¹⁷ Albert Henrichs, "Anonymity and Polarity: Unknown Gods and Nameless Altars at the Areopagos," *Illinois Classical Studies* 19 (1994): 54. Henrichs (1994, 28) argues convincingly that "Erinyes ('Angry Ones') and Eumenides ('Kindly Ones') are the two names for the polar identities of the same group of powerful divinities who dwell beneath the earth". He brings together a wealth of evidence that would identify the Eumenides with the cult of the Semnai Theai (Holy Goddesses) whose underground home was on the Areopagus (1994, 39).

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beneficially by Athena, and the goddesses are accorded a meaningful place within the rational order of the polis. Now properly Eumenides, the goddesses urge unbounded blessings, both material and social, for Athens and her people. Nevertheless, Athena reminds them, they retain a potent threat of retribution for those who transgress (932-935, 952-955). Indeed, in *Bacchae*, Euripides amply demonstrates the disastrous consequences that follow the failure to properly integrate this polar duality of the irrational.

As the *Oresteia* concludes, the city celebrates its collective identity. Zeus and Moira come together as one in endorsing the peace treaty that has been established between reason and natural necessity (1044-1046). The extension of the rule of Zeus into the human realm provides a rational ethical order for the polis and its institutions, while the goddesses govern the sphere of the natural and instinctual. Reinforced by the positive emotive power of collective cult, the law is taken up into the minds and hearts of the citizens, promoting internal harmony and keeping at bay the menace of political discord as each citizen sees himself actualizing his own freedom objectively in attaining to the common good.¹⁸ At the centre of the polis stands the Court of the Areopagus, its divinely given mandate to invoke that reverence and fear for the Laws that is to sustain the just political community. As Macleod remarks, "the parallelism of city and individual is part of Aeschylus' thinking as much as it is of Plato's."¹⁹ For both poet and philosopher alike, the concern is to identify directly the life of human flourishing (*to eu zēn*) with the just community.²⁰

Yet, amid the euphoria that marks the conclusion of *Oresteia*, there is a note of caution that must be sounded. The natural world is characterised by movement and change. What has been achieved is not the finality of an indissoluble good but the respite of a peace treaty crafted from the primary contrariety of Apollo and the Erinyes, a division of the opposing powers of despotism and anarchy that, through the mediation of Athena, has been overcome in the unity of Zeus. Although reconciled at the close in the justice of Zeus, these powers nevertheless retain the potential to break free, exhibiting themselves in that human recklessness which brings in its train disaster and ruin. To

¹⁸ On the importance of collective performance of ritual to the integrity of society, see Albert Henrichs, "Changing Dionysiac Identities," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition. Volume 3. Self-Definition in the Greco-Roman World*, eds. Ben F. Meyer and E. P. Sanders, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 150. See also Richard Seaford, "Historicizing Tragic Ambivalence: The Vote of Athena," in *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama*, ed. Barbara Goff, (Austin: University of Texas, 1995), 216.

¹⁹ Macleod, 32. See Aeschylus *Eumenides*. 522-5. Peter Euben, in *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), argues similarly (67).

²⁰ Nevertheless, the differences between the justice of Aeschylus, founded on traditional piety, and that of Plato based on a rationally articulated objective good, will in Plato's view prove defining and will necessitate the removal of even the works of Aeschylus from the public life of Kallipolis.

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understand that this is the case, however, is not *eo ipso* to bring into question or to subvert the polis ideal, but rather to bring to consciousness a recognition of the difficulties to be addressed in its realization. In this way, Aeschylus' ideal Athens, Plato's ideal city, and indeed Aristotle's unconditionally best constitution of *Politics* Book 3, are analogous. Thus, amid the overt joy and optimism with which the trilogy concludes, the hope and expectation for the attainment of the polis ideal, Aeschylus clearly remains aware of the inherent fault lines that inevitably persist in human community as it alternately reaches towards and falls away from the just political community that is its end.

3. *Antigone*

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, as in the *Eumenides*, justice clashes with justice. There is an important difference between the plays, however, in the way that they resolve this clash. In *Eumenides*, Aeschylus presents a clearly articulated resolution to the dilemma by establishing the relation of the parts to the whole.²¹ In *Antigone*, by contrast, the human mind is no longer content to be held within the bounds of a traditional moral order. Whereas Aeschylus has looked at the political community from the divine perspective of the encompassing 'whole', Sophocles focuses on the human dilemma and on the problematic relation between the 'parts' in a world where divine and human knowing are seemingly incommensurate, and man has begun actively to assert himself as the measure of what is. Yet, the polis in *Antigone* is still the extension of the rule of Zeus into the human realm. The gods remain the ultimate objective arbiters of the validity of human actions. Their presence is everywhere felt in the fatal clash of Creon and Antigone, a confrontation in which "knowledge, or the presumption of knowledge, reflects the limits of human power and man's responsibilities to the areas of the unknown, the uncontrollable, the sacred."²²

At this critical nexus for 'tragic consciousness' the path for man divides and the fate of the polis as a 'whole of parts' is played out. Faced with the inescapable recognition that the objective good that sustained the older order has fallen into a division in which he finds himself caught between public and private good, man has two choices. He can take the path that historically the Greek enlightenment was to take: the road that leads to an ever-multiplying diversity of conflicting human goods, the worth of which individual human subjects and their chosen allies are the judges. Thus we arrive at the end-stage polis portrayed in the works of Euripides and Thucydides towards the close of the fifth century. Alternatively, man can attempt to find a way of addressing the primary sources of tension and polar opposition within the political community, seeking to bridge the tragic divide by restoring an ordered relation of the 'parts' to the objective good of the 'whole,' a new rational understanding which can withstand the fifth-century

²¹ A *koinōnia politōn politeias* in which the citizenry comes together in a common bond of friendship, a (*koinophilēs dianoia*) under the justice of Zeus.

²² Charles Segal, "Sophocles' Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the *Antigone*," *Arion* 3 (1964): 49.

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enlightenment challenge to its integrity. This is the path that the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle will take, their ultimate challenge to overcome a division of reason and feeling that has its source within the soul of man.

Human ingenuity, the Chorus in *Antigone* tells us, possesses a propensity for both nobility and for baseness (365-7). If mankind is successfully to address ethical dilemmas, such as *Antigone* discloses, humans must seek to know themselves, their own nature and its limitations. Indeed, it is lack of understanding that is the true human tragedy, the quintessential tragic divide that must be bridged. The problem that results in the impasse manifested in *Antigone* is not intrinsically insoluble. Sophocles himself shows in *Ajax*, in the clash between the Atreidae and Odysseus over the burial of Ajax, that it is possible to negotiate a resolution to such an issue of contention. Unquestionably, conflicts arise in which two goods can be identified but, due to force of circumstance, one can only be achieved at the expense of the other. However, if the opposition between rival goods in *Antigone* is indeed truly irremediable in this way, as MacIntyre argues, then it is not susceptible to ethical deliberation in any meaningful sense.²³ No one deliberates about what cannot be otherwise, Aristotle points out.²⁴ With goods thus simply opposed and incompatible, any choice that is made must be recognized as being arbitrary. By contrast, the tragic power of the Sophoclean ethical dilemma resides in the fact that, as a result of the inability of humans to understand the nature of their motivations, the good becomes irrevocably divided against itself in a way that is potentially avoidable.²⁵

Aristotle conceives of the tragic action as a whole from which all that is extraneous and contingent has been removed, one bound by the limits of the necessary and the probable, expressing thereby the choices that *certain kinds* of people will make.²⁶ Tragic action, with its deep intuition into the human dilemma and its emotive power, brings into view the end from which it has fallen away, the good life for man in the stable and well-ordered political community. Through the concatenation of the 'necessary and the probable' in the unfolding of the structure of the tragic action there comes about the possibility of an understanding, not only *that* the Athenian polis ideal is a fragile one but *why* it is so. Those who witness the tragedy of Thebes enacted before them may thus learn from the suffering that the city endures. If the implications for human coexistence that the tragic conflict lays bare are to be made concrete in the life of the polis, the citizen audience must themselves fully appropriate the import of the action by taking up and

²³ Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd Edition, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) concludes that *Antigone* exposes an inherently irresolvable conflict due to "rival and incompatible demands" of family and polis (132). See further MacIntyre, 143.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112a21-30; Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a30-35.

²⁵ When I say 'potentially avoidable' I mean in relation to the essential nature of the problem as it presents, which in this case is the burial. It is not of course avoidable in terms of the structure of the individual tragic plot as a particular concretion of this problem. Aristotle's discussion of voluntary action as a precondition for ethical activity is relevant, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b30-1115a3.

²⁶ We are responsible for the kind of person we are and hence the voluntary choices we make, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1114b21-23).

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resolving within their own souls the dilemma the poet explores.²⁷

The ideals of open discussion and citizen participation in deliberations, so prized by democratic Athens, are not those on display in Creon's Thebes as Sophocles portrays it in *Antigone*. In the aftermath of civil strife, with the very survival of the polis at stake, Creon is prepared neither to tolerate the voicing of any opinion other than his own nor to repose any trust whatsoever in those with whom he interacts. In their essence, the ideals that Creon sets forth as his political platform are unexceptional and indeed will even come to be seen as providing a paradigm for responsible political action.²⁸ His policies, he states, are founded upon two basic contentions: first that whoever is to guide the polis should never be deterred by fear from following the best counsels (*ta arista bouleumata*) and second, that a friend should never be considered of more importance than one's own country (178-181).²⁹ Rational purpose (*phronēma*) and friendship (*philia*), virtues that Aristotle deems most befitting the concern of the legislator, are what Creon repeatedly professes to hold most dear.³⁰ However, as Creon proceeds to put his avowed principles into effect under the exigency of civic unrest, we observe him, as Podlecki notes, "in the very act of *becoming* a tyrant."³¹ What is already emerging in Creon's first speech, along with his insistence on the absolute priority to be accorded to safeguarding the interest of the polis, is the identification of the common good with the particularity of his own deliberative judgement (191).³² The polis is the only good and is the sole embodiment of

²⁷ See Mark Griffith, *Sophocles: Antigone*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 43; Charles Segal, *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 205. For a consideration of audience response, see Ismene Lada, "'Empathetic Understanding': Emotion and Cognition in Classical Dramatic Audience Response," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 39 (1993): 94-140.

²⁸ Hence, Demosthenes, 19.246-50 chides Aeschines for not following the guidance Creon offers here in *Antigone*.

²⁹ These are very much the sentiments Thucydides will later attribute to Pericles on the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. See, for example, Thucydides, 2.21.2-2.22.2 and 2.60.1-7, in particular 2.60.2.

³⁰ *Philia* (friendship, fellow feeling) more than anything else, even more than justice, Aristotle argues, holds the city together and prevents insurrection, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1155a23-6. On the very different understanding of *philia* espoused by Creon and Antigone, see Bernard Knox, *The Heroic Temper*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 80-88. On Greek conceptions of *philia*, see Mary Whitlock Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 39-49.

³¹ Anthony J. Podlecki, "Creon and Herodotus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 97 (1996): 359. See too Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, trans. Hazel D. Harvey and David Harvey, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 69; Warren J. Lane & Anne Lane, "The Politics of *Antigone*," in Peter Euben, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 169.

³² Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), remarks the predominance of 'I' in Creon's address

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the concept of friendship. Anyone who is to be a friend of the polis must identify completely with Creon as its rational voice, and hence with his edicts. Aware that his decree forbidding the burial of Polyneices is unpopular in certain quarters (289-292) and plagued by constant fear of duplicity and intrigue, Creon is racked by suspicion and mistrusts everyone he encounters.³³ Hence he debars from the decision-making process even those whose loyalty to the state has long been established.³⁴ The only 'best counsels' (179) to which Creon will now defer are his own.³⁵

Creon's equation of the good of the polis, which is to say its safety, with an unquestioned obedience to his dictates as leader is early evident in his description of the proper disposition for the citizenry as submitting rightly to the yoke of his domination (291-292). Whoever is placed in power by the polis must have obedience to even his least command, irrespective of whether he is in the right or not (666-667). No greater evil can affect society than civic disobedience, Creon declares, for, it is through such *anarchia* that cities are destroyed. The distinction between *peitharchia*, unquestioned obedience to his dictates as ruler, and *anarchia*, the breakdown of social order, is for Creon an absolute one, admitting of no mediation (663-676). Creon's sentiments are echoed by the demagogue Cleon, who argues, in Thucydides' account, that the worst political policy is to pass legal measures but not abide by them. A polis having inferior laws that it keeps unchanged is stronger than one having good laws that lack authority.³⁶

Aristotle, in considering the nature of political association, looks first to the particular: the good of the individual citizen as he perfects himself in virtue through friendship and justice in relation to family and fellow citizens. Only while such friendship flourishes, he argues, is the just polis possible.³⁷ By contrast, political reasoning for Creon begins with the universal, the idea of the polis as a contentless abstraction that is prior to what he, as ruler, determines to be its good: that political arrangement which will preserve it as a stable entity. That the polis is for Creon a purely rational and undifferentiated community is reflected in the emptiness of his abstract formal reasoning in which everything can be absorbed into a rigid relationship of logical

(169). See also Griffith, 156.

³³ Not just Antigone, but also the Chorus 280-284, Guard 310-312, Ismene 493-494, Haemon 746, Teiresias 1055.

³⁴ The past loyalty of the Chorus of Theban elders (165-169) and the seer Teiresias (995) is acknowledged by Creon.

³⁵ By contrast, it is inferred in his opening speech that Creon has in the past consulted the Theban Elders.

³⁶ Thucydides, 3.37.3.

³⁷ Aristotle makes clear at the outset of a lengthy discussion of friendship, in the *Ethics*, that the polis is conceived ideally as a community of friends whose common end is the promotion of concord (*homonoia*), Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1167b2-3. Friendship (*philia*) is the innate motive force that brings people together by choice in a common concern for the good of the whole achieved in the life of noble actions, Aristotle *Politics* 1280b17-38.

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contrariety, and ultimately reduced to the simple opposition of good and bad.³⁸ In effect, Creon differentiates the existence of the polis from its essential nature: life (*to zēn*) from the life in which humankind best flourishes (*to eu zēn*). Creon and Aristotle are in agreement on the importance of friendship in holding cities together. However, whereas Creon assimilates friendship directly to justice conceived as unquestioned obedience to the imposed rational order, Aristotle argues that the kinds of friendship that characterize the political community arise from mutual agreement among citizens as to what is just and advantageous for the polis.³⁹

It is not only the order of the polis that Creon assimilates to his own rational purpose but also the cosmic order of Zeus. Zeus the all-seeing is his proclaimed witness, confirming him in the actions he undertakes on behalf of the polis (184). Secure in the superiority of his own intellectual powers, Creon is blind to signs of disparity between his own knowing and that of Zeus, the overt expressions of his hubris in relation to the gods punctuating disclosure of the full course of his undoing (278-279, 1039-1044). Sophocles provides Creon full reign to exhibit the extent to which his blinkered understanding falls short of his own expectations for himself. In successive encounters with Antigone, with Haemon, his son, and finally with the blind seer Teiresias, Creon rejects, in turn, the universal unwritten laws of feeling which bind together the human race (446-525), the role of persuasive deliberation in decision-making for the common good of the polis (635-723), and finally the inspired utterances by which the will of Zeus is conveyed to man (988-1114). The elements constitutive of Athena's polis ideal as a composite whole in *Eumenides* are in Creon's Thebes detached and opposed under the stress of adversity.

The absolute distinction Creon makes between his nephews, Eteocles and Polyneices, in terms of 'friend' or 'enemy' to the polis, is challenged by Antigone with an equally unequivocal assertion of the unassailable demands of kinship bonds. Creon's edict forbidding the burial of Polyneices, she insists, is of merely mortal contrivance and runs counter to 'the unwritten and undying laws of the gods'.⁴⁰ Neither Zeus nor that Justice (*Dikē*) which belongs with the gods below has laid down such laws for mankind (450-455).⁴¹ On the authority of these ancient religious sanctions, Antigone finds her claim to have an inalienable duty to bury her own kin (*philos*), her beloved brother, in defiance of Creon. For Creon, by contrast, the universal unwritten laws of the gods to which Antigone defers have no standing in comparison to his own determination of what the city is to hold due to a friend as opposed to an enemy. Whereas it is possible for an

³⁸ See Helene Foley, "Antigone as a Moral Agent, in " *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, ed. M.S. Silk, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 60. See too Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness; Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 54-58 and Blundell, 115-130.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1160a8-14, 1167b2-16.

⁴⁰ On the unwritten laws, see e.g. Thucydides, 2.37.3; Lysias, 6.10-11; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.4.19-20 and Griffith, 201.

⁴¹ See Jebb's comments in *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments: Part III Antigone*, 3rd Edition, ed. and trans. Richard Jebb, (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1971), 89.

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astute political friend (*philos*) of the stature of Odysseus to overcome the opposition of Agamemnon to the burial of Ajax, even if in so doing he fails to convince him that he is wrong, what Creon sees before him is no *philos* of standing, but rather an irrational hubristic female whose defiance in transgressing his edict is a threat to a rational order identified with male dominance, and who must therefore be broken like a slave.⁴² The point Antigone makes is essentially that which Aethra, mother of Theseus, makes in Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and that Odysseus establishes in Sophocles' *Ajax* when he tells Agamemnon that it is not Ajax but the laws of the gods (*nomoi*) he will be destroying in forbidding the burial.⁴³ Like Creon, Agamemnon has insisted that the good man must be obedient to human authority and that an enemy remains an enemy, alive or dead.⁴⁴

The overt distinction that emerges in *Antigone*, between the apparently conflicting obligations of the universal unwritten laws of nature and human reason asserted in positive law, is symptomatic of an incipient breakdown of an older ethical order for which 'all human laws are sustained by the one divine law'⁴⁵ and human freedom can be found, as at the end of *Eumenides*, objectively realized in a universal necessity which is one with the divine rule of Zeus. In *Antigone*, the human sphere of the polis has begun to assert for itself a self-determinate existence distinct from the divine as man brings *physis* under the dominion of human *nomos*. Guthrie, commenting on the changing understanding of the intellectual basis of *nomos* during the fifth century, observes that "so long as religion remained an effective force, the devising mind could be the god's, and so there could be *nomoi* that were applicable to all mankind."⁴⁶ This quest, central to *Antigone*, for an understanding of the nature of those universal norms considered most constitutive of the human good in praxis, leads Aristotle in his turn to a consideration of the distinction between natural and political justice, and back to the specific question Sophocles raises. There are two kinds of law, Aristotle observes. On the one hand, there are the particular laws, both written and unwritten, which are held by each community, laws which are in themselves conventional; relative to the time, place, and circumstance of their execution. On the other hand, there are the overriding universal laws based on nature that humans everywhere divine in some way.⁴⁷ This is what Antigone infers, Aristotle concludes, when she argues that it is by nature just to bury her brother Polyneices, in contravention of a specific decree of Creon, arguing that 'not today or yesterday, but eternally this [natural justice] lives and no one knows from whence it appeared'.⁴⁸

Ideally, what is just by nature should hold the same power everywhere whether it

⁴² See Segal, (1981) 83. Creon's rejection of family ties here is absolute.

⁴³ Euripides, *The Suppliant Women* 19; Sophocles, *Ajax* 1343-1344.

⁴⁴ Sophocles, *Ajax* 1352, 1372-1373.

⁴⁵ Heraclitus fragment 114 (Diels-Kranz 22B114).

⁴⁶ W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, v.3, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 55. See also p. 130.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1373b1-10. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1134b18-22.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1373b10-13, 1375b1-2. Cf. Sophocles, *Antigone*. 456-7.

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appears to do so or not, Aristotle argues. However, while there is a general recognition that there are natural laws concerning just and unjust action that are of widespread applicability, they are not *necessarily* without exception. Rather, these laws hold with such a high degree of probability that to all intents and purposes they can be said to be true.⁴⁹ This being the case, it has to be recognized that, since no law operative in the natural world of motion and change can be said to be completely without exception, at every level the possibility for division and conflict exists. Hence, while the gods will eventually affirm the burial of Polyneices to be in accord with both natural and polis justice, this does not exclude *eo ipso* the possibility that in other circumstances the matter of burial might be differently construed.⁵⁰ At the same time it must also be allowed, Aristotle argues, that those posited laws which are found to vary widely from state to state are not simply arbitrary, but find their proper origin within the context of an ideal polity, however inadequately this may be realized in practice.⁵¹ Underlying all the manifest diversity there is an order to the natural world, albeit only incompletely understood by man. For Sophocles, as for Aristotle, and indeed all of the classical tradition, the polis is an extension into the natural of a divine and unchanging order.⁵² Thus the workings of a universal natural justice and the particular laws which organize and safeguard the polis are not to be considered as standing *a priori* apart and opposed but rather to be held in a determinate relation to one another. Nor can the confrontation between Antigone and Creon be said to be in principle beyond the reach of human resolution; the tragedy lies in their inability, being the *kind* of people they are, to bridge the gap that separates them by means of effective communication.

As events disclose, Antigone is undoubtedly in the right to pursue actively the provision of burial rites for her brother in accord with her understanding of the 'unwritten and unfailing laws of the gods' (454-455). However, while she is able to intuit the end, the burial of Polyneices, as the good to be sought in practice, and in so doing presents a noble and pious figure, Antigone is nevertheless unable to articulate within the social context of the polis, the realm of language, an appropriate means to achieve this end.⁵³ The undoubted 'rightness' of her cause notwithstanding, in the absoluteness of her open and public revolt against the decree of the ruler, she not only backs Creon into a corner from which his pride will allow him no escape, but in the manner of her actions she both

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1134b19-20, 1134b28-32.

⁵⁰ Cf. the climax of *Oedipus Coloneus*. Here, in the presence of Theseus' calm and measured authority, coupled to his respect for religious sanctions, a healing can take place between reason and feeling which is not possible in Creon's Thebes. See on this, Andreas Markantonatos, *Tragic Narrative*, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 163-165 and Segal (1981) 400-403.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1135a3-7.

⁵² See Homer, *Iliad* 16.431-458.

⁵³ Persuasion (Holy *Peithō*), successfully employed elsewhere by Athena, Odysseus and Theseus, is not attempted by Antigone. This is key to her tragic status. It remains the case, even when it is considered that whatever mediation she might have sought would surely have been unsuccessful against Creon. See Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995), 120.

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isolates herself irrevocably from her living family and further destabilizes her own polis, the scene so recently of disastrous infighting in the royal household. In the final analysis, despite that fact that they are reduced to tears by the thought of her fate, the Elders of Thebes offer little support for Antigone's actions. It is her independent self-will (*autognōtos orga*, 875) that is her downfall, the Chorus concludes; she goes to her death of her own free choice, a law unto herself (*autonomos*, 821). A self-proclaimed champion of the cause of justice, Antigone, in the eyes of these elders of Thebes, has progressed to the furthest extremes of boldness (*eschaton thrasous*) only to stumble against the high pedestal of the goddess, *Dikē*, Justice herself (854-856).⁵⁴

In the confrontation of Antigone and Creon a parallel can readily be drawn to the stand-off between the Erinyes and Apollo, their clash now alive at the human level.⁵⁵ The Erinyes, as the disruptive force that emerges when the natural order within the polis is disturbed, find on this analogy their Sophoclean counterpart in Antigone. With the enforcement of Creon's edict, the honours due to the chthonian divinities are overturned. The consequent disturbance of the political order causes the opposed claims of reason and feeling, which in the *Oresteia* are resolved in the concrete unity attained in Athena's polis, to become actual again. The Dread Goddesses, unleashed once more as the implacable Erinyes embodied in the fierce human will of Antigone, seek to reassert their allotted due, in the face of reason abstractly imposed. Viewed in this light, Antigone's relation to her sister Ismene takes on an added significance; their actions are related not just in an external and superficial way to show Ismene as a foil for Antigone, but as manifest expressions of the natural order in its determinate bipolarity.⁵⁶ In the civilized world of the well-ordered polis that is Athens at the conclusion of *Eumenides*, natural difference is contained peacefully within the whole. However, as Athena makes very clear, this state of concord in which the Eumenides are active holds only as long as the chthonic goddesses are accorded their proper due; should this fail to be the case, the dreaded Erinyes will once more exact a retribution (*Eum.* 990-995).

⁵⁴ In her intractable single-mindedness lies both the source of Antigone's heroic greatness and her error (*hamartia*). The Chorus are willing to agree with Antigone that there is a kind of piety in the reverence she shows towards her brother's obsequies. However, authority, for the one whose concern it is, can in no way be transgressed (872-4). On the surface, the Chorus is taken to be speaking here of the power of Creon, who is present. However, in the larger religious sphere it is the power of Zeus, in whom the ultimate authority resides, that is inferred. No human transgression can withstand Zeus (604-14). In the final analysis, it is not Antigone but Zeus who reveals to Creon the error of his ways.

⁵⁵ See Segal, (1981) 184. See too William F. Zak, *The Polis and the Divine Order*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1995), 89.

⁵⁶ As *Semnai Theai*, the dread goddesses of the end of *Eumenides* encompass a bipolar potency, as Erinyes/Eumenides; one that is made actual in the rational order of the polis (Aeschylus *Eumenides*. 930-931). The existence of an analogous relationship between Electra and Chrysothemis in Sophocles' *Electra* argues that the poet did attach a particular importance to this expression of a polarity in the natural.

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In conceiving the good of the polis solely in terms of his own abstract rational determinations, Creon has attempted to divorce himself from what it is to be truly human: a rational animal bound necessarily to *physis*, the sphere of the natural and particular. At the last, he is brought to an understanding both of the limitations of human reason in relation to the cosmic order of the divine and of the poverty of a human life that is bereft of kin bonds. Creon's expressed desire to achieve the good for the city is doubtlessly sincere, and it is evident that he has in the past been amenable to accepting wise counsel (992-994).⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Sophocles has clearly shown in his portrayal of Creon that the ideals which hold together the polis as a community of free living citizens may become subverted under the stress of civic life, and that the institution of the polis in its fight for survival can take on a life of its own as an abstract formal entity divorced from the rationale that justifies and sustains it. The polis is a delicate organism thriving only within certain limits and any substantial change to its environment, including the trend to military imperialism to which Sophocles was a witness, threatens it with extinction.

4. *Bacchae*

Euripides' *Bacchae*, written in the final years of the brutalizing Peloponnesian War, looks out on a polis world in disarray, beset both from within and without. Against the background of this intellectual and socio-political milieu, as "instinctive forces and primitive drives surge up through the legal and political structure," the conflicts of *Bacchae* take shape.⁵⁸ The lessons to be learned from the actions of Creon pass unheeded as the intellectual enlightenment gathers strength in Athens during the second half of the fifth century. Polis justice, no longer conceived in terms of ancient pieties universally operative, can readily be perceived in terms of a will to power, whether by individual, faction, or state.⁵⁹ Hence necessity and freedom come to coincide not as before in the universal order of Zeus, but in the individual subject and, 'writ large', in the will of the assembled masses as a 'tyranny of the majority'. So it is that the sophist Antiphon can declare that whereas laws are imposed, nature is of necessity. Since much of what is just by law is hostile to nature, wherever possible one must follow the dictates of human nature rather than those of law.⁶⁰ This is the case both for the individual and for the polis

⁵⁷ It is only once a ruler has been put to the test in demanding circumstance that the full measure of what lies latent in his character will be revealed, as indeed Creon himself has confidently asserted, Sophocles, *Antigone*. 175-177.

⁵⁸ Euben, (1990) 130. See also Knox, "Euripides: The Poet as Prophet," in *Directions in Euripidean Criticism*, ed. Peter Burian, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 6; Desmond Conacher, *Euripides and the Sophists*, (London: Duckworth, 1998), 10; William Allan, "Euripides and the Sophists: Society and the Theatre of War," in *Euripides and Tragic Theatre in the Late Fifth Century*, eds. Martin Cropp, Kevin Lee, and David Sansone, (Campaign IL: Stipes Publishing, 2000), 148.

⁵⁹ Thus, Protagoras is said to argue that whatever each polis believes to be just and noble is for it as long as it considers it so, Plato, *Theatetus* 167c4-6. Cf. Plato, *Protagoras* 323a5-328d2d. On the historical Protagoras, see Anthony J. Podlecki, *Perikles and his Circle*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 93-99.

⁶⁰ Antiphon, fragment 44 (Diels-Kranz 87B44). See *The Fragments of Antiphon the*

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as a whole: 'the strong do what they can, the weak acquiesce' in what they must.⁶¹ As a result, the political ideal, understood as a 'whole' which is comprehensive of its parts, effectively ceases to exist and what remains in its stead is nothing other than a 'heap', a mere aggregate of parts to be shaped and bent to the will of the stronger. Thus, some fifty years after the production of *Eumenides*, an Athenian audience, in a very different political clime, watches as once again a powerful divine dyadic force governing the sphere of the natural and irrational sets itself in opposition to an arbitrary dictate of the established rational order, and stakes its claim to a place within the city. With the Athenian democratic polis approaching its own nadir, the citizens see before them how the mythical polis of Thebes, unable to hold within one grasp the conflicting claims of reason and feeling, is torn apart.

The dramatic action of *Bacchae* inarguably has at its centre the confrontation between Pentheus and Dionysus that culminates in the eventual punishment of a persistent *theomachos* (a god-fighter, 45). Yet, as the action unfolds, we must always keep in mind that this is more than a conflict between the god and a hubristic individual (39-40, 47-52). Ranged behind the opposed principals, their fate dependent upon the outcome of the contest, are their respective constituencies, the citizenry of Thebes and the Bacchants, in what can be considered the larger clash between culture and nature, city and mountain.⁶² As the lawful human ruler of Thebes, Pentheus claims the sole right to pronounce on behalf of the citizens what will provide and maintain the polis order. However, like Creon in *Antigone*, he equates the defective wisdom of his own individual human reasoning with the good of the polis as a whole.⁶³ Those who might be expected to advise Pentheus best in reaching a decision on the good for the polis, Teiresias and Cadmus, while they urge the admittance of the god into the city, present a somewhat less than noble picture, a marked contrast to the paradigm offered by Teiresias and Haemon in their efforts to win over Creon in *Antigone*. Deaf and blind in his solipsism, Pentheus vainly opposes himself to Dionysus and attempts to shut fast the gates of Thebes against the incursion of the irrational. In the ensuing failure of human wisdom to successfully transcend and comprehend the endless cycle of nature, myth offers a telling critique of *Realpolitik*.

Sophist, ed. Gerard J. Pendrick, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Martin Ostwald, "Nomos and Physis in Antiphon's Περὶ Ἀληθείας," in *Cabinet of the Muses*, eds. Mark Griffith and D. J. Mastronade, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 293-306.

⁶¹ Thucydides, 5.891.

⁶² On city and mountain as contrasted dramatic spaces, see Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 80-124 and Rainer Friedrich, "City and Mountain: Dramatic Spaces in Euripides' *Bacchae*," *Proceedings of the XIIIth Congress of International Comparative Literature* (1988): 538-545.

⁶³ Comparisons are often made between Creon and Pentheus. Segal (1982,100) notes their self-identification with the polis. See also Euben, (1990) 143; Bernd Seidensticker, "Pentheus," *Poetica* 5: 35 (1972): 46; Eric R. Dodds, *Euripides: Bacchae*, 2nd Edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 97.

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The emotional and physical dismemberment that Dionysus instigates as the fate of Pentheus is in its turn reflective of the spiritual dismemberment that has already invaded and taken hold in the Athenian polis. At the very heart of the tragedy of *Bacchae* lies the question of the nature of wisdom (*sophia*). The wisdom once recognised as the prerogative of Zeus has been claimed by men. Fallen to earth and shattered, its broken shards are now ends in themselves, pieces of wisdom gathered up by individuals and factions to reflect and serve their own perceived needs. In the sphere of the divine, the eclipse of Zeus' justice exposes to full view a darker force resident in his offspring Dionysus, purveyor of an underlying natural, instinctual universal necessity (656), at once most terrible and yet, it is important to note, also most gentle to mankind (861). The conception of a dyadic potency for benefit or harm, pleasure or pain, which has been encountered in the Eumenides-Erinyes of Aeschylus, and implied also in the relation of Ismene and Antigone in Sophocles, reappears in a particularly potent form in *Bacchae*, emerging in a tragic world which is without an Athena, a Theseus, or a Pericles standing ready to harness the powers of Dionysus and draw them within the civilizing bounds of polis cult.⁶⁴

Understanding Dionysus as a dynamic synthesis of polar opposites is generally considered to be the best way of dealing with his ambiguity.⁶⁵ Whether he is envisaged as a traditional god, a contradictory flux, or an elemental principle, Dionysus wields power over a world of contrariety, a world which is ultimately resolved into a primary overarching opposition of life and death: 'Hades and Dionysus are the same', declares Heraclitus.⁶⁶ In *Bacchae*, Dionysus is seen to be at once both a new god whom the polis must civilize and accommodate, and at the same time an old god reborn, escaped from the bonds of a bankrupt morality that can no longer contain him. Euripides inverts and confutes mythical and historical understandings in such a way that what belongs properly to maenadic myth appears in the play to be actual ritual practice, while the ethical norms that belong historically to the polis world take on something of a mythic tenor, particularly in the utterances of the Chorus.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ W. F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, trans. R. B. Palmer, (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1965), notes the relation of Dionysus to other chthonic powers especially the Erinyes (114). At Aeschylus *Eumenides* 500 the Erinyes refer to themselves as *mainades*.

⁶⁵ Albert Henrichs, "'He Has a God in Him': Human and Divine in the Modern Perception of Dionysus," in *Masks of Dionysus*, eds. Thomas H. Carpenter, and Christopher A. Faraone, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 3; Anton Bierl, *Dionysos und die griechische Tragödie: politische und 'metatheatralische' Aspekte im Text*, (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1991), 13-20, 128-9, 227; H. S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion, Vol. 1 Ter Unus*, (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 131-7. See also Goldhill, (1990) 126-7.

⁶⁶ Heraclitus, fragment 15 (Diehls-Kranz 22B15); Otto, 121.

⁶⁷ On the interplay of mythic and cultic elements in *Bacchae*, see Albert Henrichs, "Between Country and City: Cultic Dimensions of Dionysus in Athens and Attica," in *Cabinet of the Muses*, eds. Mark Griffith and D. J. Mastronarde, (Atlanta: Scholars

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As the dramatic action commences, Dionysus has made the initial move towards asserting his primacy, stinging with manic frenzy the women of Thebes so that they have abandoned their households and the civilized world of the polis to dwell upon the mountain in communion with nature.⁶⁸ On stage, the Chorus of Asian followers of Dionysus extol the blessings they enjoy in that communion of soul which is the *thiasos*, the maenad band engaged in the rites of its holy purifications (64-166). Striking a very different note, the entrance of the two elderly Theban converts, Teiresias, the venerable prophet of Apollo, and Cadmus, the celebrated founder of the polis of Thebes, incongruously garbed as maenads, complete with fawn-skins, thyrsos and ivy crowns, could hardly in the context present more of a shock.⁶⁹ If the leaders of the polis and its institutions, the upholders of the physical and spiritual integrity of the polis, are thus portrayed and if they do indeed cut a perversely comic figure to the watching audience, this is because what they represent, the ethical order of the polis, is itself now a parody of the noble ideals it once embodied.⁷⁰

Both Theban elders assert that the acceptance of Dionysus conforms to the traditional time-honoured practices for which they are the spokesmen. No argument can cast down these ancestral customs possessed from time immemorial, declares Teresias (200-203). Cadmus, in turn, will urge Pentheus similarly not to dwell outside the bounds of the customary practices (331). The appeal to time-honoured customs, not to be overthrown by any human wisdom, so reminiscent of *Antigone*, has often been remarked as paradoxical in view of the fact that Dionysus is a new god.⁷¹ However, the anachronisms can be ameliorated, if not completely reconciled, if we see, looming behind the mythical new god and his historical fifth-century congeners, a conscious historical reflection on an older tradition now 'spent' from out of which the god has 'erupted'. Viewed from this perspective, the old men, Teiresias and Cadmus, as they confront the problem of bringing the wild '*physis*-god' within the bounds of civilization, paradoxically invoke the audience's memories of Dionysus domiciled within the polis as the god of wine and festivity. Yet even as they echo the beliefs of the older tradition, it is soon

Press, 1990), 257-8. See also Jan N. Bremmer, "Greek Maenadism Reconsidered," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 55 (1984), 267-286.

⁶⁸ The connection between the rationally ordered civilizing world of the polis and the natural order that sustains it is thus severed. The existence of the polis is predicated upon the household, the realm of regeneration and growth, rooted in necessity.

⁶⁹ Desmond Conacher, *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme, and Structure*, (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1967), notes the "grotesquely striking contrast" they make (61). Maenads are properly always female. On the perversion of ritual in Euripides' portrayal of Teiresias, Cadmus, and later Pentheus, as maenads, see Henrichs, (1982) 139. See also Rainer Friedrich, "Dionysos among the Dons: The New Ritualism in Richard Seaford's Commentary on the *Bacchae*," *Arion* 7 (2000): 120-121.

⁷⁰ Justina Gregory counsels caution in discussing Euripidean humour, "Comic Elements in Euripides" in Cropp, Lee, and Sansone, 74. See also Dodds, 90-91.

⁷¹ The many and varied interpretations of the import of the new god/old god apposition are summarized by Versnel, 178-9. For Dionysus as a new god, see *Bacchae* 219, 256, 272.

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evident that Cadmus and Teiresias are very much men of the late fifth century. Performance of cult is for Cadmus and Teiresias a rational not an emotional enterprise: an expression of self-interest. It is not through divine possession but by mutual agreement (175) that Teiresias and Cadmus have come to a decision to follow Dionysus.

The primary concern for Cadmus (181-183) is the honour that attaches to having a god in the family, something that he shows himself patently eager to exploit (330-342). Even if Dionysus is not a god, they should consider him to be, for they will be telling a lie for the sake of a good cause (334), bringing honour to their whole clan. Clearly, whereas the forms of the older religious piety remain for Cadmus, they no longer carry with them the untroubled convictions they once commanded, nor are they to be divorced from utilitarian considerations of personal benefit, the furthering of individual and family interests. Teiresias, in turn, reveals himself to be of quite a different ilk than the august and fearsome seer whose divinely inspired auguries held sway in Sophocles' *Thebes*.⁷² It is not prophecy that moves him to speak as he does but the facts, as he assures Pentheus (368-369). In the age of enlightenment, a seer needs new skills to maintain his influence, and it is quickly evident that Teiresias no longer looks to divine inspiration as the source of his power but turns instead to rational explication, bringing theology firmly within the bounds of pre-Socratic physics.⁷³ Myths must be recognized as allegorical, their true meaning revealed to be in accord with accepted scientific belief, their more bizarre features explained away by rhetorical skill. Teiresias' allegorical rationalization of Dionysus parallels that of the fifth-century sophist Prodicus in arguing that the god is to be identified with a primary principle of human nurture (274-285).⁷⁴

Like Cadmus, Teiresias impresses upon Pentheus the need to recognize Dionysus' claims to be a god who must be accommodated within the bounds of civilized life. His exhortation of Pentheus (266-327) is replete with the rhetorical cleverness characteristic of the age owing more to the power of sophistic eristic than to the threat of Zeus' thunderbolts.⁷⁵ Confident in his own wisdom, Teiresias remains oblivious to the fact that

⁷² On the significance of Teiresias' speech, see Segal (1982) 293.

⁷³ The two primary things (*duo ta prōta*) for men (274-275), the gods, Dionysus and Demeter, are identified their gifts, wine (284-285) and bread (275-277). The underlying contrariety is that of fundamental elements of Ionian physics, the wet and the dry, which the sophist interprets in terms of utility. On this, see Dodds, 104-105. See also Paul Roth, "Teiresias as *Mantis* and Intellectual in Euripides' *Bacchae*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 114: (1984), 61. Conacher (1998, 22-24) usefully compares the relevant passages in *Bacchae* and Prodicus.

⁷⁴ Prodicus is reported to have said that the ancients considered everything beneficial to life to be gods and it was for this reason he called Demeter bread, Dionysus, wine (Diehls-Kranz 84B5).

⁷⁵ For a detailed analysis of elements of the new intellectualism in Teiresias' speech, see Roth. Roth describes Teiresias as a 'theological sophist' (59) and identifies historical parallels among fifth century seers. In particular, he compares Teiresias to the portrayal of the Athenian seer Euthyphro in the Platonic dialogues *Euthyphro* and *Cratylus*. Dodds notes that Teiresias gives every appearance of being a 5th century intellectual, "one who

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in his rhetorical exposition he actively gives the lie to his earlier pronouncement that "we do not employ cleverness with respect to the gods" (200). Yet, even as Teiresias extols the benefits the god, conceived now in practical terms as a 'culture hero' who brings to man with his gift of wine, the older concept of the civilized polis-god is in spirit invoked.⁷⁶ All this stands in marked contrast to the new and wild god that has actually arrived at the gates of Thebes, and indeed to the anachronistic figure Teiresias himself cuts in his maenad garb, blissfully unaware of his own perversion of polis ritual. Just as Cadmus very evidently promotes the concerns of his own family, Teiresias, it can be reasonably concluded, seeks actively to further the interests of what Dodds terms "the ecclesiastical politics of Delphi."⁷⁷ Neither for Teiresias nor for Cadmus does the good of the polis as a whole motivate their concerns in urging the god be admitted within the bounds of civilized society.

The picture that Teiresias and Cadmus present in their expected role as senior policy advisors to Thebes, when considered in conjunction with what we later learn about Pentheus as the city's self-willed autocratic ruler, illustrates very effectively how the polis of *Eumenides* has fallen apart. The individual no longer sees his freedom as inseparable from the objective good of the polis in accord with traditional divinely mandated laws. The religion of Delphi, the order of the polity, and the claims of the family, all set themselves up in *Bacchae* as distinct rational enclaves, spheres of influence which, no longer in ordered relationship to one another and to an overarching principle in Olympian Zeus, are effectually ends in themselves, competing communities in search of the attainment of a particular good conceived in the light of their own self-promulgating wisdom. The question then as now is 'Whose Justice? Which Rationality'? Ranged against these foci of rational interest is found the powerful irrational force of the Bacchic community of Dionysus, echoing through the Chorus the collective voice of a late fifth century populace for whom there is another wisdom, a *nomos* which is coincident with a universal enduring *physis*.

In a series of direct encounters, Dionysus attempts to open the eyes of Pentheus to the distinction between the pragmatic determinations emerging from within the narrow confines of his blinkered human reasoning and a larger encompassing divine wisdom that transcends these mortal bounds. It is quickly evident, however, that meaningful communication between Pentheus and Dionysus, purveyors of contrasting wisdoms, is impossible (460-88).⁷⁸ Pentheus gives every indication of being educated in the methods

has read his Protagoras and his Prodicus (91). See too Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, "Tragedy and Religion: The *Bacchae*," in *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy*, ed. Erich Segal, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 385.

⁷⁶ For Dionysus as a 'culture hero' see Roth, 61.

⁷⁷ Dodds, 91.

⁷⁸ Pentheus has been brought up in the belief that Zeus destroyed Semele and her offspring Dionysus for impiety (242-245). In effect, Pentheus' mother and her sisters deny the *mythos* of Dionysus' birth to Semele and replace it with a *logos* (26-31). For Pentheus, the Lydian Stranger must *de facto* be an impostor. To this premise he holds fast.

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of demythologizing, rational explication current in the late fifth century, attempting to define his opponent by categorizing him in terms of determinate empirical parameters that tie him down once and for all (460-490).⁷⁹ He remains oblivious to the universal truths contained in the god's utterances, convinced that the Stranger is simply being evasive (475) and manipulative (479). Impervious to Dionysus' repeated charges of ignorance (480, 490) and impiety (476, 490, 502), Pentheus dismisses him as a brash manipulator of words (489). "You do not know what your life is, nor what you do, nor what you are," Dionysus charges (505). To which Pentheus replies, revealing only too clearly the nature of the blindness that binds him fast, "I'm Pentheus, son of Agave. My father was Echion" (506).

A powerful creator of images destined to sway the human mind, Dionysus dons now the mantle of master sophist in an attempt to shake Pentheus' obduracy.⁸⁰ Against the background of earth tremors that threaten to topple the palace (605) and fire leaping up from the tomb of Semele, Pentheus endeavours in vain to make the *appearances* of reality the god conjures up to challenge him, conform to the simple empirical physical laws upon which he relies (624-631).⁸¹ What cannot be subjected to a logical explanation, consonant with sensory experience, has no reality for Pentheus.⁸² His inexplicable silences, in the aftermath of the wondrous events he witnesses, are a telling indictment on

⁷⁹ In the latter part of the fifth century, sophists take over responsibility for the education of young Athenians seeking to attain positions of influence in the city. In place of the Old Education, founded on customary religious beliefs (*mythos*), they offer the New Education, grounded in rational, natural explanation (*logos*). Aristophanes' *Clouds* insightfully exposes the implications of this shift, in the contest between Just and Unjust Logos. The depiction of the youth Hippocrates in conversation with Socrates, in Plato's *Protagoras* (311b-314c), is also illustrative of the dangers involved when the young uncritically absorb the arguments and methodologies of the sophists. Pentheus too shows evidence that he is a product of the New Education; he is clever at speaking (cf. 395) but does not know what he is saying, as Dionysus points out (505).

⁸⁰ Like Dionysus, the sophist wields a power that allows him to bring together in images being and non-being so that everything is 'true'. Jean-Pierre Vernant compares the powers Dionysus displays in *Bacchae* to those extolled by Gorgias in *Encomium on Helen*: powers that "so bewitch the mind that no human being can resist them," The Masked Dionysus of Euripides' *Bacchae*, in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, eds. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, trans. Janet Lloyd, New York: Zone Books, 1988), 403.

⁸¹ Justina Gregory, "Some Aspects of Seeing in Euripides' *Bacchae*," *Greece & Rome* 32: (1985) concludes that Pentheus "relies on...secular language and experience" (27). Conacher (1967, 63) refers to Pentheus as a "hard-headed" rationalist. For Vernant, Pentheus is "narrowly positivistic" (403).

⁸² Whereas the Chorus react with awe and fear to Dionysus' miracles (600-603), Pentheus sends for water to put out the fire (624-626). Despite all that he hears and sees, Pentheus remains convinced he will be able to recapture the god by locking the city gates on him (653).

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the nature and limitations of his wisdom.⁸³ City and mountain will stand in opposition to the end. For, while his power over the irrational allows Dionysus to effect the destruction of Pentheus, he cannot accomplish his own appointed end, the incorporation of his Bacchic rites within the polis, without the active cooperation of human wisdom.⁸⁴ Fixated in his narrowly pragmatic and rigidly authoritarian stance, Pentheus seals his tragic fate. Only when face-to-face with the inevitability of his appalling death does his mind clear so that in, the end, he comes to recognize his errors and know, too late, that Dionysus is the son of Zeus, a god whose rites must be observed (859-860).

The wisdom respectively espoused by Pentheus and Dionysus remains locked in conflict throughout the play. Yet, while they appear completely opposed, Pentheus and Dionysus are held nevertheless in a determinate relation to one another. Thus, Pentheus, the self-declared voice of reason, is from the outset shown as being in a state of both mental and physical agitation, whereas his divine opponent, the god of the irrational and ecstatic, maintains an air of calm, arguing that the part of the wise man is to exercise self-control (641). Half a century earlier Aeschylus portrayed, in the confrontation of Apollo and the Erinyes, a very similar opposition. In *Eumenides*, however, it was possible to conceive of a resolution, a higher divine unity that could draw these principles into relation thus avoiding the extremes of anarchy or despotism that must result from the overwhelming of one side by the other (*Eum.* 693-696). Like the Erinyes, Dionysus, as his prologue and his historical incorporation into the polis bear witness, is ultimately capable of accommodating his irrational ecstatic religion to the rational polis order. Clearly absent from Euripides' Thebes, however, are the wisdom and persuasive leadership skills so eminently displayed by Aeschylus' Athena. Indeed it is possible to argue that in a very real sense the polis conceived as a 'whole' has already ceased to exist in the Thebes of *Bacchae* even before Dionysus wreaks his vengeance. The polity, as the laws embodied in the rational will of Pentheus, rigidly administers a sterile, lifeless order in which the desiring and feeling side of the soul, the wellspring of friendship and community, is subject to harsh repression, and its traditional foci of family and religion, portrayed in the pictures of Cadmus and Teiresias, are revealed as expressions of rationally calculated self-interest. It is indicative of the ongoing degradation of polis ethos that there is a notable absence of any communal collective voice in *Bacchae*.⁸⁵

The escaped women of Thebes in their maenad bands form a purely natural association, a communion (*koinōnia*) in which *nomos* is identified immediately with *physis* and all distinctions which demarcate human and beast have been negated.⁸⁶ The

⁸³ Pentheus remains silent on the earthquake damage happening around him (587-589) and on the phantoms with which Dionysus has him contend (616-631). Gregory, (1985) discusses the significance of Pentheus' silences.

⁸⁴ Dionysus can sting Pentheus to madness but significantly cannot imbue him with the wisdom he lacks.

⁸⁵ Charles Segal, "Chorus and Community in Euripides' *Bacchae*," in *Poet, Public and Performance in Ancient Greece*, eds. Lowell Edmunds and Robert W. Wallace, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 65-66.

⁸⁶ See Rainer Friedrich, "Medea Apolis: On Euripides' Dramatization of the Crisis of the

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first messenger speech (664-774) dramatically evokes for its hearers the full dyadic range of the Dionysiac experience, as it moves from the peace and sheer bucolic bliss of the undisturbed bacchants to the raw violence and savagery they reveal as they are hunted down. The contrary extremes of the delights and horrors portrayed, ranging from life at its most pleasurable (704-11) to death and destruction at their most painful (734-68), are fully indicative of the unlimited nature of the Dionysiac.⁸⁷ Like the animals among whom they live on the mountain and with whom they identify (699-700), the Theban maenads, under the power of Dionysus, respond collectively and instinctually to external stimuli; a herd (1022) they feel and act as one (75-76). The complete loss of self they exhibit is a negation of all individuality.⁸⁸ But human beings are more than herd animals, Aristotle argues; by his very nature, man is a political being uniquely fitted for life in the political association.⁸⁹ Like the beasts, humans are capable of experiencing and transmitting vocally to one another pleasurable and painful impulses. In addition, however, humans through the power of language, can communicate an articulated conception of good and bad, of what is just and unjust, which allows them to assume an ethical responsibility for their actions.⁹⁰ Yet, while law and justice are necessary to human association, they are not of themselves sufficient to sustain the appropriate life for a human (*eu zēn*) in the absence of the emotional bonds that draw the citizens together in a spirit of common understanding (*koinophilēs dianoia*); both sides must find their due place in the polis to militate against the internal divisions that lead to civil strife.

By contrast with the women of Thebes who have gone from polis to mountain, abrogating in the transition their distinctly human ethical nature, the Chorus of Lydian Bacchants have made the reverse journey, transposed from the wildness of the Phrygian mountains to the civilized world of Greece with its rationally ordered polities. Like their Theban counterparts on the mountain, the Lydian Bacchants express the full range of the Dionysiac experience, tracing through their choral lyrics, a gradual but inexorable movement from the peaceful and harmonious aspects of Dionysianism as a communal

Polis," in *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis: Papers from the Greek Drama Conference, Nottingham, 18-20 July 1990*, eds. Alan Sommerstein, Stephen Halliwell, Jeffrey Henderson, and Bernhard Zimmermann, (Bari: Levante Editori, 1993), 235; R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Euripides and Dionysus: An Interpretation of the Bacchae*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 92.

⁸⁷ Contrary to what Pentheus believes, however, the messenger is quite clear that the Theban maenads behave modestly, being neither drunk nor licentious (685-8). Indeed, it could be argued that to break apart from the unity of the female collective, to move into division by forming individual liaisons with males, is to destroy the emotional solidarity which is its cohesive power, and take that necessary first step towards the natural reforming of the rational and ethical bonds of family and polis they have left behind.

⁸⁸ Winnington-Ingram notes the homogeneity of the Bacchants (97).

⁸⁹ Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a2-8. Indeed, an impulse to political association is present by nature in everyone, Aristotle argues, *Politics* 1253a29-30.

⁹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a9-18. It is just this kind of association that makes a household and a polis.

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religious experience to culminate in a violent, vengeful ferocity.⁹¹ In the course of this movement there is re-enacted an anatomy of the fifth century intellectual revolution. Hence references to traditional practices (71) and to the dances of the biennial festival (132-133) lend, from the outset, very much the air of a cult already established in the polis, as opposed to the initial approaches of the votaries of a new god.⁹² Drawn within the bounds of the polis for the first time, the Lydian Bacchants are nevertheless able to awaken in themselves an understanding of the harmonious life of order, limit and moderation that belongs not to maenadism but to the civilized rationally ordered world of a polis at peace. This is paradoxical indeed in wild, exotic barbarian women. Dionysus is invoked, not as the wild untamed nature god of the mythical past in which the drama is set, but in terms of the civilized historical polis god of wine and the patron of the festival that he will subsequently become (375-385, 417-424).⁹³ Equally unexpected in these adherents of a god of excess and dissolution of social bonds is their exhortation of traditional tenets of Greek moral order.⁹⁴ What holds together households, they declare, is the calm life and good sense (390). Dionysus, son of Zeus, loves Peace and hates excessive men (429). The cleverness exhibited by Pentheus is not wisdom but mindless folly (387) as far as the Lydian Chorus is concerned, exceeding as it does the proper bounds of mortal thoughts (395-396). The wisdom the Chorus acknowledges is that simple customary wisdom that the mass of ordinary people (*to plēthos...to phauloteron*) espouse (430-431).

For a sense of how these apparently incongruous utterances of the Lydian Chorus might be understood in terms of the political ambience of the late fifth century, the language employed in Thucydides' Mytilenean debate, offers an interesting insight. In words very similar to those of the Chorus in *Bacchae*, the demagogue Cleon exhorts the Athenian assembly (*to plēthos*) to take a stand. In most cases, the more ordinary men (*phauloteroi*), rather than those who are more intelligent, are better at managing cities, he declares. Ignorance combined with self-restraint is more beneficial to the polis than cleverness accompanied by lack of discipline. In their efforts to outdo one another, clever individuals, who wish to appear wiser than the laws, are more likely to bring about the downfall of the polis.⁹⁵ Although he urges moderation and respect for the laws, the laws Cleon invokes are those of feeling, of *physis*, and not those articulated through rational consideration of commonly held polis wisdom. The Athenian assembly must be true to their unmediated, instinctual, emotional response in striking back at the Mytilenians, Cleon insists.⁹⁶ When departing from this course, the assembly can be charged with exercising a lack of self-control. While mouthing adherence to traditional political virtues of wisdom, justice and moderation, both Cleon and the Chorus of *Bacchae* invert polis morality, achieving a 'transvaluation of values' that brings with it a

⁹¹ Conacher (1967) 69.

⁹² Dodds, 71. See also Conacher (1967) 60.

⁹³ Marilyn Arthur, "The Choral Odes of the *Bacchae* of Euripides," *Yale Classical Studies* 22 (1972): 152-3.

⁹⁴ Arthur observes that enjoinders to moderation and limit are a constant refrain (147-8).

⁹⁵ Thucydides, 3.37.3-5.

⁹⁶ Thucydides, 3.40.7.

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return to the tribal ethic of revenge justice.⁹⁷

Hence we see in *Bacchae* how in the course of the action the overt picture that the Chorus has initially presented of a civilized polis cult of Dionysus, in tune with the traditionally established moral order, is rapidly disturbed by Pentheus' unremitting hostility, to reveal a more primitive and dangerous underlying reality. Arthur notes the similarity between the Lydian Bacchants and the Aeschylean Erinyes in their savagery and thirst for vengeance.⁹⁸ Yet, the course of the action of the two plays sees these representatives of the natural, feeling side of community taking a very different, indeed, opposing courses. Whereas the Erinyes, under the wise guidance of Athena, are finally incorporated as Eumenides (Kindly Ones) into the inner life of the polis and its collective cult, the Lydian Chorus, by contrast, paying only lip service to the civilised life of the polis, is revealed as a purely natural association. Devoid of the measure of a rationally articulated common good, the Lydian Bacchants persist inexorably in unmediated unity with the unlimited dyadic power of Dionysus their divine principle. Thus, as Dionysus prepares to lead Pentheus to his doom, the Chorus, while still professing the tenets of popular morality, simultaneously exult in a fierce natural justice which extols wisdom as 'holding one's hand over the head of one's enemies' (877-81, 888-91).⁹⁹ Expressing themselves as being of one accord with *physis*, they assert the power of a divine justice that belongs to the timeless, universal laws of nature (895-896). Like Cleon, the Lydian Chorus insists that one must never think or act above these laws (890-892). They thus move seamlessly from their earlier espousal of what the majority of ordinary people consider normal practice (430-431) to the identification of this traditional morality with the universal natural and instinctual laws of *physis*. With the central polis virtues of wisdom, justice, and moderation assimilated to the immediacy of *physis*, now the universal law underpinning and ratifying human action, civilization is overthrown and in its place arises the 'law of nature', as Plato's Callicles defines it.¹⁰⁰

5. Conclusion

The final moments of the action of *Bacchae* depict the human survivors, Cadmus and Agave, painstakingly attempting to piece back together the dismembered body of Pentheus. Symbolically this is significant not only as a recognition of the importance of ritual, but also perhaps in the reflection it offers on the larger order of the polis, whose parts can be reassembled in imitation of what once was but not thereby be brought back to the fullness of a life now departed: a whole that is a unity prior to the distinctions it contains. What has come to light amidst the burgeoning relativism and scepticism of the

⁹⁷ Thucydides argues that the traditional moral vocabulary lost its original force with the spread of civil strife and came to be applied however men saw fit to justify their course of action, 3.82.4.

⁹⁸ Arthur, 162. Cf. in particular Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 307-96. At Euripides, *Bacchae* 977-978 the Chorus calls upon the hounds of Lyssa, akin to the Erinyes, Dodds, 199.

⁹⁹ Arthur, 162-163; Winnington-Ingram, 109.

¹⁰⁰ Plato, *Gorgias* 483e3.

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fifth-century intellectual enlightenment is the realization that the older morality based on traditional *nomoi* and customary observances is unable to withstand the challenges mounted against it. Everything in the cosmos, man included, is now understood to be ultimately subject to the primacy of an underlying law of natural necessity, so that *nomos* is identified not with an objective rational order but with the demands of *physis*, as a primal instinctual drive. Wisdom and justice reside in obedience to the dictates of nature, and to argue otherwise is merely a device of the weak to thwart the interests of the strong. In perhaps its most cynical and rationally self-serving form, this is found expressed in Thucydides' Melian dialogue where the Athenians, brutally frank as to the necessities of empire, justify their unwarranted attack on the unoffending Melians with the blunt assertion that might makes right; by a necessity of nature wherever men have the power they prevail.¹⁰¹

In Euripides, the human association is brought to the very threshold of a Hellenistic world in which the individual, not the citizen, is primary. More specifically, in the criticisms of the Olympians so many of his characters express, there emerges a recognition that will subsequently become concrete for the Epicurean: if freedom from perturbation for the individual is to be achieved, the gods must be banished from rule in human affairs. Cadmus and Agave, like many other Euripidean characters, turn in their extremity, not to the gods, but to each other, to a fellow human being.¹⁰² It is no accident that Euripides, who in his own time achieved only a modest success on stage when compared with his confreres Sophocles and Aeschylus, becomes the tragic poet of greatest renown in the fourth century and beyond, nor that *Bacchae* comes to be prominently celebrated among his works.¹⁰³ Yet, even as Euripides was able to project vividly the forces at work in the destruction of the traditional polis ethos, he is not simply to be divorced from the ambience of the polis world of which he was a part. The recognition and charting of forces active in the dismemberment of the polis, which brings with it the questioning of old unexamined assumptions of a *patrios nomos*, does not thereby eliminate the human requirement for life in a social order.

Aristotle records that Plato was influenced by and drew upon both the Socratic search for definition in ethical matters and the Heraclitean doctrine that all sensible things are in flux.¹⁰⁴ In poetic form, it can be argued, the same radical oppositions, with all that is consequently entailed for human society, have been powerfully and ruthlessly laid bare

¹⁰¹Thucydides, 5.105.2.

¹⁰² Cf. Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1415; *Heracles*, 1397-8. Euripides shows the gods of Greek myth to lack those values necessary to civilized society, notably friendship and justice. For instance, Zeus, in Euripides is not concerned with moral justice but with right as necessity. Thus Hecuba tellingly invokes Zeus as a 'natural necessity', *Trojan Women*, 886. In *Heracles*, Zeus is portrayed as also lacking *philia*, in marked contrast to the human hero Heracles (574-582, 631-636). Other gods, Dionysus, Hera and Aphrodite are cruel, vengeful and pitiless in their dealings with humans. "Who could offer prayers to such a goddess," Heracles rails against Hera, *Heracles*, 1307-1308.

¹⁰³ Knox, (1985) 11-12.

¹⁰⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 987a29-b4.

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in *Bacchae* by the imagination of Euripides. So that, while it is possible to immerse oneself in the play's scepticism and negativity, it is also, by the same token, from within this darkness that the 'Owl of Minerva' will take flight and the polis will be given a new and rationally articulated form for thought. Like Socrates, Euripides is acutely aware of the significance of the issues raised by the contention that virtue has no nature of its own so that its 'truth', moving in the sphere of language and opinion, is merely what it *becomes* for each human individual in the pursuit of his own ends. While it is not the work of the poet to provide a philosophical exegesis, in the contrasting positions his characters adopt on the nature of wisdom in *Bacchae*, Euripides brings to light the problematic nature of current understanding and the need to look beyond these partial conceptions if the problem they present is to be resolved. Further opposed to these conflicting dictates of human reason in *Bacchae* stands the Heraclitean world of appetite and feeling contained within the powerful dyadic flux of opposites which is the sphere of the Bacchantes, who in the immediacy of their relation to their principle respond instinctually to the dictates of *physis*, bereft of the light of considered reason and moderation as the civilizing principles of political association.

Central to any understanding of human association will be the role that wisdom and moderation must play in tempering the powerful instinctual animal drives that continually threaten the stability of man's ethical nature and with it the very existence of civilized society. This is the challenge Euripides bequeaths to philosophy: to Plato and Aristotle. A new beginning must be made to the investigation of the essential nature of political community. What is to be sought is the unifying *logos* that is the innate ordering principle determining how the active and passive sides of the soul and society, the sides of reason and feeling, can be brought together in a concretion of unifying form and content so that justice and friendship will constitute the political community.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper for many helpful and constructive suggestions.