

Beyond Retribution: Re-theorizing Justice Through Greek Tragedy

by

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DEDICATION

To Eric, who makes everything possible, and who is my feeling of being held in the world. To our dog Otto, whose constant affection and companionship are my daily delight. To Brenna Rice, whose friendship I cannot live without, and whose many care packages, Slack messages, romance novels, and jokes about writing made dissertating in the long pandemic year bearable. To Amanda Kubic, who is already the kind of teacher and classicist everyone should aspire to be, and whose consultation on questions of translation was indispensable. To Meg Berkobien, whose brilliance and bravery in imagining the world as it could be are a constant inspiration. To my dissertation writing group – Becky Hixon, Emily Saidel, and Alvaro Sottil de Aguinaga – who constantly push me to be a better thinker and writer, and without whom this dissertation would not be finished. To my parents, Jani and Tom, and my parents-in-law, Richard and Susan, whose support and belief in me have made me feel cherished and grateful. I hope I have made you proud. To my students, whose willingness to think with big questions and share their intellectual growth has been my greatest pleasure. To Langdon Brown, whose abundant encouragement through my undergraduate career and beyond made a doctoral degree feel like a real thing I could do. And last, but certainly not least, to my dissertation committee, whose generous reading, mentorship, and support has been a gift.

PREFACE

We have not touched the stars,
nor are we forgiven, which brings us back
to the hero's shoulders and the gentleness that comes,
not from the absence of violence, but despite
the abundance of it.

- Richard Siken, "Snow and Dirty Rain"

PYLADES. I'll take care of you.

ORESTES. It's rotten work.

PYLADES. Not to me. Not if it's you.

- Euripides, *Orestes*, trans. Anne Carson

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ABSTRACT

Can retribution be just? Through a close reading of eight Greek tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, this dissertation argues that it is both possible and necessary to theorize justice in other than retributive terms. By attending to the words and actions of female characters and their attendant choruses, I consider how each articulates a harm and makes a claim to justice, and I analyze how the actions they undertake *as* women in pursuit of justice unsettle the idea that legal retribution is more “impartial” and less harmful than revenge. In doing so, they make legible issues of justice that are of contemporary concern: what a person might want, in taking revenge or in seeking redress of harm from the law; the kinds of subjects that democratic legal justice imagines and makes visible, and the kind of agency those subjects possess; the construction of the criminal type and the use of predictions to reduce crime; the affective role of the community in ensuring justice is done; the justification of the use of punishment; and the logic of commensurability that underlies any system of retribution.

My introductory chapter provides a brief overview of debates among contemporary philosophers and penal theorists about the merits and limitations of retributivism, and explains how Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* has been enlisted as a mythical origin for the legal paradigm of retributive justice. The second chapter links the revenge of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* to that of the title character in Euripides’ *Hecuba*, positing revenge as a kind of meaning-making outside the framework of legal justice, undertaken by women when denied recourse to the law. In the third chapter, I examine the gendered construction of the criminal type in Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis* and Euripides’ *Medea*, in order to contest an enduring logic of prediction that

rests on an identity-based presumption of guilt and cannot accommodate the ways systemic forces affect subjects' possibilities for action.

Refining the theory of agency in my third chapter, the fourth chapter juxtaposes Euripides' *Ion* and *Bacchae* to explore how two core institutions of legal justice – the adversarial form of the legal trial and the administration of punishment by the courts – are insufficient to secure justice for survivors of harm. Throughout the dissertation I develop a gendered frame of analysis to explore how female figures in Greek tragedy also perform alternatives to the retributive institutions and unequal forms of relation that fail them; from their perspective it becomes possible to see a version of justice that may be more adequate both to the kinds of beings we are and to the redress we seek in turning to the law.

My dissertation engages a tradition of political theory that uses classical materials to pose questions about ethical and political life. I outline a double shift in our understanding of justice, from conceiving justice in negative terms (ameliorating harms) to positive ones (promoting goods) and from conceiving justice as a product that is delivered after a harm, generally through punishment, to conceiving it as a process that is always ongoing: the pursuit of being in just relations with others. In my conclusion I reflect on the usefulness of Greek tragedies in undergraduate teaching, showing how my own students have engaged with Euripides' *Hecuba* and Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* to think critically about current ideas of justice.

Keywords: Greek tragedy, retribution, political theory, gender, justice

CHAPTER I

Introduction: Re-theorizing Justice Through Greek Tragedy

Bad things happen in Greek tragedies. Parents kill children, children kill parents, friends and lovers betray each other, sacrifices are corrupted, cities are besieged by madness and plague. One approach to explaining why bad things happen in Greek tragedies is to claim that they arise from a disturbance to the conventional ordering of the world – the subordination of men to gods, women to men, the family to the city – the restoration of which comes at a terrible human cost. On this model, humans who commit acts of hubris (deliberately or not), outraging the gods, bring divine punishment on themselves that both restores and reifies the *kosmos*. But another approach to understanding why bad things happen, one that comes into view by attending to Greek tragedy's female figures, is to ask: what if the *kosmos* was already bad? What if the conventional ordering of the world – the hierarchies of power, allocation of material supports, valuation of relationships, estimation of who is considered capable of action, what kind, when, and why – itself made these bad things possible? What good then could restoring it do? And what alternatives could there be?

I. The Word of a Woman

At the end of *Agamemnon*, the first of the three plays of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra, still bloodied from the slaughter of her husband (the titular king recently returned from the Trojan War), calls for an end to violence. Addressing her lover Aegisthus, who is about to raise his sword against the chorus of Argive elders, Clytemnestra admonishes:

μηδαμῶς, ᾧ φίλτατ' ἀνδρῶν, ἄλλα δράσωμεν κακά.
ἀλλὰ καὶ τάδ' ἐξαμῆσαι πολλά, δύστηνον θέρος.
πημονῆς δ' ἄλις γ' ὑπάρχει: μηδὲν αἱματώμεθα.
στείγεται αἰδοῖοι γέροντες πρὸς δόμους, πεπρωμένοις τούσδε
πρὶν παθεῖν εἴξαντες ὥρα: χρῆν τάδ' ὡς ἐπράξαμεν.
εἰ δέ τοι μόχθων γένοιτο τῶνδ' ἄλις, δεχοίμεθ' ἄν,
δαίμονος χηλῆ βαρεῖα δυστυχῶς πεπληγμένοι.
ᾧδ' ἔχει λόγος γυναικός, εἴ τις ἀξιοῖ μαθεῖν. (1654-51)

No, my beloved, let us do no more harm.
Even these are many to reap, a wretched harvest.
There is suffering enough already: let us bloody ourselves no further.
Go home, venerable counselors, give way to your fates and season,
before you suffer: we did the things that were necessary.
And I tell you, if these troubles were enough, we would welcome their end,
struck unluckily by the heavy foot of fate.
Such is the word of a woman, if anyone cares to learn from it.¹

Clytemnestra's words seem measured, even wise – she recognizes the damage she and Aegisthus have wrought, in killing Agamemnon, and is willing to accept the consequences, but refuses to do further harm – and they are utterly at odds with the picture of Clytemnestra rendered in much scholarship on the *Oresteia*. That Clytemnestra is spiteful, grasping, possessed of a man's desire for power and a woman's talent for deceit. She murders her husband out of simple lust, and is either a willing accomplice in Aegisthus's revenge or a scheming harpy who towers over her cowardly lover. That version of Clytemnestra is easy to despise, and lends itself to readings of the *Oresteia* in which the triumph of Orestes in Athena's courtroom in the final play of the trilogy represents the triumph of an impartial and democratic legal justice over archaic and aristocratic practices of cyclical vengeance, and of masculine order over feminine excess.

But Clytemnestra's own words elsewhere in the trilogy, and especially in *Agamemnon*, push back against critics' bloodthirsty caricature of her, and in turn against readings of the *Oresteia* that posit a clean separation between revenge and justice. Clytemnestra persistently and

¹ All translations throughout this dissertation are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

explicitly positions her murder of Agamemnon as revenge for his own crime of killing their daughter Iphigeneia – *not* as a plot to usurp his power and make way for Aegisthus to join her bed – and in doing so, demonstrates the necessity of attending to grief and particular forms of relationality in doing justice. Indeed, the lines above not only foreshadow the trilogy’s concern with cycles of revenge – which Clytemnestra herself will also fall victim to – but, when placed in the context of Clytemnestra’s other speeches and actions in the trilogy, they also begin to articulate a vision of justice somewhere between the violence of revenge and the supposed impartiality of Athena’s democratic court, exposing the limitations of each. Clytemnestra has knowledge to offer, and perhaps even a way forward without further violence, if only others would be willing to listen: *Such is the word of a woman, if anyone cares to learn from it.* But no one does.

II. Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* and the Birth of the Courts

I open with the *Oresteia* because I cannot avoid it. The trilogy is among the oldest of the extant Greek tragedies, and is the most explicitly concerned with thinking about justice, providing as it does a neat origin story for the democratic court of law. If I want to write about justice – its institutions, its alternatives, its investments (and our investments in it) – with classicists and political thinkers like Danielle Allen, Martha Nussbaum, Helene Foley, Peter Euben, Arlene Saxonhouse, Froma Zeitlin, and so many others, I need to write, like they do, about the *Oresteia*. But I also want to move beyond it.

The story of the *Oresteia* goes like this: Ten years before the start of the trilogy, Agamemnon must lead the Greeks to fight in the Trojan War, but the winds won’t blow to allow his ships to sail for Troy. He consults a seer, and learns that the goddess Artemis demands the

sacrifice of his daughter Iphigeneia. Agamemnon complies. He slays his daughter, the wind blows, the ships sail. Ten years later, the Greeks have won the war, and this is when the first play (*Agamemnon*) opens. Agamemnon returns to Argos, where his wife Clytemnestra is lying in wait. After an opulent welcome, she murders him in the bath – requital, she says, for killing their daughter.

In the second play (*Choephoroi*), Orestes, who had been sent away from Argos for safekeeping, returns, spurred by Apollo to avenge his father's death. In concert with his sister Electra, Orestes plots to murder his mother. He succeeds, and flees Argos, hounded by the Furies for the crime of matricide. The bulk of the third play (*Eumenides*) is comprised of a courtroom scene – the first trial for murder brought before the Areopagus – in which the Furies prosecute Orestes and Apollo defends him, as Athena presides as judge and casts the deciding vote, should the jury she assembled be split. It is, of course. Athena rules in favor of Orestes, denying Clytemnestra's and the Furies' claim on his life as a murderer of kin, and buying the Furies' consent with the promise of honors in their new role as the Kindly Ones, exalted guardians of Athens' prosperity.

These facts of the plot invite the interpretation, supported by many scholars and provided even in the Reader's Guide for the edition of the trilogy published by Penguin Random House, that the *Oresteia* "depict[s] the movement from primitive retaliatory vengeance to civilized justice."² Situating Aeschylus' trilogy in its historical context, some scholars foreground the political nature of tragedy as a genre (both in its institutional position and in the problems it stages), and see tragedy grappling with the transition from aristocracy to democracy and the reforms of Solon and Ephialtes (Foley 2001, Loraux 1998, Segal 1995, Vernant 1978). From this

² Robert Fagles, "The *Oresteia* Reader's Guide." Penguin Random House.

point of view, the *Oresteia* is a perfect case study, dramatizing (in Helene Foley's words) "an evolution from a remote archaic world to one that closely prefigures the institutions of classical actions" (26). Other scholars read the events of the *Oresteia* through the additional lens of gender, as Froma Zeitlin does in "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*." Zeitlin argues that the trilogy dramatizes ancient Greek concerns with the division of power between the sexes, and culminates by reaffirming woman's subordination to man and patrilineal succession through "the binding nature of patriarchal marriage," and by displacing the political power embodied by Clytemnestra into the realm of ritual (Zeitlin 1978 149, Holmes 2012 128). In both cases, even if the outcome (for example, the ceding of political power to men) is criticized, the legal paradigm of retributive justice that the birth of the Areopagus is taken to inaugurate is not.

Accepting this interpretation of the *Oresteia* requires a reader to make a number of assumptions: the assumption that the trilogy does not itself contest its outcome in the *Eumenides*; the assumption that the replacement of personally enacted revenge with legally enacted punishment is uncomplicatedly good; and, most importantly, the assumption that justice is synonymous with retribution. (I hope to show, over the course of this dissertation, that none of these three are true.) Nonetheless, the dominance of this consensus reading of the *Oresteia* has also had the effect, however unintended, of directing scholarly and critical attention away from other Greek tragedies in conversations about the nature of justice. After all, what could be a better object of inquiry than the trilogy that *literally* stages the invention of the democratic court system as a way to stop cycles of revenge?

Of course, the *Oresteia* isn't the only Greek tragedy that takes up questions of justice, nor does the successful establishment of the court of law at the end of the trilogy settle the matter of

Clytemnestra's claim to justice through revenge. In fact, attending to Clytemnestra's words and actions over the course of the three plays, as I will do later in this introduction, yields a very different sense of what justice is, and raises the question of whether the democratic court can accommodate it. But I also want to turn my attention to those other works of Greek tragedy, and their female figures (both protagonists and choruses), who similarly offer insights about justice – if anyone cares to learn from them.

III. Justice and the Problem of Retribution

I have said that I want to move beyond the *Oresteia* when thinking about justice, but it may not be immediately obvious why we should turn to Greek tragedy at all. Part of my motivation in undertaking this project is to make a case for the continued relevance and resonance of Greek tragedy in political life. Perhaps it is not such a new argument – as I say, *many* political theorists have made a case in their work for the usefulness of classical texts – but it seems to me a perennially important one, to combat both the idea that ancient texts are too distant from modern life to generate any useful insight and the tendency within Classics as a discipline to treat its own importance as self-evident. I want to make a case for Greek tragedy not because the genre is inherently good or because the ancient world is superior to the modern one, or out of a desire to preserve the place of “western civilization” in political thinking, but because these texts grapple with ongoing political questions in ways that can open us to new possibilities in our own time. Greek tragedy's plots are so tightly focused around a single figure or family, and at the same time take place on such a grand scale – in terms of harms perpetrated, cross-generational impact, and the involvement of divine or mythical figures – that they render visible problems of justice that might otherwise go unquestioned. The temporal distance between our

own time and that of Greek tragedy's performance likewise displaces those problems of justice for us, just as they displaced the problems of newly democratic Athens into a mythical past, making them easier to consider because they seemingly have to do with someone else.

A central problem of justice, in our own time, and a central problem for Greek tragedy, is the practice of retribution. Broadly, I understand "retribution" to be an umbrella term for kinds of (generally violent) payback in response to harm. In parsing what falls under the umbrella of "retribution," I have found Danielle Allen's schematization in her book *The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens* to be particularly helpful. Synthesizing both popular intuition and the work of penal and legal theorists like H.L.A. Hart and Richard Nozick, Allen distinguishes between the retributive practices of revenge and punishment. While punishment is considered to be a legitimate form of retribution, because it is administered by some "impartial" authoritative body which is not invested in the harm at issue, revenge is considered to be illegitimate for the opposite reasons. Undertaken directly by the person harmed against the person who harmed them, revenge is "angry" and "passionate," and for that reason is prone to excessive response (18). Similarly, Allen notes that punishment is defined in relation to an offense against the law, while revenge is defined in relation to a personal offense (18). When I refer throughout this dissertation to "the legal paradigm of retributive justice," I am talking about an understanding of justice as fundamentally retributive – aimed at "paying back" harms after the fact – and codified through a system of punishments, decided and administered by a legal body, that are putatively commensurate with crimes. This is the paradigm that the *Oresteia* is taken to inaugurate, and which is uncontested in the majority of scholarship on it.

My own interest in retribution as a problem for justice arises as much from current work on punishment in carceral studies, theories of restorative and transformative justice, and prison abolition activism as it does from retribution's outsize representation (in the form of revenge) in Greek tragedies. In their scholarship and activist work, thinkers like Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, Jackie Wang, Mariame Kaba, and Danielle Sered not only bring attention to unequal retributive processes and outcomes (such as sharply divergent sentencing practices along race and class lines) and their social impacts (including the criminalization of Black and brown communities), but they also challenge the prevalence of incarceration as a form of punishment, and ask whether incarceration, or other infliction of hard treatment, actually accomplishes the aims often attributed to it: the deterrence of crime, the creation of safety (distinct from security), and the provision of "justice" for survivors of harm.³ Kaba and Sered both argue that incarceration accomplishes none of these, and Sered additionally makes the case that incarceration – far from recognizing the dignity or humanity of the wrongdoer as a moral actor – dehumanizes them because it prevents them from exercising the same power that they abused, in doing harm, to make amends.⁴

³ In an interview ("Toward a Horizon of Abolition"), Kaba makes a strong distinction between safety and security: "Security and safety aren't the same thing. Security is a function of the weaponized state that is using guns, weapons, fear, and other things to "make us secure," right? Horrible things are supposed to be kept at bay by these tools, even though we know that horrible things continue to happen all the time – and that these very tools and the corresponding institutions are reproducing the violence and horror they are supposed to contain" (94-95). Jackie Wang makes a similar point in *Carceral Capitalism*: "A question that a purely economic view fails to address is why, when the welfare state was being dismantled and there was an ideological pivot away from 'big government,' was the public induced to believe that a prison binge was legitimate while spending on social services, education, and job creation was not? Is it possible that, as the government withdrew from the arena of social welfare and the revolt among those in the capitalist class reorganized politics such that the government was no longer allowed to regulate the economy, the only remaining social entitlement – the entitlement that has come to give the state as an entity its coherence – is the entitlement of security?" (82-83).

⁴ Sered writes, "In its overall place in the larger process of accountability, the expression of remorse is a critical part of the inversion of power that accountability requires. It is, to put it simply, a way for a responsible party to use his or her power for good. And because it is an exercise of power, it is rooted in agency, which in turn is rooted in the responsible party's persistent and always reparable humanity" (107).

These arguments about the (in)efficacy of incarceration echo ongoing debates among retributivists and penal theorists about the justification of punishment. Central to these debates is the question of whether punishment has intrinsic or only instrumental value, which tracks with the positions of positive and negative retributivism, respectively. While positive retributivism takes the primary justification for punishment to be that the criminal deserves it, regardless of what other benefits may result from the punishment, negative retributivism insists that the desert of the wrongdoer is not sufficient reason to punish, and must be supplemented with positive reasons to punish, such as deterrence or incapacitation. However, instrumentalist accounts of retribution face the additional task of establishing whether the positive reasons to punish they offer can themselves independently justify punishment. In her essay “Democratic Dis-ease: Of Anger and the Troubling Nature of Punishment,” Danielle Allen summarizes the challenges facing penal theorists who do not wish to accept positive retributivism as the final basis of punishment. While such theorists may be reluctant to accept retribution as the ultimate justification for punishment because of its association with anger or a desire for vengeance, the two most commonly offered positive reasons – reform and deterrence – cannot stand on their own. As a result, Allen claims, most contemporary penal theorists follow Rawls in “marrying” retribution with deterrence: while deterrence can explain why there ought to be a penal system in general, “retributive guidelines” should be used to establish individual cases of punishment (192). This is presumably because retribution, as Robert Solomon argues, contains within it a demand of “like for like,” which can introduce reasonable limitations on the extent of punishments (128).⁵

⁵ See Robert Solomon, “Justice v. Vengeance,” in *The Passions of Law*.

The link between anger and retribution brings us again to the *Oresteia*. In the introduction to her book *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, Martha Nussbaum grounds her critique of anger in a reading of the *Oresteia* that focuses on the Furies as avatars of anger, and contends that their transformation represents the elimination of anger from justice, rather than merely the subsumption of that “vindictive passion” into the legal system (1). In a way, Nussbaum’s argument about anger brings together (albeit indirectly) the positions I have outlined above: on the one hand, thinking about punishment as a matter concerning the desert of the wrongdoer and the justification of who should be able to punish and why; and on the other, thinking about punishment as a matter concerning the needs of the victim of harm and positive reasons for punishment, which can (in addition to incapacitation, deterrence, or reform) include communicating disapproval for the wrongdoer’s actions and respect for the victim’s claim of harm.

Nussbaum’s primary objection to anger is that it is retributive: “Concurring with a long philosophical tradition that includes Aristotle, the Greek and Roman Stoics, and Bishop Butler,” she writes, “I argue that anger includes, conceptually, not only the idea of a serious wrong done to someone or something of significance, but also the idea that it would be a good thing if the wrongdoer suffered some bad consequence somehow” (5). Thus, in her view, there is never any place in the law or justice for anger, since it is almost always comprised of a “payback wish” (retribution, vengeance), rendering it normatively problematic for either of two reasons: it reflects an over-investment in relative status (a sense that the wrongdoer insulted the victim by doing harm, and that the balance in relative status can be “reset” by injuring the wrongdoer in kind), or it comprises a kind of magical thinking, since it is obvious that injuring the perpetrator will not erase or redress the injury to the victim. The former is normatively problematic because

“that type of obsessive narrowness...is something we ought to discourage in both self and others,” while the latter is normatively problematic because “the beliefs involved are false and incoherent, ubiquitous though they are” (5-6). The only kind of anger that Nussbaum finds acceptable is “transition anger,” which she identifies as a kind of simple moral outrage: “This is outrageous! Something must be done.” While Nussbaum admits that anger can serve a number of political purposes, including as a signal that something is wrong, a motivation to fix the thing that is wrong, and a deterrent to potential wrongdoers, she ultimately argues that at least the first two purposes can be fulfilled by a “non-angry performance of anger” along the lines of Martin Luther King Jr., who reminded African American citizens that they had a right to be angry, but quickly shifted that anger into motivation to build a more just world, rather than to “pay back” white oppressors with subjugation and violence in kind.

Nussbaum’s argument about anger gains complexity as it unfolds throughout her book, especially as she extends her critique to forgiveness as an oft-advocated alternative to anger, arguing that when forgiveness functions as a transaction – requiring abasement as a precondition to its fulfillment – it simply enacts anger’s payback wish in another guise. But I focus here on Nussbaum’s introduction because her use of the *Oresteia* exemplifies both what I consider to be the consensus reading of the plays, taking them to offer a relatively straightforward allegory for the birth of democratic legal justice, and the tendency among political thinkers to turn to Aeschylus’s trilogy in particular to support whatever story they want to tell about justice. I will offer my own counter-reading of the *Oresteia* in the final section of this introduction, and in doing so I hope to untangle the tight connection she has wound between anger and retribution in order to demonstrate that revenge, when it is enacted by female figures in Greek tragedy, is motivated by more than anger and functions as more than just the fulfillment of a payback wish.

In the meantime, I would like to draw out the consequences of Nussbaum's argument about anger, grounded in the *Oresteia*, for debates about retributive justice.

Nussbaum echoes Apollo's characterization of the Furies in the *Oresteia*'s final play, identifying them with "unbridled anger": they are "obsessive, destructive, existing only to inflict pain and ill;" "subhuman [and] doglike" in their desire for blood (2). The gentle tempers that the Furies take on in the final moments of *Eumenides* are so foreign to their previous doggy natures, Nussbaum argues, as to render them and the retribution they used to embody completely changed: not a dark secret at the foundation of the law, but a cornerstone of just institutions.

With the conclusion of the *Oresteia*, she writes,

Aeschylus suggests that political justice does not just put a cage around anger, it fundamentally transforms it, from something hardly human, obsessive, bloodthirsty, to something human, accepting of reasons, calm, deliberate, and measured. Moreover, justice focuses not on a past that can never be altered but on the creation of future welfare and prosperity. The sense of accountability that inhabits just institutions is, in fact, not a retributive sentiment at all, it is measured judgment in defense of current and future life. (3)

Nussbaum's singular focus on anger as the normatively problematic cause of revenge in the *Oresteia* marks a slight departure from the consensus reading of Aeschylus' trilogy, which often takes the form of a broader condemnation of cyclical violence. It also yields a distinct critique of both harsh punishments specifically and retributivism in general: that almost any justification of harsh punishment ultimately relies on an appeal to the *lex talionis*, and so falls victim to the same fallacies she demonstrates with respect to anger; and that retributivism – like the Furies of the *Oresteia* – is narrowly focused on a past that cannot be undone, looking backward toward the desert of the wrongdoer rather than toward the future and the prevention of further harm. Indeed, Nussbaum suggests that reliance on the criminal punishment system *ex post* is an admission of failure at deterring harm *ex ante*. Such *ex ante* deterrence requires what Nussbaum terms

“welfarist” interventions, which may include punishment but “as just one part of a much larger project that would also include nutrition, education, health care, housing, employment, and much more” (8).

With respect to the debates around retributivism, I share Nussbaum’s conviction that *ex ante* interventions are more likely to address the causes of violence than the harsh treatment offered by the criminal punishment system after the fact. But I find more in the *Oresteia* (and other Greek tragedies) than an obsession with injury or a series of “exhausting vicarious retributive projects” that “make it impossible for anyone to love anyone” (4-5). When undertaken by Greek tragedy’s female protagonists, revenge is also animated by the spirit of accountability that Nussbaum identifies with just institutions. Revenge, too, can be “a measured judgement in defense of current and future life” – but forms of life and relation that are not recognized or valued by a “justice” system that serves dominant structures of power.

IV. Performing Justice: Greek Tragedy’s Female Figures

One way to read this dissertation is as a study of revenge, providing an overview of the different uses to which revenge has been put, and the contexts in which it has been pursued, by female protagonists in a selection of eight Greek tragedies: the three plays of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, which I will examine in this introduction; the *Women of Trachis*, by Sophocles; and four plays by Euripides (*Hecuba*, *Medea*, *Ion*, and *Bacchae*). Clytemnestra and Hecuba make a case for revenge as a meaning-making act, Deianira and Medea undertake revenge as an option of last resort, and Creusa and Agave are the attempter and victim (respectively) of a thwarted or corrupted revenge. Each of these female figures articulates a harm and makes a claim to justice, and the actions they undertake *as* women in pursuit of justice unsettle the idea that legal

retribution is more “impartial” and less harmful than revenge. In doing so, they make legible issues of justice that are of contemporary concern: what a person might want, in taking revenge or in seeking redress of harm from the law; the kinds of subjects that democratic legal justice imagines and makes visible, and the kind of agency those subjects possess; the construction of the criminal type and the use of predictions to reduce crime; the affective role of the community in ensuring justice is done; the justification of the use of punishment; and the logic of commensurability that underlies any system of retribution.

But this dissertation is also a study of the ways these same female figures, and their attendant choruses, perform alternatives to the retributive institutions and unequal, gendered forms of relation that fail them. In enacting revenge, Clytemnestra and Hecuba draw our attention to aspects of harm and loss that legal democratic justice cannot accommodate; in deliberating with their choruses, Deianira and Medea seek the hospitality and trust in their actions that their husband and king deny them; and in acting with their choruses, Creusa and Agave demonstrate both a communal model of seeking justice that takes seriously the needs of the victim of harm, and a diffuse exercise of agency that challenges the assignation of responsibility for harm to a single actor. Taken together, these female figures perform a different way of being in relation with others, one unrecognized within the plays by the male figures for the law, and unrecognized in scholarship by people who think these plays are about the male characters, or who consider the female figures either irredeemable (Medea, Clytemnestra, Hecuba) or inconsequential (Creusa, Deianira, Agave), and therefore not worth attending to. But by taking the claims and actions of these female figures seriously, it becomes possible to see how the rhetoric of the plays disrupt their logic, and vice-versa, to unsettle assumptions about both the

role of retribution in legal democratic justice and the foundational role of Greek tragedy, and in particular the *Oresteia*, in the way legal justice is imagined and mythologized in the West.

In the chapter that follows, I will link the revenge of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* to that of the title character in Euripides' *Hecuba* to posit revenge as a meaning-making act outside the framework of legal justice, undertaken by women when denied recourse to the law. I read *Hecuba* contextually and intertextually, attending both to its historical context of the Athenian transition to democracy in the 5th century and to its intertextual dialogue with the *Oresteia*. Against the great majority of scholars of *Hecuba*, I argue that Hecuba's transformation into a dog does not signal her moral degeneration, and that her revenge is both ethically coherent and deeply human, recognizing the particularity of her lost son Polydorus in a way that democratic justice cannot. Thus, what is at stake for Hecuba as well as for Clytemnestra, in avenging themselves on their children's killers, is not just the vindication of their anger or restoration of what they have lost, but a demand for others to recognize those losses in their particularity: not just *any* child, but theirs in particular; not *just* their children, but a whole way of being in the world. Theorizing justice as an interpersonal (rather than impersonal) matter in this way recognizes the subject of justice as one who is constituted in and by their relations with others, and restores the particularity elided in the operation of "equality under the law."

My third chapter examines the gendered construction of the criminal type in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* and Euripides' *Medea*. In both plays, the female protagonists (Deianira and Medea) endeavor to secure their places within their households, and not to be replaced in their marriages, through "gifts" of poisoned garments. In this, their actions fit the tragic pattern I propose in my first chapter, wherein revenge both acts as the underside of law, taken by individuals without access to legal redress, and attempts in its form to attend to the particularity

of an injury or loss in a way that the law cannot. In these plays, however, both women's possibilities for subsequent action are constrained by their encounters with male figures who presume their guilt and see them as criminal, either without context or before they have even done harm. In both women's cases, these encounters materially change their possibilities for action: Medea, seen as a threat and denied aid, becomes threatening and then a murderer; while Deianira, accused of murder but unable to defend herself, commits suicide rather than live as a threat, misrecognized by others as an evil woman who intended harm. As Deianira and Medea navigate and give voice to their dilemmas, I argue, they contest a logic of prediction – one that endures in contemporary practices of predictive policing – that rests on an identity-based presumption of guilt and cannot accommodate the ways systemic forces affect subjects' life possibilities and shape their actions.

In my fourth chapter, I analyze Euripides' *Ion* and *Bacchae*, a pair of plays that, like *Medea* and the *Women of Trachis*, are inverses: the scene of Agave re-membering her son's torn body at the end of *Bacchae* is the dark reflection of Creusa's happy reunion with her living son at the end of *Ion*. This chapter refines the theory of agency articulated in my third chapter and problematizes both the adversarial form of the legal trial (recalling the limitations of the democratic court and the uses of revenge articulated in my first two chapters) and the rhetoric of punishment that enables the administration of legal retribution. In *Bacchae*, the chorus of maenads enable and enact with Agave the terrible crime at the center of the play: the dismemberment of her son, Pentheus. I contend that Agave, entangled with the chorus, represents a version of the tragic subject not as a lone actor, but as acting with and acted on by others and by forces beyond herself. In this way, Euripides both calls into question the logic of retributive justice in general, and offers a tragic subject that a simple form of retributive justice

cannot accommodate. Similarly, I argue that in *Ion*, Euripides uses Creusa's inability to seek justice from the god who wronged her to problematize the logic of legal trials by staging alternatives to legal justice: first, Creusa's attempt at revenge through harming a mortal dear to Apollo, and second, the practices of affective identification, disclosure, and recognition performed by Creusa and the chorus, which ultimately enable the justice she seeks. I propose that Creusa's disclosure of her rape by Apollo and consequent forced exposure of her son, and the recognition of that harm by its doer and by her community (the chorus), reckon with the affective dimensions of harm or loss – its grief, its rage – in a way that legal justice tends to overlook or suppress, and should incorporate.

Finally, in my conclusion, I reflect on my personal investment in Greek tragedy and the uses I have found for it, especially in the context of undergraduate teaching. I believe that the approach to reading Greek tragedy that my dissertation models – reading with the hospitality that I theorize through my engagement with *Medea* and *Women of Trachis* – can also bring Greek tragedy's conflicts of power and value into clearer view for students as they engage the play and each other in classroom discussion, and can open new pedagogical possibilities for teaching classical literature. I give brief accounts of two instances of teaching Greek tragedy (Euripides' *Hecuba*, and Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*) to demonstrate the ways that students use the tragedies to think through contemporary social and political problems. This kind of engagement with ancient literature exemplifies the classroom as a space of classical reception: a space where, to paraphrase Dan-el Padilla Peralta, students negotiate the recursive and critical relationship between the deep past and the deep present.⁶

⁶ See Dan-el Padilla Peralta, "Barbarians Inside the Gates, Part II," in *Eidolon* (November 2015).

V. Clytemnestra: A Grief Lesson

It is worth engaging Nussbaum's reading of the *Oresteia* to determine exactly how and why tragic revenge is disqualified from being anything other than the visitation of violence by an angry person on someone they perceive to have injured them. Even if we are comfortable with Nussbaum's wholesale condemnation of anger and revenge on the grounds that they are normatively problematic – and I do not disagree that the impulse to exchange injury for injury is problematic – we should be skeptical of the tendency not to examine them more deeply. While I concede that tragic revenge may be a class of retribution, insofar as it occurs in response to a harm done, I contend that Nussbaum's identification of revenge (which she uses interchangeably with retribution) with anger prevents her from seeing the ways in which it may function in tragedy as, in her own words, “a measured judgment in defense of current and future life.” To that end, I will contest Nussbaum's reading of revenge in the *Oresteia* on the grounds that tragic revenge is not concerned with relative status, nor does it reflect “magical thinking” – the two features that render anger/retribution normatively problematic in Nussbaum's account.

Nussbaum is not wrong to characterize the Furies as guardians of vengeance, nor is she wrong about their fearsomeness – their eyes, dripping a foul liquid, their terrible smell, their black robes, their calls to hunt Orestes. And they do insist on a blood price: Orestes' blood to pay back his mother's. But where she errs is in identifying the Furies with an endless and irrational anger, as in fact, their concern in the *Oresteia* is fairly limited. In part, the Furies' concern is circumscribed because all of the murders occur within the same family, which confines the cycle of vengeance within it. This fact is especially relevant because of the kind of murder being litigated in the final play, the kind for which the Furies pursue the murderer: the murder of kin. Not only does the fact of kin-murder underlie the verdict of the jury and Athena (transforming

matricide to homicide, the death of a mother to the death of any other person), but it is emblematic of the Furies' position in general. They chase kin-killers because those are the most extreme cases: "Now is for the overturning of new laws," they say, "if the crime of this matricide/overpowers custom." The result would be men who are accustomed "to tolerance of bloodshed," and suffering for parents at the hands of their children (*Eumenides* 490-98). If humans are not obligated to honor even the closest ties of kinship, they ask, what is to bind them to their fellow man?

Moreover, the Furies and Apollo each provide evidence that tragic revenge isn't prey to the "magical thinking" Nussbaum ascribes to it. Both parties acknowledge that death cannot be undone: "a mother's blood upon the ground/is hard to bring back," the Furies say, "the liquid, once poured on the earth, is gone" (*Eum.* 261-63). Apollo, likewise, notes that Zeus can change every state but death: "when the dust has swallowed up a man's blood,/he has died once and for all; there is nothing that can raise him up again" (*Eum.* 646-48). So, to the extent that revenge in the *Oresteia* does not seem particularly concerned with relative status, nor does it subscribe to the belief that the death of the murderer will somehow bring the lost loved one back, it does not meet Nussbaum's criteria for anger, which must contain a "payback wish" based on either of those grounds. What, then, could motivate tragic revenge?

The answer is grief. It is true that Clytemnestra rages, eloquently; but her anger is not directed at Agamemnon himself so much as it is the irreparable and incommensurable loss of her daughter Iphigeneia, whom he slaughtered at the altar to procure favorable winds to sail to Troy.⁷

⁷ In the chapter "Mourning, Membership and the Politics of Exception: Plotting Creon's Conspiracy with Democracy" from her book *Antigone, Interrupted*, Bonnie Honig writes compellingly about the regulation of mourning in 5th century BC Athens as context for Greek tragedy's representation of the tensions between democratic and aristocratic paradigms of personhood and citizenship. (Indeed, Honig's treatment of Sophocles' *Antigone* is so capacious and so thorough that I myself have skirted this play in my dissertation.) Honig argues that Antigone's "aristocratic" insistence on the irreplaceability of her brother Polynices and Creon's "democratic" resistance to her public mourning points to "a shift from an heroic ethics and politics of individuality and distinction

In *Agamemnon*, when the chorus of old men confront Clytemnestra about her murder of her husband, she replies:

νῦν μὲν δικάζεις ἐκ πόλεως φυγὴν ἐμοὶ
καὶ μῖσος ἀστῶν δημόθρους τ' ἔχειν ἀράς,
οὐδὲν τότε' ἀνδρὶ τῷδ' ἐναντίον φέρων:
ὄς οὐ προτιμῶν, ὡσπερὶ βοτοῦ μόρον,
μήλων φλεόντων εὐπόκοις νομεύμασιν,
ἔθυσεν αὐτοῦ παῖδα, φιλτάτην ἐμοὶ
ὠδῖν', ἐπαδὸν Θρηκίων ἀημάτων.
οὐ τοῦτον ἐκ γῆς τῆσδε χρῆν σ' ἀνδρηλατεῖν,
μιασμμάτων ἄποιν'; ἐπήκοος δ' ἐμῶν
ἔργων δικαστῆς τραχὺς εἶ. (1412-21)

Now you decree exile from my country for me
and hatred uttered by the citizens, and to bear ruin,
bringing nothing then against that man:
who, honoring no more than if it were the death of a beast
in his fleecy flocks abundant with sheep,
sacrificed his own child, my dearest pain,
as a charm for the winds of Thrace.
Was it not him you should have banished from the land,
from house and home, in requital for his pollutions?
But listening to my deeds you are a harsh judge.

Clytemnestra's frustration with the chorus is clear (and, I would add, well-founded: it indeed seems outrageous that they should treat her murder differently from her husband's), but the crux of her response is in her characterization of Iphigeneia's murder: in slaughtering their daughter, Agamemnon treated her life as if it were worthless – “honoring [it] no more than if it were the death of a beast” – and as if he could do so without affecting others. Clytemnestra emphasizes that in Iphigeneia, Agamemnon sacrificed “his own child” and “[her] dearest pain,” intimating that Iphigeneia's death is not like any other, and that treating it as such (leaving it unavenged)

to a democratic ethics and politics of interchangeability and substitution” (103). While I find Honig's reading to be enormously generative, I also want to distinguish my argument from hers. I understand tragic female figures' rhetoric of incommensurability – including and especially their emphasis on the affective elements of grief and loss – to undermine the retributive paradigm of justice (which depends on a logic of commensurability), and not just the smooth functioning of the democratic polis (103). These two phenomena are related, but not the same.

would be a dishonor, a failure to recognize adequately both Iphigeneia's dignity and her particularity. If revenge is a corrective, it is a corrective to the notion that any human life is bereft of dignity or value, deserving of violence in excess of the uncertainty of everyday life; and a corrective to the idea of a human subject that is not inextricably bound to others, and indeed is constituted in its relations with others. Rather than revenge "[making] it impossible for anyone to love anyone," as Nussbaum alleges, revenge occurs precisely because someone loves someone (4).

Later in her book, Nussbaum herself offers a definition of grief that supports my reading, as she argues that grief's "target" is the loss – "the person who has died or departed" – even if the loss is caused by a person (47). Moreover, she writes,

grief seeks restoration or substitution for that which was lost, whereas anger typically wants to do something to or about the perpetrator. Grief addresses the hole or gap in the self, anger the wrongful infliction of that damage by the target. (47)

I would amend this definition to suggest that grief may indeed take into account the "wrongfulness" of a loss, or at least suggest that the wrongfulness of a loss (as in the case of Iphigeneia), in contrast to a natural death, might be additional cause for grief. In Clytemnestra's case, the fact that the "target" of her revenge is her loss – it is aimed at honoring Iphigeneia, and seeks to restore the dignity denied her by Agamemnon – supports my contention that she is motivated by grief, and not just anger. Some might object that the "target" of Clytemnestra's revenge is Agamemnon; I would respond that Agamemnon does not matter to Clytemnestra *qua* Agamemnon (in the same way that Iphigeneia matters to Clytemnestra *qua* Iphigeneia): the identity of her daughter's murderer is secondary to the fact of her murder, and Clytemnestra (or another of her family members) likely would have sought revenge for Iphigeneia regardless of who killed her. It is who she has lost that matters to Clytemnestra, not who has caused her loss.

Thus, we can see that even if the transformation of revenge into legal retribution “frees” the family (and the intimate sphere more generally) to be “a place of...reciprocal good will,” as Nussbaum argues, it does not guarantee the same recognition of the particularity of the lost loved one (4). Indeed, in retributive justice administered by the law, revenge’s emphasis on the lost loved one elides into the crime of taking a life, so that it is murder tout court that is prosecuted and punished rather than the murder of a particular person, as we see in the transformation of Clytemnestra’s murder from matricide to homicide. While this seems necessary for the sake of impartiality (no one’s life is worth more than anyone else’s; no one is entitled to be treated differently under the law), it occludes the very thing people may come to the law for: recognition of the person they have lost. And as the victim of the crime is subsumed into the crime itself, and a “fit and fair” punishment is assigned for the crime, the system of legal redress suggests, however inadvertently, that the value of a victim’s life is equal to the punishment meted out for taking it. The result is that the value of a life is put into circulation, interchangeable both with punishments meted out by law and with other lives. Such a system may address the anger that Nussbaum identifies with retribution (indeed, playing into the flawed logic that harming the perpetrator will make up for the injury or balance out relative status), but not the grief that underpins tragic revenge.

While Clytemnestra’s revenge looks backward, to the incommensurable loss of Iphigeneia, and to the present, correcting Agamemnon’s estimation of his daughter as disposable and ensuring he will not make the same mistake again, it is also oriented toward the future, as Nussbaum argues just institutions must be. In response to the chorus of elders, who fret about Agamemnon’s funeral rites, Clytemnestra proclaims:

οὐ σὲ προσήκει τὸ μέλημ’ ἀλέγειν
τοῦτο: πρὸς ἡμῶν

κάππεσε, κάθθανε, καὶ καταθάγομεν,
οὐχ ὑπὸ κλαυθμῶν τῶν ἐξ οἴκων,
ἀλλ' Ἰφιγένειά νιν ἀσπασίως
θυγάτηρ, ὡς χρῆ,
πατέρ' ἀντιάσασα πρὸς ὠκύπορον
πόρθμευμ' ἀχέων
περὶ χεῖρε βαλοῦσα φιλήσει. (*Agamemnon* 1551-59)

This duty is not yours to care for:
by our hand
he fell, by our hand he died, and we shall bury him,
with no weeping from this house.
But Iphigeneia, his daughter –
it must be so –
having met her father gladly
by the swift-flowing river of griefs,
will throw her arms around him and kiss him.

At the same time she denies her husband the funeral laments befitting a king and head of *oikos* in the realm of the living, Clytemnestra imagines her family reunited in the world of the dead.

Iphigeneia, the very daughter Agamemnon slaughtered like an animal, will throw her arms around her father in the underworld. While Clytemnestra does not offer an account of the content of their reunion – no tearful confrontation, no apology – Clytemnestra is clearly imagining that the bond between father and daughter could be repaired, if only in the afterlife. What makes it possible for Iphigeneia to meet her father gladly on the banks of the Acheron is his death in turn: Clytemnestra's revenge paradoxically functions as a way to put their family back together, enabling Agamemnon to see clearly in death the daughter he refused in life.

None of this is meant to suggest that revenge is good and should be reinstated in our own time. Even if it may function rhetorically to honor a lost loved one, killing a perpetrator in an act of revenge amounts to another, unacceptable violation of dignity. But I hope I have demonstrated, with my rereading of the *Oresteia*, that tragic revenge is comprehensible; that we may even be able to empathize with tragedy's avengers – and that the particularity those

avengers insist on is worth holding on to, both because it reveals that grief, and not just anger, may motivate people to seek redress for a loss, and because it disrupts the “magical thinking” of retributive justice by insisting on the incommensurability of loss. Tragic revenge suggests that for legal justice to “feel” just, it must address not only anger, but grief; not only injury, but loss.

In the preface to her book *Grief Lessons*, translating four plays by Euripides, Anne Carson asks: “Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.” Her question-and-answer, here, intimates that grief and rage can be intertwined (as we see in *Clytemnestra*), or that grief can sometimes look like rage. This possibility seems to be lost on Nussbaum, who sees in grief the recognition that something valuable has been lost, but sees in anger only a selfish and backward concern for harm done to oneself, missing the resonances between the substitution of grief and the retribution of anger.

Indeed, a troubling consequence of the characterization of anger as normatively problematic, irrational, and unreasonable – even if such a characterization is logically sound – is that it shores up a division between reason and emotion, allowing emotions and emotional actions (like anger and revenge) to be dismissed without further thought, as if they are devoid even of a “kernel of rationality.” This division is also, historically, gendered: women are emotional, irrational, and not to be taken seriously, while men are the sole possessors of reason and objectivity. It follows, then, that such an understanding of anger would prevent Nussbaum and others from seeing how, in the *Oresteia* and elsewhere, women’s anger and their grief actually reflect deeply reasoned, ethically coherent positions. When anger is by definition irrational, there appears to be little reason to take the grievances of angry people seriously, or even to treat them as fully human: they are doglike, obsessive, and bloodthirsty, like the Furies. The result is an analysis without sensitivity or compassion, lacking the “unconditional love and

generosity” for its subjects that Nussbaum touts as the best response to instances of injury and grief (12).

Carson goes on to make a brief argument about tragedy’s catharsis: you cannot possibly hold all this anger in you, and you cannot possibly unleash it on the world and live. “Do you want to go down to the pits of yourself all alone?” she asks. “Not much. What if an actor could do it for you? Isn’t that why they are called actors? They act for you” (7). Although Carson is concerned with the restorative properties of cleaning out bad feelings, her attention to the work of the actors who enact tragedy’s plots helps bring into focus another actor: the texts themselves, which act on and for the audience as well. The speeches and plot elements – the murders and subsequent revenges, the accusations and laments – are important in themselves, but also for how they bear on and illuminate one another. It may seem obvious, but tragedy does rhetorical as well as emotional work. And while I do not analyze Greek tragedy as a theatrical performance on stage in this dissertation, I close read textual elements in order to analyze the performativity of these plays as “they act for us,” enacting that rhetorical and emotional work.

For this reason, Nussbaum’s harsh disposition toward tragedy’s avengers – a disposition shared by many critics of Greek tragedy – seems in part a failure of reading: she rules on them as if in a court of law, overlooking the ways that their actions can mean more than their face value, the way that revenge can function – work toward an end, reflect a value – rather than be merely a (violent) end in itself. This is not to elevate an action’s rhetorical weight over its consequences: a death is still a death. But *reading* Clytemnestra and the Furies, in search of a way for their actions to make sense, rather than adjudicating them, yields insights about grief and justice that are worth lingering with.

Perhaps this insight is what Carson meant by titling her collection *Grief Lessons*: that tragedies, as much as they may be cathartic, are also didactic. Beyond ideas about the ways art can inculcate certain values and habits in a population, tragedy also problematizes those values and habits, not just offering a vision of the world as it is, but asking how it could be otherwise. Tragedy's attention to structurally marginalized figures – women, foreigners, slaves – and the ways in which they are barred from seeking justice within the law, and so must seek it elsewhere, teaches us both to see their griefs and to contest the conditions that cause them.

CHAPTER II

κυνὸς σῆμα: Euripides' *Hecuba* and the Uses of Revenge

I. The Two Hecubas: Problems of Interpretation

ἀλλ' ὃ τῶν χαλκεγγέων Τρώων
ἄλοχοι μέλαι,
καὶ κοῦραι κοῦραι δύστυμοι,
τύφεται Ἴλιον, αἰάζωμεν.
μάτηρ δ' ὡσεὶ τις πτανοῖς
ὄρνισιν, ὅπως ἐξάρξω ἡγὼ
κλαγγάν, μολπάν...

But O unhappy wives
of the Trojans with brazen spears,
whose daughters were ill-wed brides,
let us weep, Ilium smolders,
and I, like a mother
among winged birds, shall lead
the keening, the song... (Euripides *Trojan Women*, 143-9)

οὐ γάρ με χαίρειν χρὴ σε τιμωρουμένην;
Shouldn't I rejoice, having avenged myself on you? (Euripides *Hecuba*, 1258)⁸

Hecuba: queen of Troy, wife of Priam, bereft mother of thirteen children. Hecuba mourns. At the opening of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Hecuba slowly rises from the Thracian dust to offer a lament to Troy and what is left of her life. Hecuba has lost everything, yet condemns the horrors of war and counsels her fellow women to make the best of their new lots. It is easy to admire this Hecuba, who exhibits noble character in the face of great adversity, who displays such tenderness and grief for her dead children, who makes impassioned speeches

⁸ For the Greek, I have used Gilbert Murray's 1902 Oxford text. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

decrying the violence of the conquering Greeks. She is a figure of remarkable consistency, and it is with similar consistency that Hecuba the endless mourner has endured – in images and engravings from the 14th century onward, in which she is primarily depicted discovering Polydorus’s corpse or weeping on Polyxena’s funeral pyre; and in the popularity of stage performances of Trojan Women, especially in the United States, in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁹ This version of Hecuba is abject but sympathetic, her grief uncomplicated by rage, her primary virtue her persistence in the face of destruction.

Euripides’ other version of the mourning queen has not fared so favorably.¹⁰ Euripides’ *Hecuba* and its titular protagonist have posed an interpretive and ethical dilemma for classical scholars since the 17th century. Critics from Schlegel to Nussbaum lament what they consider to be *Hecuba*’s two major flaws: the lack of structural unity between the play’s first and second halves, which many believe would function better as two separate plays; and the lack of unity in Hecuba’s characterization across the two halves of the play. Indeed, it is difficult for critics to conceive that the Hecuba who gives speeches on human excellence at the beginning of the play and the Hecuba at the end of the play is the same person without also positing that she loses her humanity in the second half when she avenges her son’s murder. This suspicion is confirmed, to their minds, when Hecuba becomes literally inhuman in the play’s final scenes. Polymestor prophesies that Hecuba will turn into a dog with fiery eyes; that she will then jump from the

⁹ On the endurance of Trojan Women, particularly in the US context, see Helene Foley’s 2012 book *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage*.

¹⁰ See Nussbaum 1986, Mossman 1995, Foley 2015. In “The Betrayal of Convention: Euripides’ *Hecuba*,” Nussbaum connects Hecuba’s loss of status to the dominance in the nineteenth century of “a moral philosophy that speaks of the incorruptibility of the good will, sharply distinguishing the sphere of contingent happenings from the domain of the moral personality.” Mossman provides a very thorough footnote of the most prominent scholarly responses to *Hecuba*, which are overwhelmingly negative and include the work of Beck, Hermann, Schlegel, Murray, Hadley, Heinemann, Kirkwood, Abrahamson, Conacher, Buxton, and Arrowsmith, among several others. Foley likewise surveys major critical responses to Hecuba; her bibliography is exhaustive.

ship's mast; that her grave at sea will become κυνὸς ταλαίνης σῆμα, ναυτίλοις τέκμαρ: sign of the suffering bitch, a landmark for sailors.

Helene Foley's recent book *Euripides: Hecuba* is a notable exception to these consensus readings, as she provides a thorough account of the critical reception of the play and a compelling analysis of the evolution of Hecuba's rhetoric in relation to her sense of justice. Foley contextualizes the negative reception of *Hecuba* as a relatively modern phenomenon, beginning in the 17th century and in contrast to the positive view of the play among Renaissance critics, who "admired *Hecuba* not only for its paradigmatic representation of the pitiful fragility of human fortunes, but for its horrific, triumphant, and bloody revenge by a frustrated victim seeking retribution for a crime that has gone unpunished, as well as for its compelling rhetoric," and for whom "horror, violence, moral depravity, and emotional extremity constituted a desirable dramatic *atrocitas* (tragic horror)" (2015.70). However, despite Foley's own assertion that Hecuba's arguments in defense of the powerless and against the powerful may be more important to the play's meaning than her transformation from victim to avenger, she still frames that transformation as "shocking," implies that Hecuba's character has become tainted by "the corrupting violence of war," refers to Hecuba's "turn to self-help justice" as "horrific," and suggests that in her pursuit of justice, Hecuba is "reduced...to destroying the family bonds and innocent lives that she began the play by defending" (2015.2-10). In this way, even as she troubles the critical tendency to condemn Hecuba and highlights more generous readings of the play, Foley preserves the attitude of moral judgment demonstrated by these other critics, and cannot seem to conceive of Hecuba's revenge as consonant with, not in opposition to, her investment in "the family bonds and innocent lives that she began the play by defending."¹¹

¹¹ These more generous readings include Justina Gregory 1991, "Genealogy and Intertextuality in 'Hecuba'"; James Kastely 1993, "Rhetoric and Violence in Euripides' *Hecuba*"; and Judith Mossman 1995, *Wild Justice*.

The mode of Hecuba's revenge is gruesome, to be sure. Rather than merely kill Polymestor, her son's murderer, Hecuba slays his two infant sons and puts out his eyes. The play's audience would have seen Polymestor scabbling on all fours, hunting and howling like a wild animal, an image likely as shocking to them as it is to more modern critics. Yet these critics never regard Polymestor as inhuman, despite his visually degraded position and his violation of the laws of *xenia* (guest-friendship) in murdering Hecuba's son. Hecuba's revenge marks her alone as having abandoned the *nomoi* ("laws," "conventions") of communal human life. Having willingly acted in an inhuman way, Hecuba herself becomes inhuman.

But to read *Hecuba* so schematically is to make a number of assumptions: the critical assumption that *Hecuba* is meant to be understood in isolation from other Greek dramas on the same theme; the moral assumption that revenge is an inherent evil and was as incomprehensible to the ancient Greeks as it may be to readers today; the anthropocentric assumption that it is worse to be a dog, under any circumstances, than to be a human. Insofar as critics understand Hecuba's revenge as rendering her inhuman, they also tend not to see it as having anything to do with justice – because justice is a human invention, concerned with human laws and human relations; and Hecuba, since she is not human, can have no part in these. While Hecuba's revenge is brutal, to linger in moral disgust as most critics do, and to use such disgust as evidence of Hecuba's inhumanity, is to forget – deliberately or not – that her claim to revenge is valid.¹² Taken on its own terms, Hecuba's revenge is both ethically coherent and deeply human. With *Hecuba*, Euripides points us toward a more expansive, if still imperfect, vision of justice. Hecuba's revenge is also a kind of justice, one that reckons with the particularity of what is lost in human life in a way that law cannot. Hecuba's transformation does not mark her loss of

¹² See "Hecuba's Revenge," in Mossman's *Wild Justice*. Mossman observes, furthermore, that killing the victim's children was common practice – a prudential measure, to curtail future retribution.

humanity, but rather her insistence on the value of the very human goods critics accuse her of abandoning: the *nomoi* of kinship and *philia*.

I situate my reading of *Hecuba* in the play's historical context, Athens in the 5th century B.C., and in its intertextual relationship to Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. 5th-century Athens gave rise both to democracy and tragic drama, and it is a commonplace that the latter staged the issues of the former. As Jean-Pierre Vernant observes in his essay "Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation,"

the City puts itself on stage and plays itself...It puts in question its own internal contradictions, revealing...that the true subject matter of tragedy is social thought, and most especially juridical thought in the very process of elaboration. Tragedy poses the problems of law, and the question of what justice is. (281)

In the transition from aristocracy to democracy in the late 6th and early 5th centuries, it was necessary to center the citizen, rather than the family or clan, as the unit of political life. While the term 'citizen' had specific gender and class connotations for the Athenians, I use it here to refer more broadly to the subject constituted in and by the polis – a participant in the life of the polis and subject of its laws. In order to supplant kinship with citizenship, Solon in the 6th century and Pericles in the 5th instituted laws governing familial relationships to dead kin: how family members could be mourned, for how long, and by whom.

Prior to the institution of these laws, aristocratic families held elaborate funerals to honor their dead kin that could last for as long as a week; professional mourners were hired to wail laments, and the women of the household sheared their hair and tore their cheeks. Not only were such funerals disruptive to the functioning of the polis, but they also projected the irreplaceable and exceptional nature of the person lost, *as* having been a member of a particular family. If the new democratic government wished to promote even the illusion of equality among citizens, and to encourage loyalty to the polis over kinship ties, such practices could not be allowed to

continue. Between them, Solon and Pericles limited the length and lavishness of noble families' public funerals, and decreed that they be confined to the private sphere and celebrated only by the close family of the dead (Foley 22-3). These laws precipitated a radical reorientation of the individual's relation to kin and to polis, and made its way onto the tragic stage in modified form through plays dealing with intrafamilial murder and the meting out of justice and revenge. Any reading of Greek tragedy must be attentive to this historical context.

In addition to the play's historical context, *Hecuba* is at least in part Euripides' response to the tradition of tragedies dealing with themes of justice and kinship, and perhaps even to Aeschylus's *Oresteia* in particular. There is sufficient evidence in the text to suggest that even if Euripides wasn't concerned with responding to the *Oresteia* specifically, it was certainly on his mind: *Hecuba* is a revenge play featuring a murderous mother in which the action begins with a virgin daughter's sacrifice because *the winds won't blow*. It also features a courtroom scene and a meditation on *peitho* (persuasion), the mutable kinship rhetoric that allows each murderer in the house of Atreus to reason their way out of their crime by reasoning their way out of the family, and which leads, in the final courtroom scene in *Eumenides*, to the erasure of the family as a measure of identity at the founding of democratic law.

The *Oresteia* is widely considered to stage the transition from aristocratic vendetta justice to the democratic justice of the court of law. The trilogy culminates in the first murder trial brought before a jury on the Areopagus, in which Orestes' fate as a mother-killer is decided. What is most provocative about this trilogy is that its final verdict of Orestes' acquittal – the symbolic moment of transition from revenge to legal justice – rests on an argument of *justification* that prizes the very particularity of the kinship tie that the court has been instructed not to take into account, but is invoked by Athena herself, reflecting on her own motherlessness

in her deciding vote. Orestes is acquitted of homicide (rather than matricide), on the grounds that such homicide was justified by the *kinship relation* between Orestes and his father Agamemnon, whom Clytemnestra killed.

The difficulty is that this verdict takes into consideration the particular identity of a victim – it is Orestes’ father, *in particular*, whom Clytemnestra murdered – as a way to justify Orestes’ reciprocal murder of his mother. At the same time, it places Clytemnestra outside the bonds of kinship, marking her death as interchangeable with any other. The results of this verdict are twofold: the verdict reinforces the purely patrilineal heritage favored by the Athenians, and it eliminates kinship from consideration in homicides. Homicide, in effect, becomes the only kind of murder recognized in the democratic court of law (insofar as the court compensates or punishes it as necessary), which in turn implies that the only relation between persons that the court recognizes is the relation of citizenship.

Aeschylus’s trilogy illuminates the stakes of universal application of the law (despite being built, in the *Oresteia*, on a particular application), and of treating all citizens as interchangeable. When all citizens are interchangeable, none can have a claim to the law that is greater than any other’s; thus all citizens are equal before the law. Moreover, the creation of a category of crime (homicide) that admits no distinction or preference for its content (kin or not kin) allows for the systematization of punishment, such that it becomes possible to mete out equivalent punishments for equivalent crimes, and to posit an exact commensurability between the two. At the end of the *Oresteia*, the Erinyes become the Semnai and are led to their new home beneath the city, where they will rule over matters of reproduction and agricultural prosperity. While this transition certainly isn’t uncomplicated for Aeschylus – his trilogy does

point to asymmetries of justice at the birth of democratic law – it is ultimately presented as necessary if the cycle of violence predicated by vengeance killings is to come to an end.

Euripides unsettles the seemingly clean division between legal justice and violence, and with *Hecuba* exposes how the violence at the birth of democratic legal justice persists in the present. The commensurability of crimes and punishments and the interchangeability of citizens that yields equality before the law also engage in an erasure of particularity that shifts the register of violence from physical to epistemological (with possible physical consequences). Hecuba rejects this interchangeability, and through her revenge not only insists on the particularity of her own son, but also points to the inadequacy of legal justice to recognize what she has lost in him.

II. Nussbaum, Butler, and Euripides: Human Good and Possibilities for Ethical Action

Despite her ultimately negative view of Hecuba and her revenge, Martha Nussbaum is one of few critics who engages seriously with Euripides' drama in order to determine what possibilities it may offer for ethical action. Her reading invites close attention for this reason. In *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Nussbaum traces Hecuba's "degeneration" in terms of a loss of ways of ordering the world; that is, the loss of moral laws (*nomoi*) in which Hecuba could put her trust. For Nussbaum, the good human life, and human virtue, is something that grows: like a plant, it has an internal structure that can make it strong, but it is also subject to the winds and rains of *tuche*, luck. Nussbaum's ethical person is fundamentally one who lives in the world, and her central dilemma is how much of life one is to entrust to luck. For her, rational self-sufficiency is one way to make life less precarious; too much self-sufficiency, however, risks losing what makes the good life good. Choosing not to

entrust one's well-being to friends, family, or lovers is to choose a life isolated from human goods.

The figure of Hecuba acts as a limit case that allows Nussbaum to consider the extent to which good ethical character can protect the individual from the world's hostility. Hecuba's noble character – a product of her aristocratic birth, her ability to depend on others for care and to learn from them, and her cultivation of ethical choices over time – should insulate her somewhat from suffering, and allow her to withstand loss without losing herself. But Nussbaum accords with the critical consensus in her view that Hecuba's revenge is evidence of the failure of her ethical character to do just that, and makes of Hecuba a warning about how good character can go bad. She concludes that Hecuba pursues revenge as a way to “put the world in order” that will render her invulnerable to risk. But without human vulnerability, Hecuba is “no longer a noble person, perhaps no longer a person at all” (1986.405). For Nussbaum, then, the utility of Hecuba – the play and its protagonist – is that it forces its audience to confront the limits of the human understood as ethical actor. If Hecuba's tomb did not stand at the play's end, she writes,

we would not stand as we humanly do. If we could not be turned into dogs, we would no longer be humans. And a question linking tragedy and philosophy in this culture...is whether, and how, that dog's rock is to be allowed to stand in our world. (421)

Thus Hecuba's double transformation (into dog, then stone) is fitting because that fate stands as a warning and a guarantee to a particularly human goodness.

While Nussbaum's reading is elegant, what she misses is that *nomoi* are not the only things Hecuba loses, and they are not the only way of relating to the world. Hecuba has lost so much – her home, her husband, her children – and each loss is manifold. Pleading with Odysseus to spare her daughter from being sacrificed to Achilles' angry ghost, Hecuba says,

ἦψω τῆς ἐμῆς, ὡς φῆς, χερὸς
καὶ τῆσδε γραΐας προσπίτνων παρηίδος:
ἀνθάπτομαί σου τῶνδε τῶν αὐτῶν ἐγὼ
χάριν τ' ἀπαιτῶ τὴν τόθ' ἰκετεύω τέ σε,
μὴ μου τὸ τέκνον ἐκ χερῶν ἀποσπάσης,
μηδὲ κτάνητε: τῶν τεθνηκότων ἄλις.
ταύτη γέγηθα κάπιλήθομαι κακῶν:
ἦδ' ἀντὶ πολλῶν ἐστὶ μοι παραψυχή,
πόλις, τιθήνη, βάκτρον, ἡγεμῶν ὁδοῦ.

Just as you admit, falling upon my feet
you clung to my hand and old woman's cheek,
now I lay hold of your own hands in return
and demand the favor granted then. I beg you,
do not tear my child from my hands,
do not slay her: there are dead enough.
In her I have rejoiced and I forget my troubles:
she is my consolation in place of many sorrows,
she is my city, my nurse, my staff, my leader on the road. (274-82)

It is not just Polyxena's life at stake, here, but Hecuba's as well; not just the loss of a daughter but of a whole set of ways of being in the world: as a mother, a woman with family; as having had (even if no longer) a polis; as being a subject of care, a person with a future. Polydorus's death likewise only compounds these losses. In Polydorus, Hecuba loses not only her last, youngest child, but any hope of Troy's resurgence and the last tie of friendship on which she could rely, since it is her *friend*, Polymestor, who murdered her son. Without her children, what is left for Hecuba? What is left of her?

These questions recall Judith Butler's, in "Violence, Mourning, Politics": first, "Who 'am' I, without you?" and later, "What is left of me?" (12, 19). For Butler, these questions are key to understanding grief and mourning, and to the political work that grief and mourning do. According to Butler, loss uncovers the ties to others that constitute us, and so when we lose someone we care about we experience the loss (and mourn the loss) of more than one thing: the loss of the other, the loss of ourselves in the other, and the loss of the relation between the other

and ourselves that is constitutive of who we are. To lose that tie is to become undone, in the sense that we become inscrutable to ourselves, “we do not know who we are or what to do” (12). Moreover, to experience loss, for Butler, is to submit to a transformation that we do not choose and whose result we cannot know in advance. Who ‘am’ I, without you? What is left of me? It is impossible to know before loss, or even at the moment of loss, and so the work of mourning is the work of this transformation, feeling out not just what is left but what has changed.

Hecuba has changed – she *has* transformed, *humanly* – and this is what Nussbaum fails to take into account. Nussbaum assumes that the Hecuba who loses Polyxena, and then Polydorus, and then puts out Polymestor’s eyes in revenge, is one and the same Hecuba; that there is a single and constant ethical core, like the stem of a plant, which can be damaged and even break but does not alter. Hecuba is still Hecuba, no matter what happens, and her actions demonstrate the kind of person she is and whether her character has been corrupted. Nussbaum sees Hecuba’s revenge on Polymestor, blinding him and killing his two sons, as an act of closing herself off to the possibility of further betrayal, causing her to lose the openness and good faith that mark a noble person. In fact, Hecuba has been transforming with each loss, because what makes Hecuba is not merely her ethical commitments and actions, but her relations to others, and her relations to herself and to the world through others. Nussbaum recognizes these relationships, inherently unstable, as human goods, but not as constitutive of human life.

Hecuba has not lost her humanity, but she has lost what is good about being human. Without the relations with others that constitute human life, what is left for Hecuba? It is possible that she considers her life and finds nothing. Indeed, she says as much in response to Agamemnon’s pity at the discovery of her son’s body:

“ὄλωλα κούδέν λοιπόν, Ἀγάμεμνον, κακῶν” (784). In his 1958 University of Chicago Press

translation, William Arrowsmith renders this line “I died long ago. Nothing can touch me now,” while E.P. Coleridge in his 1938 translation renders it “I am ruined; no evil now is left, Agamemnon.” Anne Carson, in her translation of *Hecuba* in *Grief Lessons* (2006), writes “I do not exist. There is nothing left. Not even evils.” Translated literally, the line reads “I have been destroyed. Not one thing is left, Agamemnon, even of evils.” All of these translations capture the sense that Hecuba is no longer. There is still something called Hecuba but even she cannot say yet what that Hecuba is. She has been undone by grief; whatever coherence she can claim is a function of what Butler calls “posit[ing] the I in the form of unknowingness,” in the midst of the transformation of loss (19). The closest anyone could come to saying what it is to be Hecuba is what she herself says when Polydorus’s mangled corpse is brought before her:

ἄπιστ' ἄπιστα, καινὰ καινὰ δέρκομαι.
 ἕτερα δ' ἀφ' ἐτέρων κακὰ κακῶν κυρεῖ:
 οὐδέ ποτ' ἀστένακτος ἀδάκρυτος ἀ-
 μέρα μ' ἐπισχῆσει.

Not to be trusted, not to be trusted are these fresh new things I see.
 One sorrow lights on other sorrows:
 no day will ever end
 without sighs, without tears. (689-92)

To be Hecuba is to mourn.

III. On Revenge

How to mourn, then, for Hecuba? Mourning requires that she honor her losses for what they are: what she has lost in her son and daughter, and what she has lost of herself in them, what (in Butler’s terms) is “lost within the recesses of loss.” Hecuba has lost people to whom she was attached, in whose lives she saw value. They were part of what was good about being in the world. That Polydorus and Polyxena were her children means that Hecuba has also lost the part

of herself that was a mother, that moved through the world in such a way as to secure the flourishing of her children. And of course, in Polydorus's death, Hecuba has lost something else, too: she has lost her trust in Polymestor, the bond of holy *xenia* she shared with him, because he shattered it when he murdered her son. So with respect to Polydorus, mourning requires something more than private reckoning with grief. It requires revenge.

It is important to establish here that revenge was not an inherent evil to the ancient Greeks, and that they recognized several occasions in which it was necessary, most notably in response to the murder of kin. This is not to say that the Greeks were unaware of the dangers of revenge: as I noted previously, it is widely accepted that Aeschylus's *Oresteia* grapples with precisely that democratic moment of the transition from the settling of personal scores with private retribution to the reckoning of those grievances in a court of law. Even this reading of the *Oresteia*, however, ignores something about revenge: revenge is a duty to the wrongly dead because it recognizes the value of those lives in their particularity. As Judith Mossman remarks, revenge (τιμωρία) is linked etymologically to τιμή, honor, and is thus "more than the satisfaction of the avenger's vindictive feelings; it is a necessary restoration of honor to the victim" (171). Thus Hecuba's desire for revenge for the murder of her son should not come as a surprise, either to modern readers or ancient audiences. Indeed, Mossman argues that Hecuba's revenge would have been anticipated by Greek audiences with some excitement, as they wondered how the old queen, now a captive slave, could possibly take revenge upon a king (180).

However, Hecuba only designs to carry out revenge after her appeal to the impartial arbiter of legal justice, in the figure of Agamemnon, is denied. This very appeal is contested among critics of the play, who either overlook it altogether, or dismiss it as itself evidence of Hecuba's moral degeneracy, in an attempt to impose "unity" onto her character. D.J. Conacher

and William Arrowsmith are representative examples of the latter approach. In the introduction to his translation of the play, Arrowsmith writes that “[Hecuba’s] sophistic approval of pure persuasion and her appeal to Agamemnon to repay his nights with Cassandra” are only comprehensible as signs of her weakened hold on her humanity in the face of suffering; while Conacher “thinks Polydorus’ death makes Hecuba ‘lose all sense of moral identity,’ and that her supplication of Agamemnon is a symptom of this; in other words, that she is wrong to prefer revenge to her own dignity” (qtd. in Mossman 169).

On the contrary, Hecuba’s appeal to Agamemnon affirms her commitment to human *nomoi*; but a brief exercise in comparative translation may help elucidate the controversy around this appeal. The question of Hecuba’s dignity notwithstanding (suppiancy was common practice and one of the three kinds of *philia –hiketeia*; see Belfiore 2000), we must consider the reasons she gives Agamemnon to carry out justice by taking vengeance on Polymestor on her behalf. The relevant lines in the Greek text are:

ὦ δέσποτ', ὦ μέγιστον Ἑλλησιν φάος,
πιθοῦ, παράσχες χεῖρα τῇ πρεσβύτιδι
τιμωρόν, εἰ καὶ μηδέν ἐστίν, ἀλλ' ὅμως.
ἐσθλοῦ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς τῇ δίκη θ' ὑπηρετεῖν
καὶ τοὺς κακοὺς δρᾶν πανταχοῦ κακῶς ἀεί.

O my lord, O greatest light to the Hellenes,
be persuaded, lend an avenging hand to an old woman,
even if she is nothing, but nonetheless.
For to do service to justice is of a good man,
and to act evilly against evil men everywhere always. (841-45)

My translation above is close to those of E.P. Coleridge (“For it is always a good man’s duty to help the right, and to punish evil-doers wherever found”) and Anne Carson (“It is the mark of a good man to serve justice, and to hit evil with evil everywhere”). But Arrowsmith renders it “Do your duty as a man of honor: see justice done. Punish this murder.”

This translation makes significant interpretive leaps. Not only does the Greek text contain no specific reference to Polydorus's murder, but Arrowsmith also transforms a general statement about the workings of justice and just action (one that is echoed later by Agamemnon, both in direct response to Hecuba here and later, in his verdict on Polymestor) into a command to Agamemnon that seems to equate impersonal legal justice with Hecuba's personal revenge. Arrowsmith's translation invites us to view Hecuba's entreaty as even more inappropriate in its insistence that Agamemnon "punish this murder," which we might interpret as asking for selective application of the law: punish *this* crime, do justice to what *I* have lost.

If Arrowsmith's translation were supported by the Greek text, Hecuba's supplication to Agamemnon would indeed lend itself to the kind of criticism that he and Conacher levy against it, signaling a perversion of justice and a concomitant loss of Hecuba's dignity. Arrowsmith's translation also sets up a tidy opposition between Hecuba and Agamemnon that bolsters such an interpretation, as Arrowsmith's version of Hecuba supplicates in terms of (archaic, aristocratic) revenge, emphasizing the particularity of what she has lost and the injury done to her; and Agamemnon's refusal to act on her behalf could represent (modern, democratic) civil justice through the courts, which cannot recognize that particularity in its consideration of a crime. Such particularity cannot be countenanced by a democratic court that regards all citizens as equal and as having equal claim to the law.

While Arrowsmith's translation at this juncture is only loosely connected to the Greek text, it does reflect and reinforce the critical tradition I examined above, that sees in Hecuba and her revenge transgression against properly human life. But his translation's insistence on the particularity of Polydorus's murder ("Punish *this* murder"), even if it is not present in the Greek, also brings to the fore the tension between legal justice and vengeance that are at the heart of

Euripides' play. Hecuba only pursues revenge after her path to legitimate justice through Agamemnon is thwarted, but the kind of justice he represents cannot recognize the particularity of her loss anyway. The law could punish Polydorus's murder as a homicide, but not for being the murder of Hecuba's child *in particular*, and it is precisely the loss of Polydorus *in particular* that drives Hecuba to supplicate Agamemnon on his behalf. What Hecuba seeks in the law, the law can never give.

At this point, we must also consider Hecuba's gender as it relates to her status before the law. In Euripidean as in Aeschylean Athens, women were excluded from citizenship and could not represent themselves in court; and even in aristocratic revenge culture, the duty to avenge kin fell to the nearest male relative, not to females. As Nicole Loraux and other feminist theorists have argued, women in tragedy both act more freely than they would have in contemporary Athens and tend to embody the contradictions and excesses of civic life: tragic women are extravagant mourners when such mourning was outlawed; they seek revenge when it has already been replaced with the justice of the courts; they complicate the relationship between family and polis by prizing or disregarding the kinship tie to the point of violence. The murderous mother would have been a familiar trope to Euripides' audience, and thus Hecuba's recourse to revenge rather than human law would again not have been unexpected, especially given tragic plots' removal to a distant mythological past. But unlike other murderous mothers – most notably Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia* – Hecuba's revenge is not condemned within the play, nor is it clear that her twofold transformation constitutes punishment for it.¹³

It becomes especially difficult to consider Hecuba's revenge damnable when we recall that she does not exact it on her own. She enlists the help of other Trojan women, who aid in the

¹³ See Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*.

murder of Polymestor's children and in putting out his eyes with brooch pins. We might consider the communal execution of Hecuba's revenge to reflect two things: first, a consensus among the chorus regarding the particularity of Polydorus and the rightness of revenge as a way to recognize that particularity in death; and second, the gendered nature of revenge in this tragedy and others. Since action within the law is not available to Hecuba or her fellow women, and since Hecuba is an exemplary figure for all Trojan loss (intimated by the positioning of the choral ode at 905-954, just after Agamemnon's refusal and just before the entrance of Polymestor, in which the women recount the fall of Troy), a community of women rises around her that both amplifies Hecuba's grief and claim to justice, and enacts the recognition of a particular loss – which may also serve symbolically as a recognition of all *they* have lost.¹⁴

Although Agamemnon declines to kill Polymestor on Hecuba's behalf, fearing his soldiers' disapproval, his passive support of Hecuba's plan to get revenge herself functions to legitimate it. At lines 898-904, Agamemnon proclaims:

ἔσται τάδ' οὕτω: καὶ γὰρ εἰ μὲν ἦν στρατῶ
 πλοῦς, οὐκ ἂν εἶχον τήνδε σοι δοῦναι χάριν:
 νῦν δ', οὐ γὰρ ἴησ' οὐρίους πνοὰς θεός,
 μένειν ἀνάγκη πλοῦν ὀρῶντ' ἐς ἤσυχον.
 γένοιτο δ' εὖ πως: πᾶσι γὰρ κοινὸν τόδε,
 ἰδίᾳ θ' ἐκάστῳ καὶ πόλει, τὸν μὲν κακὸν
 κακόν τι πάσχειν, τὸν δὲ χρηστὸν εὐτυχεῖν.

These things shall be so: for if the army could sail,
 I would not have been able to give you this favor:
 But now, since the god does not send fair winds,
 it is necessary to wait, the soldiers looking for a quiet journey.
 Let it be well, by any means: for this is common to all,
 to each individual and to the state, that the bad man

¹⁴ However, since the women's involvement is only reported after the fact, in Polymestor's and Hecuba's accounts to Agamemnon; and since their presence in the tent is only implied, and not seen – only Polymestor, his children, and Hecuba enter and exit the tent, and the chorus of women performs a menacing choral ode outside it, while the revenge is presumably being enacted inside – I focus in this essay on Hecuba's revenge as it relates to her alone.

suffer ill, and the good man prosper.

Agamemnon's use of impersonal constructions – “These things shall be so” and “Let it be well” – serve a dual purpose. Agamemnon's words grammatically absolve him from responsibility for what will happen to Polymestor, while at the same time granting Hecuba his tacit permission to carry out her plan by characterizing her revenge as aligned with what is “common to all”: that the wicked man should suffer and the good man prosper. This legitimation is reinforced by Agamemnon's judgment in Hecuba's favor during the trial scene, in which she and Polymestor each justify their actions before Agamemnon after the revenge has taken place. This scene may even gesture toward how law and revenge could work together: Agamemnon condemns Polymestor's killing of Polydorus as basest murder, and a violation of guest-friendship, but he does not likewise condemn Hecuba's revenge, effectively lending it his approval. But attending to the form Hecuba's revenge takes, especially in light of Clytemnestra's revenge in the *Oresteia*, reveals the economy – the system of equivalences posited – at the heart of the law, and which ensures that legal recourse will never “do justice” to loss.

When Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon, even if it is to recognize Iphigeneia through revenge, she still, however unintentionally, participates in the same economy the law proposes: Iphigeneia and Agamemnon are not the same, but the remediation of Iphigeneia's death with Agamemnon's death posits them as interchangeable, an exchange of one death for another. But Hecuba's revenge takes a different form, and its form is the point of contention among interpreters of *Hecuba* who see it as too brutal, too inhuman to belong to a properly human person. Hecuba lures Polymestor and his two young sons into her tent on the pretext of giving him information about a secret cache of Trojan gold. The slave women compliment Polymestor on his Thracian dress, coo over his babies, and suddenly Polymestor is weaponless and his

children are out of reach. The women draw daggers that they had concealed in their robes, stab Polymestor's sons to death, and put out his eyes.

Unlike Clytemnestra's revenge, Hecuba's does not posit any formal equivalence, either between Polydorus's death and Polymestor's, or between Polydorus's death and the death of Polymestor's sons. Instead, the more exact(ing) form of Hecuba's revenge attempts to transmit to Polymestor the fullness of what she has lost in her son, the particularity of self, other, and relationality that is "lost within the recesses of loss" and knowable only through the process of mourning itself. Hecuba replicates the form of her loss not because her loss and Polymestor's are equivalent, but because the only way to know *what* one has lost in another is to lose him. In this sense, revenge acts as the underside of the law, recognizing the particularity of Hecuba's loss in a way that the law cannot.

Blinded, his children dead, Polymestor prowls Hecuba's tent on all fours, howling in pain and grief, vowing his revenge on her and her women. He calls out several times for "the light of his eyes" (φέγγος ὀμμάτων), twice in conjunction with a lament for his dead children. Hecuba is unrepentant. She says to Polymestor,

οὐ γάρ ποτ' ὄμμα λαμπρὸν ἐνθήσεις κόραις,
οὐ παῖδας ὄψη ζῶντας οὐς ἔκτειν' ἐγώ.

You will never put bright vision in your eyes,
nor see your children living, whom I have killed. (1045-6)

Hecuba's words echo Polymestor's own speech directly after the blinding and again after Agamemnon's verdict condemning him for murder: at line 1035, Polymestor exclaims, "ὦμοι, τυφλοῦμαι φέγγος ὀμμάτων τάλας" ("Alas, I am blinded, O light of my eyes"), while at line 1255 he says, "οἴμοι τέκνων τῶνδ' ὀμμάτων τ' ἐμῶν, τάλας" ("Woe is me, of these my children and my eyes; I am wretched"). The repeated proximity of these two halves of Hecuba's

revenge – Polymestor’s blindness and the death of his sons – suggest that “the light of [one’s] eyes” is not just the spark of life, but one’s children. When he took Polydorus’s life, Polymestor put out the light of Hecuba’s eyes, leaving nothing in the world for her to see. Hecuba in her turn not only takes the lives of Polymestor’s children, who are the lights of his eyes, but Polymestor’s eyes themselves, leaving him unable to see at all.

The form Euripides gives Hecuba’s revenge renders visible revenge’s excess: just as what is lost in a life always exceeds the life itself, what is taken to repay that loss is likewise excessive. Revenge does not give anything back; it only compounds violence by taking another life. In this way, revenge doubly breaks with legal justice, by insisting on the particularity of the person lost, and by abandoning the logic of commensurability. Hecuba seeks revenge for her son’s death not in order to acquire compensation for it, but to make the particularity of the loss of Polydorus known to the man who considered Polydorus’s life of so little value that he ended it. In Hecuba’s revenge, Polymestor becomes like her, and comes to know, through his own suffering, her loss: he, too, is now childless; and blinded, he cannot see even what might be left of the world without his sons in it.

IV. Cynossema

After Agamemnon’s verdict, Polymestor relates a prophecy, which he alleges to have received from Dionysus prior to meeting Hecuba in her tent. He predicts that Hecuba will be “changed to a dog, a bitch with blazing eyes,” before climbing the ship’s mast and falling to her death into the sea. Noting the mythical precedents for Hecuba’s metamorphosis, Mossman remarks that metamorphosis is

‘a widely applicable motif to mark a change of roles, or to hint at some reference outside the tale.’ ... Thus it can come to be seen as a mode of rescue in a crisis. If

a god can do nothing else to save you, he can at least turn you into something; but this is not seen as a perfect solution by any means. (199-200)

Even if it is an imperfect solution, if there is nothing left of Hecuba's life, perhaps her transformation is a second chance at it. It will not be a life free from pain or precariousness or even human law, but at least it will be a life free of her very human skin. Before her revenge, the possibility of human goods remains open to Hecuba – she could form a new family, have new children; she may still live a good human life through her relations with others – but she is not interested in seeking them out, and there are no longer any others with whom she wants to relate. The ferocity with which she insists on the particularity of her children suggests that even new bonds of kinship will not be sufficient for Hecuba to continue existing as Hecuba, since she understands herself not merely in terms of categories of relations (mother-child, wife-husband, etc.) but in those relations with particular people. All of those people are gone. Avenging Polydorus was the last thing Hecuba could do as a mother, a member of this royal family. Now that she has done it, there is no way for her to persist except through a total reorientation to the world.

Euripides effects this reorientation by taking Hecuba out of the human species, but not entirely; though Hecuba sheds her human skin, she retains her connection to human goods. Hecuba as “bitch with blazing eyes” is clearly meant to evoke the Furies, the black dogs of the *Oresteia*. It is fitting that Hecuba takes this form, of the dread goddesses who protect the kinship bond, and honor the particularity of what is lost in death. To be Hecuba is to mourn, and her new form protects the mourning appropriate to kin. Unlike the Furies of the *Oresteia*, however, Hecuba is not placated with gifts and buried beneath the ground. Instead, she rises. After leaping from the ship's mast into the sea, Hecuba transforms a second time, into her own tomb: a rocky

promontory that will be called *κυνὸς ταλαίνης σῆμα* and be *ναυτίλοις τέκμαρ* – sign of the suffering bitch, a landmark for sailors.

It is tempting to regard Hecuba's dog-rock as guide, monument, memorial – to remember that what we lose, when we lose someone, is more than merely their life; to commemorate the particularity given up in the transition to democracy, which allows all citizens equality before the law; to remember what law cannot. But this memorializing view of Hecuba treats the particularity she insists on as something in the past, and something that we must move past in order to avoid further violence; when in fact law depends on the impulse for revenge in order to operate, and conceals its violent suppression of particularity in systems of commensurability and compensation. In this sense, *cynossema* is less like a monument than a linguistic sign: the dog-rock does not merely memorialize a vengeful moment in the past, but projects revenge and its uses into the present and future; it is a semantic transformation that ensures Hecuba's continued ability to signify in the present. *Cynossema* is a pillar of the law, and it is only with it in view that we can begin to think law differently now: to think loss in other than economic terms, to accommodate the affective excess of grief and rage, to recognize the human and the citizen in one.

CHAPTER III

“It is the same to have and to await”: Justice and Predictive Logics in Sophocles’

Trachiniae and Euripides’ *Medea*

I. Introduction

“Predictions are much more about constructing the future through the present management of subjects categorized as threats or risks. ...in marking subjects as potential risks, they are actually produced as such.” - Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*, 43

In the introduction to *Carceral Capitalism*, Jackie Wang analyzes the ways that the credit economy and predictive policing, in identifying and treating certain subjects as risks, produce them as risky: these subjects are often labeled credit risks, violent risks, or recidivist risks regardless of whether they have done anything to become real risks or threats. “With the rise of risk-adjusted pricing,” Wang writes, “subjects who are targeted for subprime loans because they are in the high-risk pool (in that the creditor believes there is a high chance they will default on their loans) are tracked into loans that are impossible to pay and essentially guarantee failure. Similarly, when inmates seek parole and are denied because they received a COMPAS score marking them as at risk for recidivism, they are preemptively assumed guilty and thus are treated as such” (43-44).¹⁵

Wang is not the only one to note the injustice of predictive policing practices, though her formulation – that identifying individuals as threats produces them as such – is remarkably clear.

¹⁵ COMPAS (Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions) is a predictive policing algorithm tool developed by Northpointe, Inc. to assess the likelihood of a criminal defendant to reoffend (recidivism). A 2016 study by ProPublica found that COMPAS risk assessment scores wrongly labeled black defendants as high-risk at almost twice the rate of white defendants, and correspondingly wrongly labeled white defendants as low-risk more often than black defendants.

In “Machine Bias,” an analysis of the use of risk assessment algorithms (including COMPAS) in several states published by ProPublica in 2016, the authors relate the case of Paul Zilly, a Wisconsin man imprisoned for stealing a push lawnmower and tools in 2013. Despite the prosecutor’s recommendation of a year in the county jail and follow-up supervision to help Zilly “[stay] on the right path,” the judge based his decision on Zilly’s COMPAS score, which rated him a high risk for future violent crime and a medium risk for general recidivism, and sentenced him to two years in the state prison and three years of supervision. “The New Science of Sentencing,” an examination by The Marshall Project of the potential use of risk assessment tools in sentencing in Pennsylvania, offers a similar story. While Milton Fosque – an Army veteran in his 50s who was sentenced in 2012 to a year of prison and five years of probation following his third DUI in a four-year period – was not sentenced using risk assessment tools, his case is instructive for how they can work. Barry-Jester et al. write,

In just about any risk assessment, prior criminal activity is considered the most predictive measure, and in the Pennsylvania tool, prior arrests can be worth several points. Fosque has been arrested numerous times in his life, so he would get four points. He’s male, which is worth another point, and lives in an urban county, one more point. Those qualities combined give him a starting score of 6 out of a possible 13, putting him in the range of moderate risk. Along with the sentencing guidelines, a judge would see a chart showing that people who fit this description have a 49 percent recidivism rate.

Some of the factors determining Fosque’s 49% recidivism rate – his gender, where he lives – are beyond or nearly beyond his control. He also cannot help, in the present, that he committed DUIs in the past; he cannot change what he did. But, Barry-Jester et al. report, he has changed, and “says the chance he will commit another crime is zero”: he has remained sober, is active at his church, and is working with a social worker on his family issues. “Fosque is quick to talk about drinking and the life choices that landed him in jail,” write Barry-Jester et al., “But he also feels he owns the responsibility and effort it has taken to stay sober.” When he is informed

that risk assessment tools *were* used to determine which facility he served time in and how much supervision he received on parole, Fosque tells the authors: “You mean to tell me they’re using statistics to determine what’s going to happen to me? That ain’t right.” Paul Zilly voiced a similar concern to the investigators at ProPublica, saying that his COMPAS score didn’t account for the changes he was making in his life. He had stolen the lawn mower and the tools during a relapse into meth addiction. Since then, he had converted to Christianity, was working toward recovery, and was trying to be available to his son. “Not that I’m innocent,” Zilly told ProPublica, “but I just believe people do change.”

In their conversations with journalists, Fosque and Zilly both demonstrate an understanding of what they had done wrong in the past, and how that wrongdoing led to their encounters with the criminal justice system and subsequent imprisonment. From these brief interviews, it is not clear that the men think that the fact of their sentencing was unfair – neither seems to contest the existence of prisons, or of punitive justice; both appear willing to accept some punishment, and certainly they accept responsibility for their past actions. But what does seem manifestly unjust to both men is the idea that their sentencing and their futures should be determined by statistical measures of their riskiness, algorithms that evaluate them based on group identity characteristics and past actions but that cannot accommodate the possibility of change. As much as Fosque and Zilly take responsibility for their pasts in their interviews, their words also express a desire to take responsibility for their changed presents and futures, for the ways their lives are different now. But the statistical generalizations to which Fosque and Zilly are subjected simultaneously affirm and deny the responsibility the men want to claim: insofar as criminal history is a legitimate criterion in determining future risks, it was the men’s own actions that contributed to their risk scores; any actions after being deemed risks, however, cannot

change or mitigate that appellation.

Indeed, as legal scholar Sonja Starr observes in a *New York Times* op-ed from 2014, because risk scores are based not on a defendant's crime but primarily or wholly on prior characteristics, they seem to prioritize factors unrelated to individual conduct. "Specifics vary across states," she writes, "but common factors [for calculating risk scores] include unemployment, marital status, age, education, finances, neighborhood, and family background, including family members' criminal history." And because risk assessments include race-correlated variables, Starr argues, punishment profiling based on risk scores will only exacerbate existing racial disparities in incarceration, sending "the toxic message that the state considers certain groups of people dangerous based on their identity," as well as "[confirming] the widespread impression that the criminal justice system is rigged against the poor." The *Los Angeles Times* editorial board makes a similar point in an editorial titled "The Problem with LAPD's Predictive Policing," published in March 2019. Rather than eliminating the biases of individual police officers in targeting people most likely to commit violent crimes, the board writes, algorithmic risk assessment tools enhance bias:

The problem is that we also have data that show police arrest African Americans and Latinos more often than whites who have committed the same crimes, in part because their neighborhoods are more heavily policed. They are also prosecuted more often for the same crimes, so end up in jail or on probation and parole more often for the same crimes. If the algorithm crunches arrest, incarceration and probation or parole data and then spits out a risk assessment, it will signal to cops that the black or Latino subjects – already subject to unequal criminal justice treatment – ought to be more closely watched. The cycle of inequity will be repeated, this time enhanced by the data "science" that is supposed to erase bias. In marking black or Latino subjects as potential risks, and in turn subjecting them to increased policing, predictive policing measures produce them as such.

Beyond the inequities – in over-policing, arrests, sentencing, and incarceration – that risk assessment tools and predictive policing practices enhance and exploit, and the constitutional

concerns that their use raises,¹⁶ what kind of life does predictive policing close off or make possible? In a discussion of fine farming (a predatory revenue-gathering practice that often traps residents in cycles of debt) in predominantly black municipalities later in *Carceral Capitalism*, Wang asks what it feels like for residents of those areas to be “routinely degraded and exploited by the police,” and asserts that municipalities that are over-policed make it impossible for residents to ever feel at home “in the place where they live, walk, work, love, and chill” (190). “In this sense,” Wang writes, “policing is not about crime control or public safety, but about the regulation of people’s lives – their movements and modes of being in the world” (190). I want to suggest that risk assessment and predictive policing practices are not about justice, either, and in fact pose a significant obstacle to justice, precisely because they prevent certain populations and individuals – whose race, gender, class, or other non-conduct-related characteristics mark them as “risks” – from ever feeling “normal” or at home. Instead, it forces them to be aware of their perceived riskiness and status as a threat, and to change the ways they move through the world accordingly, without a guarantee that those changes will shield them from harm.

It may not be immediately clear what analyses of predictive policing and financial capitalism have to do with ancient Greek tragedy, separated by a gulf of years so wide as to seem insurmountable, and taking place in contexts likely unrecognizable to each other. But the logic of risk and threat that Wang identifies in predictive practices and that I have explored above is also present in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae* and Euripides’ *Medea*, shaping the fates of the plays’ protagonists. Both Deianira and Medea are preemptively assumed guilty and so treated as such,

¹⁶ In her op-ed, Starr points out that this kind of treatment also raises constitutional concerns, as the Supreme Court has held that that statistical generalizations about groups, even if they are accurate on average, cannot be used to justify discrimination that is otherwise impermissible. “People have a right to be treated as individuals,” she writes, “and individuals often do not conform to group averages.”

by male figures within the tragedies and very often in scholarly criticism.¹⁷ Within the plays, the presumption of guilt takes the form of male figures who have the power to change the women's circumstances – in Deianira's case, her son, Hyllus, and her husband, Heracles; in Medea's, Creon, the king of Corinth, and her husband Jason – judging their actions to be criminal, either without context (Deianira) or direct evidence (Medea), and either before (Medea) or after (Deianira) they have done harm. In both women's cases, their encounters with the figures who mark them as criminal materially change their possibilities for action: Medea, seen as a threat and denied aid, becomes threatening and then a murderer; while Deianira, accused of murder but unable to defend herself, commits suicide rather than live as a threat, misrecognized by others as an evil woman who intended harm.

In scholarly criticism of the plays, the presumption of Deianira and Medea's guilt can take the form of an ethos of adjudication, as critics read to judge the goodness or badness of the women's actions rather than to make sense of those actions in context. The result of adjudicative reading is a flattening of these female characters into types based on a narrow assessment of their actions, and often these types are the same ones offered by the male figures who judge the women within the plays: the murderess, the jealous wife, the mother who loves her children too little or too much. By contrast, I propose a reading practice that is "structural" both in the sense of attending to how individual characters' actions fit into and impact the dramatic structure of the plays, and in the sense of accounting for the ways individuals are acted on and through by structural forces (that is, forces that are not applied equally to all characters, and which define their positions within the social structures of the plays).

¹⁷ For examples of adjudicative readings of Medea, I am thinking in particular of Brockett 1958, Knox 1977, Cowherd 1983, Durham 1984, Barlow 1989, Foley 1989, Lawrence 1997; of Deianira, see Pozzi 1994, Bowman 1999, Carawan 2000, Rood 2010, Wohl 2010. I deal with these critics and their readings in more detail below.

The structural reading I propose takes all action within the plays to be an attempt at meaning-making that reflects the characters' values, and thus begins from the assumption that they are trying to act in ways that support a good life, to ensure their own flourishing and that of the ones they care about. The task of criticism then is not to rule on whether Medea or Deianira are more or less human, more or less guilty because of what they have done, but to discern what has made their actions possible and how those actions could be ethically coherent. Shifting the objective of reading from judgment to understanding allows readers to ask how these plays can be useful now, beyond being read as moral fables. It is through understanding the female characters' motives, values, and possibilities for action that the inequities in configurations of power within the plays, especially in matters of justice, become visible, and invites readers to consider the limitations of a framework of justice – including in their own time – that does not or cannot recognize those values.

Indeed, the female choruses of *Trachiniae* and *Medea* model precisely this understanding in their orientation toward Deianira and Medea, as they address their mistresses in the same terms the two women understand themselves – as occupying a structural and intimate position in their respective husbands' households that bears on their possibilities for action – and imagine worlds in which their relations could be otherwise. In contrast to the predictive logics employed by the plays' central male figures, the choruses' refusal to judge either woman as criminal holds open the possibility that Medea and Deianira's lives might still be good. I call the choruses' orientation hospitality (borrowing from Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality*), and propose it not only as an alternative to the criminalizing predictive logic of risk assessment, but as central to the project of re-theorizing justice in non-retributive terms.

II. Constructing the Criminal: On Anger and Adjudicative Reading

The protagonists of Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Trachiniae* are ostensibly motivated by jealousy: Medea and Deianira are threatened by the arrival of interlopers in their marriages, who have supplanted (in the case of Medea) or may yet supplant them (in the case of Deianira), both in their households and in their husbands' affections. Both women devise schemes, of revenge (Medea) and preemption (Deianira), involving poisoned garments, in the hopes of winning over their spouses. Because of the temporal difference in their predicaments – Jason has already betrayed Medea with a secret marriage to the princess of Corinth, while Heracles has not yet arrived home with Iole, and Deianira's fears of her are not yet confirmed – what it means to “win over” their respective spouses differs. Medea hopes to triumph over Jason by paying him back the harm he has done her; Deianira hopes to prevent future harm by cementing her husband's love for her. What is at stake for both women, however, is more than romantic jealousy, a matter of pride or shame in unrequited desire. After all, as Deianira herself admits, Heracles has had many women before, and many women have loved him; love rules all mortals alike. But in bringing Iole into their household, and in creating a new marriage of political convenience when he already has a wife and children, Heracles and Jason render interchangeable – their wives, and by extension any children – what ought justly to be irreplaceable. To live together with another woman in the same place, Deianira protests, sharing the same marriage – what woman could? (545-6)

As Giulia Sissa argues, jealousy in the ancient Greek context differs from modern jealousy: while modern jealousy may be perceived as “mere impotent rage” and considered a petty emotion, for the Greeks – like those who would have watched Medea and Deianira on the

tragic stage – jealousy was “noble and formidably effective” (218). Sissa traces the transformation of jealousy from righteous anger at intolerable injury to “impotent rage” that should remain unspoken to the Stoics, and to Seneca in particular. His *Medea*, she argues, presents the Colchian princess as the perfect figure of disordered passions, one who confesses her pain, consents to her anger, and lashes out in murderous revenge, even as she recognizes the unspeakable nature of her decision: “My ferocious soul has decided I don’t know what, inside...and my soul does not yet dare confess it to itself” (217, translating Seneca). “This is how the desire to retaliate fits the pain that is its cause,” Sissa writes: “by a quasi-unconscious thought – a thought that should not be *confessed*” (218). In this way, jealousy becomes shameful.

Sissa’s argument implicitly indicts the Stoic perspective by contrasting the strength of Medea in her jealous response to Jason with the weakness of modern jealous women, who have “ceased to require their due,” suggesting that there is something valuable in Medea’s jealousy (205). Importantly, Sissa asserts that “serious jealousy is anger,” and defines anger as “a protest against ingratitude [and] a call for a reaffirmation of reciprocity and dignity” (208, 212). While I agree with Sissa’s assessment that the presence of anger indicates that something has gone wrong in a relationship¹⁸, and reflects an affront to something genuinely valuable, I want to suggest that what is at stake for Medea, and for Deianira, is not their pride. It is an entire way of being in the world, a form of relating to others based on the particularity of a given relationship rather than the interchangeability of relational forms. Medea and Deianira, like other tragic mothers, demand that their particularity and the particularity of their children be recognized, forcing their spouses to see in death what they could not see or refused to see in life. In this, the revenge enacted by

¹⁸ “Anger leads me to action, for Aristotle, but to reach the remedial act, it is first necessary that I become aware of the offense itself. Everything starts because it appears to me that I have been slighted, and this perception causes me pain.” (214)

Medea and Deianira fits the tragic pattern I have proposed in my first two chapters, wherein revenge both acts as the underside of law, taken by individuals without access to legal redress (and at times tacitly endorsed by figures for the law, as Agamemnon endorsed Hecuba's revenge on Polymestor in Euripides' *Hecuba*), and attempts in its form to attend to the particularity of an injury or loss in a way that the law cannot.

This kind of reading – a reading that takes seriously both the female protagonists' anger and their claims to justice – is not intuitive, as demonstrated by the body of critical literature on both plays. This may be due to precisely the problem Sissa points out: critics tend to misidentify Medea's and Deianira's anger as either modern jealousy (a petty emotion and insufficient, if understandable, motivator for lethal revenge), or as typical of feminine unruliness more generally: Medea's *thumos*, even when admirable, is excessive and renders her inhuman; Deianira's guile in using a love charm renders her as “bad and bold” as the women she purports to despise (*Trach.* 582-84). It is worth noting that while Deianira herself disavows any anger at her husband, unable to blame him for erotic urges she considers beyond his control, and does not attempt revenge, her motivation in using the love charm is the same as Medea's: she does not want to be replaced.¹⁹ For this reason, in addition to the oft-noted similarities between their plots, it makes sense to think *Medea* and *Trachiniaiæ* together in a more sustained way than most critics have undertaken thus far.²⁰

¹⁹ That Deianira's lack of anger and ill intent, especially when she is compared to Medea or Clytemnestra, is misperceived as weakness is especially troubling. Carawan 2000:189 neatly glosses the scholarly consensus on Deianira as “a long-suffering housewife who means no harm;” this description, even if tongue-in-cheek, further demonstrates the scholarly trivialization of Deianira's motives observed above. One might also wonder whether the scholarly trivialization of Deianira (for not acting angrily enough) and Medea (for acting too angrily) suggests a concern not with acting in anger, but with women acting at all.

²⁰ Knox 1977, Foley 1989, Pozzi 1994, Lawrence 1997, Carawan 2000, Hopman 2008, and Wohl 2010 all make comparisons between Medea and Deianira, Clytemnestra and Deianira, Clytemnestra and Medea, or all three. Knox 1977 also groups Creusa (from Euripides' *Ion*) with Deianira and Medea, to make the point that not everyone who used poisons or charms was considered a witch.

Moreover, rather than thinking about what might drive these tragic women to take revenge and how that revenge could make sense, in the world of the play and in the world of the reader or spectator, the very fact of revenge seems to disqualify the avengers – and the potential justness of their revenge – from serious scholarly consideration. Criticism of *Medea* tends to focus on the ways that Medea’s revenge renders her inhuman or superhuman (e.g. Brockett 1958, Knox 1977, Cowherd 1983, Barlow 1989, Foley 1989), and/or on the ways that it demonstrates or critiques Medea’s masculine, epic, heroic ethos (versus a feminine, tragic one), or a psychological conflict between her “masculine” and “feminine” sides (Knox 1977, Durham 1984, Foley 1989, Lawrence 1997). Criticism of *Trachiniae* largely centers the question of Deianira’s relative guilt, and the considerations of intention and agency that attend it (e.g. Bowman 1999, Carawan 2000, Rood 2010, Wohl 2010). In both cases, critics tend to neglect the events that lead to the respective acts of revenge (the murder and infanticide, or the accidental death by poisoned robe) in favor of passing judgment on their aftermath. In doing so, critics of *Medea* and *Trachiniae* miss an opportunity to interrogate the conditions that enable or constrain the protagonists’ actions – conditions that, I argue, are key to the tragic project of problematizing retributive justice.

I want to emphasize that the critical literature dealing with *Trachiniae* and *Medea*, while it may not take up the question of justice in the plays as explicitly as I intend to, is no less compelling, and offers much to build on. The work of Helene Foley (“Medea’s Divided Self”), Marianne Hopman (“Revenge and Mythopoiesis in Euripides’ *Medea*”) and Naomi Rood (“Four Silences in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*”) is especially productive, and their analyses of gender – gender and Medea’s revenge, in Foley; gender and the manipulation of genre, in Hopman; and gender and the possibilities for action and silence, in Rood – provide me with opportunities and

vocabulary to make my own arguments. I also want to extend the questions about agency, intention, prediction, and interpretation raised by Carawan, Rood, and others in relation to *Trachiniae* to Euripides' *Medea*, whose brutal revenge plot is often considered inevitable, rather than contingent. In both plays, the protagonists' capacity for action is circumscribed in their encounters with others, whose acceptance or refusal enables or constrains the choices Deianira and Medea are able to make, in ways that further trouble a retributive justice paradigm.

III. Euripides' *Medea*: On Becoming a Threat and the Case for Revenge

Following an account for the audience of Jason's wrongs by the nurse and the tutor to Medea's children – Jason has taken a second, royal wife and forsaken Medea and their children; Medea has not ceased weeping since; and now there is news that Creon means to banish them – Medea's first lines are a wish to die (ἰώ, δύστανος ἐγὼ μελέα τε πόνων, / ἰώ μοί μοι, πῶς ἄν ὀλοίμαν; “Oh, what a wretch I am, how miserable in my suffering! / Oh, I wish I could die.” 96-7). After Jason's betrayal, Medea finds her life hateful and desires an end to it (144-47), lamenting the deeds she undertook on Jason's behalf, in abandoning her homeland and killing her own brothers (160-67). It seems that Medea (like Deianira, as we will see later) finds a life in which she is banished from her *oikos*, disavowed by her husband and without support, to be a life that is not livable.

But there are important differences between Medea's case and Deianira's which render their situations inverses. Because Iole arrives in Trachis before Heracles himself, Deianira is able to attempt prophylaxis and repair; Jason, by contrast, has already wed the princess of Corinth in secret, leaving Medea without a similar opportunity. We will see that Deianira understands Heracles to be ruled by love, and thus as acting without intending to harm her; while Jason, first

in marrying Creon's daughter in secret and later in extolling the material advantages of this match, has made a calculated decision that purposefully disregards harm to Medea. And while Deianira's intentions matter a great deal – to her, before her death, and to those who interpret her actions before and after it – Medea's intentions, and even her history of benefiting the citizens of Corinth²¹, do not matter at all. She has already been branded a threat, and is treated accordingly.

In fact, Medea's pleas and gentle words to Creon are as disqualifying in his estimation as if she had actually done harm. When Creon first arrives to deliver his sentence of exile to Medea, barely 300 lines into the play, he has made up his mind, even though Medea has not harmed anyone onstage (and her curses, such as they are, have been directed primarily at Jason, punctuating her laments for herself). While it would be difficult to claim that Medea is *not* a threat to Creon, or at least to allege that Creon does not have reason to consider her a threat – Medea did, after all, willingly and deliberately commit great violence to arrive with Jason in Corinth – his reasons for exiling her have nothing to do with how Medea has actually acted toward him. When Medea asks him why he has decided to banish her, Creon answers

CREON. I am afraid (there is no need to hold back my words)
that you will do some fatal harm to my daughter.
Many things join as proof of this:
you are a clever woman and skilled in many evils,
and you are grieved at having lost your husband's marriage bed.
And I hear that you are making threats, so they tell me,
to do something to the husband and the bride and the one who gave her.
So I will take care before these things come to pass.
It is better for me to become hateful to you now, woman,
than to be softened now and lament it later. (282-91)

²¹ Referring to Medea's life since arriving in Corinth, the nurse says in lines 11-14, "before, she had there a blameless life (οὐ μεμπτὸν βίον)/ with her husband and children, an exile/pleasing to the citizens on whose land she had arrived,/and giving everything to Jason himself."

Creon's reason is fear. He is afraid of something that has not yet occurred, which Medea herself has not given him cause to believe will come to pass, and of which he has become aware only through secondhand accounts: "*I hear that you are making threats, so they tell me,*/to do something to the husband and the bride and the one who gave her" (287-89, italics mine).

Medea is aware of how her past actions bear on her present reputation, and of how others' perceptions of her change her possibilities for action, as she reflects explicitly in the beginning of her response to Creon. "This is not the first time, Creon, but many times before/my reputation has hindered me and done me great harm," she says, and continues a few lines later to describe the ways others have found her: "because I am clever, to some I am hateful/to others gentle, to still others the opposite,/and to yet others irksome: but I am not so very clever" (292-3, 302-5). Medea then addresses Creon's fear directly:

MEDEA. Are you afraid of me, lest you suffer some harm?
Do not fear me, Creon: it is not my way
to harm a king.
What wrong have you done me? You gave your daughter
to the man your spirit led you. I hate the other one,
my husband – you, I think, did these things wisely.
And now I don't begrudge you faring well.
Have your marriage, all of you, may it be happy!
But let me dwell in this land. For though I have been wronged,
I will keep silent, yielding to those more powerful. (306-315)

Here, Medea presents a remarkably clear-eyed assessment of Creon's part in Jason's harm to her, demonstrating to Creon that she has no reason to target him with her ire. Creon has not injured Medea, or hasn't set out to – the intention in marrying his daughter to Jason is to secure a good match for her, not to harm Medea; even his nameless daughter, though she poses an unbearable threat to Medea's marriage bed, does not necessarily intend to harm Medea. But Jason's pursuit of this marriage, because he is already in a particular relation – the relation of marriage – with Medea, does harm her; the fact that his marriage to Creon's daughter is a strategic choice only

makes the harm more egregious. So in this speech, Medea directs her anger at an appropriate object (Jason), and makes a reasonable request to the king (not to be exiled); moreover, there's no indication at this point of what Medea may do to seek revenge on her husband and his new bride (though earlier she confided in the chorus that she would seek revenge in some form, and the chorus agreed that she would be right to do so). It is only when Creon refuses to grant her request, and exiles her, that her brutal revenge begins to take shape.

Critics like Shirley Barlow and Helene Foley consider Medea's speeches throughout her encounter with Creon to be deceptive; her description of herself as one who is not wont to "transgress the authority of a king" is laughable, given what readers and viewers know of her past.²² And indeed, after Creon leaves – and Medea has secured a stay of a single day for her exile – Medea's words seem to imply an intent to deceive: "Do you think I would ever have flattered that man," she asks, "unless I could gain something, unless I had a plan?" (368-70) But I think it is equally possible that, at this juncture of the play, Medea's entreaties to Creon are sincere. She begs Creon not to exile her – "by [his] knees, by [his] new-married girl" (324) – and even after his second refusal, gives him an opportunity to show her mercy:

MEDEA. But will you drive me out, and give no regard to my prayers?
CREON. I will, for I do not love you more than my family. (326-27)

The persistence of Medea's requests to Creon, in the face of repeated refusals, indicates to me that her pleas are at least partially in good faith. If Medea were looking for a reason to hate Creon, or a pretext to harm him, why ask for his mercy so many times? Creon's first words to

²² See Helene Foley, "Medea's Divided Self," *Classical Antiquity*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1989, 74: "Creon is aware of Medea's unusual intelligence and her capacity for anger, but Medea deceives him into a temporary reprieve by using the weapons of the weak: supplication (338) and an appeal to her children's welfare (340-47)." See also Shirley Barlow, "Stereotypes and Reversals in Euripides' 'Medea,'" *Greece & Rome*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1989, 160: "Discarded now is the wheedling, the begging, and the flattery – feminine arts which she has calculatedly used with advantage upon the reluctant Creon in gaining an extra day in the country – she boasts that he has been stupid enough to fall for them – and we see her in *other*, in her *true*? (we may wonder) – colours – prepared to kill rather than be laughed at by her enemies."

Medea are an order of exile (271-76), and he does not waver even when Medea draws out and dismantles his reasons for fearing her. Creon declares that he will not be persuaded, no matter Medea's words (325), yet Medea continues to ask. The very fact that she asks holds out the possibility that Creon might answer differently, and suggests, however dimly Medea may view her future in Corinth, under Creon's power, that that different answer is desirable.

Even if the whole scene is a charade meant to secure an extra day before exile for Medea to execute her plans for revenge, those plans, at the time of Medea's encounter with Creon, are unformed. The same speech that implies Medea's intent to deceive by "flattering" Creon undoes the assumption that she had already decided on revenge, as she deliberates on what form the revenge should take (sword, fire, or poison), decides on the best course of action (poison), and considers the consequences for her physical safety (how will she secure haven for herself?) and her honor, if she does not avenge herself on Jason. It is also worth noting that, at this point, Medea has not decided to murder her children – this decision comes still later in the play, after Medea's encounters first with Jason and then with Aegeus, in a long speech (764-810) where the specifics of Medea's revenge plot, including her children's part in it, finally crystallize. Taken together, all of this evidence suggests that Medea's revenge is not inevitable: instead, Medea's encounter with Creon is a turning point, pushing her to act in ways that are painful to herself and everyone around her.

In this way, Creon's marking of Medea as a threat produces her as such: she becomes the kind of subject she is perceived to be (foreigner, witch, murderess) because of the way(s) others encounter her, cutting her off from the possibility of acting or being otherwise. Creon's own words reflect as much: when Medea asks Creon why he exiles her, he replies that he is afraid of her – because she is clever, and a witch, and angry at her husband, and anyway he hears that

she's been making threats – so it is better to act preemptively, and earn her hatred, than to show compassion and regret it later. The word Creon uses to denote Medea's threats, ἀπειλεῖν, has two meanings. In the positive sense, it can mean to promise or profess; in the negative, to threaten. Liddell and Scott render the meaning of ἀπειλεῖν, “to hold out either in the way of a promise or a threat.” This *holding out* suggests a suspension in time: both promises and threats are speech-acts, but the promised or threatened action hasn't yet been completed. There is still the possibility that things may turn out differently. Medea is held, to paraphrase Christopher Gill, between the person she is and the person she might be; Medea holds out her hands to Creon and supplicates him by his knees.²³ But Creon holds back – chooses to earn Medea's hatred with his sentence of exile, to act in a way he knows will force her hand – and holds off a future in which Medea might have acted differently.

Medea's pleas, intentions, and care are not enough; Creon has made up his mind. His second refusal and command to leave Corinth at 316-23 make clear how impossible it is for Medea to change how he encounters her, as he muses that her softness during their exchange makes him trust her even less. He would rather deal with someone – woman or man – who is quick to anger than a clever woman (like Medea) who is quiet, as silence can conceal evil plans.²⁴ But this is plainly not true, given his earlier words to Medea explaining his choice to

²³ Christopher Gill, “Did Chrysippus Understand Medea?” *Phronesis* vol. 28, 1983, 136-49. Qtd in Helene Foley 1989, 62. My invocation of Gill here is an abuse of the quote Foley cites, which is in the context of discussing scholarly disagreement about Medea's “psychological division” in the monologue in which she decides to kill her children. Foley writes, “Most recently, Christopher Gill made a case for the perceptiveness of the Stoic Chrysippus' interpretation of lines 1078-80 of the monologue, which demonstrates a psychological division ‘not so much within the person, and between psychological elements, but rather a division between the person as he is in the moment and as he might be if he exercised his full potentiality for human reason. At any one moment, the person functions (in one sense rationally) as a whole; even if his functioning is (as he himself may recognize) a kind of malfunctioning.’” While I am not invested in the debate about psychological division, I do find Gill's evocation of a division “between the person as he is...and as he might be” to be compelling and productive.

²⁴ Creon, responding to Medea's plea quoted above (at 306-15), says: “You say soft things to hear, but in my heart/is terror lest you plan some wicked thing for me,/so I trust you even less than before:/for a woman who is quick to anger, and a man likewise,/is easier to guard against than a clever woman who is silent./No – go as quickly as

exile her: it is because he heard that she was making threats, angrily, that he came to fear her in the first place. No matter how Medea acts, whether she makes threats in anger or pleads her case with soft words, she only confirms Creon's judgment of her as a threat. What else is there for her to do but become one?

Rather than consider Medea's words in her encounter with Creon deceitful, then, as Foley and Barlow do, we can consider them a test: Medea attempts to determine what kind of future is held out for her, whether she can trust others to trust her, before she makes a decision to act one way or another. With Creon's final refusal, though he grants a stay of one day, Medea's possibilities to live the kind of life she desires (recognized and loved by her husband, belonging to an *oikos*, seen by others as she sees herself) have dwindled to nothing. Life in Corinth without Jason might have been painful and undesirable, but being permitted to remain where she had made a home for ten years, with Creon's blessing, would have left open the possibility of a future she could still make good. Without even that, deemed a threat by Creon and replaceable by Jason, the revenge that Medea had previously only contemplated becomes a necessity.

Since it is not possible for Medea to act in a way that would prove she is not a threat, she doesn't try to, and instead sets out on her final day in Corinth to make Jason understand what he has done. Medea's revenge on Jason, like Clytemnestra's revenge on Agamemnon and Hecuba's revenge on Polymestor, seeks to impress upon him the value of the lives he has deemed disposable or interchangeable, and to recognize in death the fullness of what he has already abandoned in life. The form Medea's revenge takes ensures this: she uses her children as messengers to deliver a poisoned dress and diadem to Jason's new bride, which (much like Deianira's poisoned robe) burns to death whoever touches it, and results in the deaths of both

possible, say no more words:/the thing is fixed thus, and you have no means/to remain among us, being hostile to me."

Creon and his daughter; then, she kills the children herself, and denies Jason the opportunity to hold their bodies or mourn them. Instead, she carries them with her in her flying chariot to a rocky promontory outside Corinth, to establish a cult in their honor before heading to Athens, where she has been promised Aegeus's protection.

Critical responses to Medea's revenge are broadly divided into two camps, with some crossover: there are those who see in Medea's infanticide the loss or disavowal of her femininity, maternity, or humanity (Foley, Barlow, Knox, Durham, Hopman); and those who see in it the disastrous apotheosis of heroic *kleos* (glory) that Medea has wrested away from Jason and appropriated to herself (Foley, Barlow, Hopman). Of these, it is worth engaging briefly Helene Foley's argument in "Medea's Divided Self" (1989), as it blends most clearly and persuasively the approaches of both camps.

Foley analyzes Medea's monologue at 1020-80, in which she debates whether she will kill her children, to argue that Euripides stages an ethical conflict about human values through a gendered division within Medea's psyche, between her feminine/maternal side, which loves and values her children, and her masculine/heroic side, which values reciprocity in relations along the epic model of helping friends and harming enemies. Although Foley notes that elsewhere in the play Medea's (feminine) passion and (masculine) reason work together as she makes her plans, she argues that Medea's capitulation to her *thumos* at 1078-80, which she defines not as irrational passion or rage but as a capacity within Medea that directs her to act, "suppress[es] altogether the claims of her maternal side...[and] confirms our sense that Medea's choice for revenge has been inevitable from the start, that her self-debate aims finally not at persuading herself to save the children (a plan in any case abandoned after 1058) but at making the crime seem inevitable to herself" (72). In doing so, Foley claims, Medea takes to its logical conclusion

the same heroic code of helping friends and harming enemies espoused by Jason and Creon and becomes “an amoral deity,” demonstrating how the “concern for status and revenge at all costs [has] disintegrat[ed] into something uncomfortably close to the callous utilitarianism of Jason and destroy[ed] those whom [Medea’s] ideals were meant to protect” (82, 83).

While Foley’s reading here is adept, I am reluctant to read Medea’s monologue at 1020-80 separate from and as paradigmatic of the rest of the play, and I want to suggest that the move to characterize Medea as divided and in irreconcilable conflict with herself, just as critics have similarly lamented the lack of “unity” in Hecuba’s character, forecloses the possibility of understanding her actions as ethically coherent, and as affirming, rather than abandoning, her values. Foley’s judgment of Medea not only ignores how the practice of revenge is gendered in Greek tragedy – it is primarily undertaken, especially in Euripides, by women who have no other legitimate recourse to address harms done to them or to loved ones – but also ignores how this kind of revenge functions as a meaning-making act, meant to impart to the perpetrator of harm the value of the life they disregarded so much that they rendered it disposable.²⁵ In taking revenge on Jason, then, Medea actually *rejects* the masculine/heroic ethos he represents – which, as Carrie Cowherd rightly observes, takes the form of sophistic arguments that prioritize his self-interest and allow him to justify his harmful actions toward Medea and his children (1983.133-34) – and forces him to see the sons he had already forsaken, by taking another wife and making another family, for the irreplaceable beings they are.

²⁵ For more on revenge as meaning-making act, see “Euripides’ *Medea*: The Case for Infanticide,” in Gill 1996. Gill makes a case for understanding Medea’s revenge as an “exemplary gesture” that demonstrates “second-order reasoning” about what it is to live a human life – that is, it makes a more general ethical claim, arrived at through reflective deliberation about specific events or circumstances. As I do, Gill takes Medea’s revenge to be a repudiation of the values and form of life Jason represents: “...what she disputes, by implication, is his right to detach himself from their bond of *philia*, and to remake his life (and that of the children) in the unilateral way that he proposes. ... Thus, her killing of the children, as well as his wife and kingly father-in-law, is to be understood not just as a mode of terrible vengeance (though it is that) but also as an exemplary gesture, dramatizing his misguided conception – as she sees it – of what is involved in living a human life” (Gill 168).

It is true that Medea voices concern in this speech about how she will be perceived by others if she takes different courses of action, recalling earlier statements during her speech after securing safe harbor in Athens from Aegeus, when she finally decides the manner of her revenge, including the deaths of her children: “Do I wish to be laughed at,/letting my enemies go unpunished?” she asks at 1049-50, using language very similar to that at lines 797 and 807-10 (“For to be laughed at by enemies is intolerable, my friends,” 797; “Let no one call me a common woman, weak,/nor gentle, but the opposite,/grievous to enemies and kind to friends:/for the most glorious life belongs to those kinds of people,” 807-10). But she also makes clear, in both speeches, not only that her children face certain death in Corinth for their part in the death of the princess (792-3, 1059-61), but that even if they were to remain and somehow not die, it is not certain that their lives would be good. In the same monologue that Foley sees as “suppressing altogether” her maternity, Medea movingly describes the life she and her children will no longer ever get to live: as an exile, she will never find joy in their happiness, never prepare them and their brides for their weddings or participate in the ceremony, holding the torches high; she will never, in her old age, be tended to by them or lain out for burial. Without her children, Medea’s life will be miserable and painful; but they, too, will never look upon her again with their loving eyes. Medea considers, at 1045-47, taking the children with her: “Why should I harm their father with their pain,” she wonders, referring to the prospect of killing the children, “and bring on myself pain twice as great?” After all, “living with [her] in that other place, they will gladden [her]” (1058). But no: the way is already set, Jason’s bride will die, and since Medea will not leave her children behind to be treated harshly by her enemies, she resolves to kill them herself (1059-68).

From this, Medea makes clear that she, unlike Jason, knows exactly what she stands to lose in killing her children: she will lose relations that constitute and sustain her, a whole way of being in the world, that she cannot replace and will grieve as long as she lives. But Jason has already made that life impossible: though he claims he married Creon's daughter to benefit his children (593-97), that he would have allowed them to be exiled, without a home or his protection, suggests he never cared for them as his children at all. Rather than focus on the final three lines of Medea's monologue at 1020-80, as Foley does, I believe the most important ones for interpreting Medea's actions are slightly earlier, when she gives her children a final blessing at 1073-74: "I wish you happiness," she says, "but somewhere else: what is here/your father stole for himself." Jason has demonstrated through his "callous[ly] utilitarian" match with Creon's daughter how interchangeable he believes his family to be. To him, they may as well already be dead; without his protection, they are better off dead than alive. In taking their children's lives, Medea only executes a decision Jason has already made, in order to show him what an error it was to make it.

And Medea's gambit seems to work. When Jason arrives at their home, thinking to save his children from the anger of the Corinthians for the deaths of Creon and the princess, and learns instead that his children are already dead, he laments that Medea has destroyed him (*ὅς μ' ἀπόλεσας, γύναι.*/"How you have destroyed me, woman," 1310). Over the course of their confrontation, though Jason does not (yet) accept his own role in his children's deaths, he begins to speak of them in the same relational terms Medea has: he bemoans that he will never be able to speak with them again (1349-50), or touch them or kiss them (1399-1400, 1403-4); and, in the inverse of Medea's wish to celebrate their weddings and have them attend to her death, Jason begs Medea to let him mourn them and bury their bodies (1377, 1411-12). In this way, Jason's

words reflect an understanding of what he has lost in his children that was previously absent; he now describes their loss to Medea as a great pain and sorrow, whereas before – when he would have lost them through exile – he would not have considered it a loss or pain at all, a point Medea reiterates throughout their encounter (1395-1402).²⁶

Medea counts Jason's grief a victory even though Jason, like Heracles, does not admit or even recognize what he has done, in taking a second wife and family, as a harm. In fact, Jason's insistence on framing Medea as a criminal – a jealous wife, a lioness, a bad seed who was bad from the beginning – prevents him from seeing or acknowledging what he has done to her. He comes closest in an ambivalent exchange with Medea in the final scene of the play, when he first identifies her as a sharer in his pain, then dismisses her capacity to feel it:

JASON. You yourself have grief and are a companion in my sufferings.
MEDEA. Know it well: but the pain is worth it if you cannot mock it.
JASON. O children, what a wicked mother you had.
MEDEA. O children, how you were destroyed by your father's sickness.
JASON. It was not our right hand that killed them.
MEDEA. But it was your violation, your wedding and your new marriage.
JASON. And you thought it right to slay them for the sake of a marriage bed?
MEDEA. Do you think this is a small misery for a woman?
JASON. For a sensible woman, of course. But everything is evil to you. (1361-69)

Because Medea is the kind of person to whom “everything is evil,” the pain she feels at the loss of her marriage bed – which she asserts is “no small misery” for a woman – is not to be trusted, and so her motive in causing Jason the pain of losing their children is summarily dismissed, a non-harm. Just as Creon would construe any action of Medea's to confirm his judgment of her as a threat, Jason sees the wickedness of her actions as originating within her, and not as, in whole or in part, a reaction to harm. Medea does evil because she is evil, “having a savage nature like

²⁶ When Jason laments his “beloved children” and expresses his longing to speak to them and embrace them, Medea says at 1396 “They were beloved to their mother, not to you,” and at 1401-2 “Now you would speak to them, now embrace them,/then you rejected them.”

Tuscan Scylla” (1342-43), and what she does makes no sense because she herself cannot judge what is sensible. In this way, Jason’s framing of Medea-as-monster saves him from having to confront his own part in doing harm to his family.

It is worth noting that the word Medea uses to denote the harm Jason has done, in taking a new wife, is ὕβρις (hubris). Both Rex Warner and David Kovacs in their respective 1944 and 1994 translations render this word “outrage,” the connotation of which tracks with their translation choices elsewhere to maximize the perception of Medea’s seeming obsession with being slighted (e.g. καθυβρίσαι at 782 and 1061 as “to be mocked” or “to be insulted” while I have rendered it “to be treated harshly” or spitefully), but I have translated it “violation,” both to preserve its seriousness and to convey its connotations of wantonness and violence, against norms governing gods and humans (as in Sophocles’ Oedipus cycle) and against persons. The charge Medea brings against Jason, bolstered by her repeated accusations of oath-breaking (as at 1392, “What god or *daimon* listens to you,/a vow-breaker and a betrayer?”), is a serious one: Jason has broken, violently, not just the covenant of marriage but a norm of care and recognition that ought to govern his relations; and in taking a second wife and allying himself with the Corinthian royal family, who would exile Medea and his sons, he exposes them to violence and harm beyond the baseline precariousness of existence.

The form of Medea’s revenge – taking not just Jason’s new bride and father-in-law, but also his children with Medea – ensures that Jason knows the gravity of that harm, by making him lose what is irreplaceable and by cutting off in every way she can the possibility of replacement altogether. Jason cannot, as Antigone avers she would, have another child by another spouse; that other spouse is lost too. If Medea were only a jealous wife, perhaps it would have been enough to kill her rival and Creon; if she only wanted to spite Jason by cutting off his line, she

could have killed only the children. That Medea does both repudiates the very idea of replacement, and she leaves Jason to grapple with his newfound grief as he learns what he has lost, as well as with the logic of interchangeability that caused it.

In the end, Medea escapes, flying away from Corinth, her children's bodies in tow, in a chariot pulled by dragons. As Foley and others have noted, both the fact and the means of Medea's escape (the chariot belongs to her grandfather, Helios) seem to vindicate Medea's assertion that the gods are on her side: not only is Medea not punished for what she has done, but she escapes by more-than-mortal means. But while many (Barlow, Foley, Hopman, Knox, Mills) take this scene as evidence of Medea's divinity – her status as a Euripidean *dea ex machina*, and the shedding of her humanity – I want to emphasize the ways Medea remains mortal, and human, as she flees to Athens. That she takes her children's corpses with her, intending to establish a cult to them at a temple outside Corinth, attests to the way she still understands herself in relation to them. The deaths of her children have not “nullified” Medea's past with Jason, as Marianne Hopman argues, and she refuses to leave her children behind in order to “start fresh” in a new land. Instead, Medea carries them with her, out of the frame of the play, ensuring their continued association for the audience and acknowledging how the children constituted and continue to constitute her, even in death. Likewise, the life that awaits Medea in Athens is not one unmarked by suffering: Medea herself has predicted her own grief and sorrow in the future, as a result of having killed her children.

But Medea's escape is consonant with Euripides' efforts elsewhere in his oeuvre to problematize justice understood as retribution: Hecuba transforms into a dog, Medea is whisked away on a chariot, and Creusa, who would unknowingly have killed her own son, is prevented from doing so by the revelation that the son she thought was dead is alive, and before her. That

Medea escapes despite Jason's (and likely the audience's) desire and expectation that she should be punished suggests that perhaps what Medea did is not something that ought to be punished, or that punishment/retribution is not the correct paradigm to apply, not least because Medea's own argument is that the loss of her children is incommensurable. Nothing that could happen to her could possibly equal it.

In her escape and vindication, Medea manages to triumph in the situation she faces along with Deianira, albeit at great personal cost. Though others' perceptions of her as a threat produce her as such, constraining her possibilities for action, Medea's revenge forces Jason to recognize the particularity of his relationship to the children, if not to Medea herself, before she flies straight out of the frame of his (and Creon's) interpretation. In flying out of frame and to Athens, Medea has secured the possibility of another kind of life, on different terms than the one she lived in Corinth. There is the possibility that this life, though not free from pain or grief, will be better.

IV. Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: Testing, Agency, Constraint

When Deianira of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* is talked about at all, it is often in comparison to Greek tragedy's other, more murderous mothers. She is considered neither as wicked (though perhaps as culpable) as the Clytemnestra of the *Oresteia*; nor as passionate, reasoned, or self-reflective as Medea (Barlow 1989, Foley 1989, Pozzi 1994, Carawan 2000, Wohl 2010). Her responsibility for the events that befall her – and, by extension, her agency in bringing about those events – is regularly called into question, both by critics and within the play. Laurel Bowman emphasizes the extent to which Deianira's agency is negated by the prophecies that determine the play's action; Kasey Hicks argues that the theatrical convention of the three-actor

rule, by which the same actor portrayed both Deianira and Heracles at opposite ends of the play, demonstrated male mimetic mastery over femininity; and Edwin Carawan, though arguing against the scholarly consensus that Deianira is a “long-suffering housewife who meant no harm” (189), problematizes her agency even as he assigns guilt to her for Heracles’ death, as he raises the question of what degree of foreknowledge is necessary to cast blame.

These critics are right to identify agency as a key area of concern for Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, as several characters’ agency – not just Deianira’s, but Heracles’, Hyllus’, and Iole’s as well – is complicated by external forces, including fate or prophecy and love, which is consistently figured as a sickness that afflicts individuals from without and which they cannot resist, in addition to the ways that these characters themselves act on each other. Rather than asking, then, whether Deianira set in motion events that culminated in the death of her husband (yes) or whether she meant to do so (no), I believe it is more appropriate to ask what circumstances made it possible for Deianira to act as she did – perhaps even impossible for her to act otherwise.

Throughout the play, Deianira is well aware of her own circumstances, as a woman and as the wife of Heracles. Over the first 48 lines, she recounts how she came to be Heracles’ bride, from her fear of marriage in her youth because she was pursued by the river god Achelous, to Heracles’ arrival in Pleuron and his victory over that god, to her current pain and dread because of his prolonged absence during his labors. The fear and sorrow of Deianira’s youth – as she sat watching Heracles fight Achelous, “struck with terror lest [her] beauty should ever win [her] pain” (24-25) – has given way to “[a woman’s] share of worries in the night,/fearing either for her husband or her children” (148-49), and especially to concern for Heracles as the end of his labors nears, because he shared with her a prophecy declaring “an end to his grief” with the end

of his labors, and now she is “dreading lest [she] have to live/bereft of the best man of all” (176-77). Deianira soon receives the news that Heracles has returned to Trachis, but sees what life without his protection might be like with the arrival of Lichas, Heracles’ herald, who leads a group of captive women. Deianira prays that her own children may never meet the same fate as these women, as least not while she is alive: “these unlucky women,/homeless, fatherless, wandering a foreign land – /before, they too were daughters of free men,/but now they have a slavish life” (299-302). Without the protection of Heracles and her place in his household, that fate might well be her own, and Deianira promises one captive in particular – a silent young woman who seems to be of noble birth – not to increase her unhappiness, as “what is present at hand is enough” (329-32).

Deianira’s pity for this young woman turns to despair upon learning from a messenger that she is Iole, daughter of Eurytus, whose homeland of Oechalia Heracles sacked in his desire for her. The messenger suggests that the love Heracles bears Iole means that she has not come to his household to be a slave, and urges Deianira to confront Lichas, who refused to name Iole and gave a misleading account of the sack of Oechalia that left out Heracles’ love. The speech Deianira delivers to Lichas is both ferocious in her insistence on his honesty and frank in her assessment of her position relative to Heracles and Iole:

By Zeus who hurls lightning down upon the highest glen of Oeta,
do not deceive me!
You will not speak your words to a wicked woman,
nor am I a woman who does not know the ways of men,
that they are not born to enjoy the same things forever.
For whoever stands against Love,
with his hands like a boxer, does not think rightly:
for Love rules even the gods as he pleases,
and me as well: why not another woman like me?
So if I cast blame on my husband, seized by this sickness,
I am mad indeed; or on this woman, who shares

in something that is neither shameful nor a wrong to me. (436-48)

Here, Deianira characterizes love as an external and quasi-divine force that rules humans and which they cannot resist, and the feeling of love as a “sickness” that afflicts humans, who suffer under this affliction. Importantly, humans acting under the influence of love – as Heracles does, in his desire to bring Iole into his home – cannot be blamed for their actions. Recognizing this, Deianira claims she would be mad to blame Heracles for doing a harm he clearly does not intend; moreover, Deianira includes herself among the humans ruled by love, and in doing so draws a connection to Iole (“[Love] rules even the Gods as he pleases, and/me as well: why not another woman like me?”) that she will reprise later in her speech, when she remarks that she pitied Iole when she saw her “because/her own beauty destroyed her life” – just as Deianira considers her own life destroyed by her beauty, as it rendered her subject to lust and capture by Achelous, Nessus, and Heracles himself (l. 464-65).

Deianira’s awareness of her own and others’ positions as ruled by love recurs in a later speech to the chorus, after hearing Lichas’s account of Heracles’ activities and the identity of Iole. At 536-46, Deianira laments her fate:

I have taken in a maiden – I can think her a maiden no longer, but a married
woman –
just as a sailor takes on cargo,
ruinous goods for my heart.
And now we two await our beloved
under one cloak. Such a gift does Heracles,
called brave and faithful,
send me in repayment, waiting at home for such a long time!
But I cannot be angry
at that man, being sick so often with this sickness.
But to live together with her in the same place,
sharing the same marriage – what woman could do it?

Knowing now that in welcoming Iole to her home she welcomes a married woman, Deianira remarks bitterly that “such a gift does Heracles,/called brave and faithful,/send [her] in

repayment” (540-42). Yet while she cannot be angry with Heracles, “being sick so often with this sickness,” she cannot countenance living with another woman in her house, especially a woman bright with youth like Iole: “But to live/in the same place with her, sharing the same marriage – /What woman could do it?” (544-46).

From these two speeches, two things become clear about Deianira: her motivations for acting, which are not mere jealousy, and her framework for understanding justice. When Deianira decides to administer the love charm, she acts not out of anger or spite, but from an awareness of how the insertion of Heracles’ new lover into their household could change the possibilities for her life. Just as Medea’s with Jason, Deianira’s place within the *oikos* she has made with Heracles fuses a structural with an intimate position; Heracles’ continued love is the only guarantee of the continuation of her place within that *oikos*, and another wife – brought into her home, unlike Heracles’ other mistresses – poses a threat to it. This is confirmed by her admission that she knows “the ways of men” and of Heracles’ past lovers, none of whom has yet “suffered an ill word/or reproach from [her], nor would *this* one” (439, 459-62). Her concern is not for Heracles’ lust or love for another woman, or even another woman’s love for Heracles (“even/if [Iole] should be all melted in her loving,” Deianira will not speak against her, l. 462-63), but with maintaining her place within the *oikos*.

But even as Deianira recognizes Iole’s relationship with Heracles as threatening that place, she refuses to see Iole as a threat, affirming to Lichas at 490-92 that her initial promise of kindness toward Iole still stands. Instead, she understands Iole as being overtaken by love and unfortunate in it; in being ruled by love, just as Deianira herself is, Iole “shares in something that is not shameful, [and] is no harm to [her].” In this light, Deianira’s decision to use Nessus’s charm on Heracles is eminently judicious: rather than attempt to dispose of Iole (“get rid of the

threat”), or even to harm Heracles for seeming to forsake her in this way, Deianira commits to receiving Iole hospitably and directs her efforts toward bolstering her relationship with her husband to ensure her continued singular place within the household. Justice for Deianira involves not punishing Heracles or Iole, but repairing the bond with Heracles that she perceives as being eroded.

This reading of Deianira also helps to link the secrecy of her plan to cement Heracles’ love through Nessus’s charm with her preoccupation throughout the play with how she appears to others, a preoccupation that critics like Edwin Carawan and Naomi Rood have made much of. Rather than reflecting an obsession with appearances born from a desire to conceal wrongdoing, as Carawan argues; or acting out a fantasy of divine action, in which she attempts to direct events silently and unseen, like Aphrodite, as Rood claims; I contend that Deianira’s concern with appearances stems from a reasonable assessment of her own ability to act and to interact with others. Not only does Deianira understand how her own physical appearance has caused others to act on or react to her in certain ways (her beauty has destroyed her life!), and the ways that she and those around her are ruled by love, but like Medea, she also demonstrates an awareness of the ways her structural position as a woman constrain her possibilities for action: she can live in relative comfort within the *oikos*, contingent upon her connection to her husband; or she can live the life of a slave in a foreign land, like the group of captive women, without an *oikos*, forsaken by husband and family. The love charm presents Deianira with a way to act within the sphere she is allowed – love, the household, her marriage – to repair a bond that matters to her, and to reject the familiar tragic script of the wife maddened by jealousy, who blames and seeks to harm her husband for his infidelity. This script is so unbearable to her that she ultimately chooses suicide over emplotment in it.

As Deianira describes her plan to secure Heracles' love with Nessus's charm, she takes care to differentiate herself from women who are "bad and over-bold," and invites the chorus to judge whether she is acting rashly, adding that she will cease her plan if they determine that she is (582-87). Deianira has the chorus's support, but seems uncertain of her actions nonetheless, asking that the women be discreet, since "In darkness/even if you do shameful things, you will never fall into disgrace" (596-97). Carawan makes much of Deianira's desire to move in darkness so as not to be disgraced, and takes the chorus's assent in the exchange at 588-97 to be a warning against, rather than an endorsement of, Deianira's strategy. He argues that Deianira's awareness of the supposed shameful nature of her actions is tantamount to foreknowledge of their lethality: she knows she is doing something wrong, and does it anyway, without testing first, and for this reason bears sole responsibility for Heracles' death (207, 215).

This reading takes for granted, however, that Deianira is fully aware that the "love charm" she applies to Heracles' robe is actually poison, something that the text does not even suggest until after she has sent the robe to Heracles with Lichas, at lines 663-728. Even if, as Carawan argues, tragic audiences would have been aware that actual "love charms" were a form of erotic poisoning – rendering a husband dependent on his wife, and the wife able to impose her will on him – there is no indication in the play that Deianira's charm would necessarily work in the same way (208). Indeed, Deianira's application of the love charm may even double as a test, since she uses a scrap of wool to brush the mixture of Nessus's blood onto the robe for Heracles. It is only after she has delivered the robe to Lichas that she sees what has happened to the wool in the sunlight: it has run together and crumbled to dust on the ground, and "from the earth, where/it lay exposed, clotted foam bubbles up,/like the rich juice of the blue-green fruit/from Bacchus's vine, poured onto the ground" (695-704). Prior to this discovery upon Deianira's

reentry into the house, neither the wool dipped in the mixture of Nessus's blood nor the robe on which Deianira brushed the blood seemed harmed – so what reliable indication could she have had, from the objects themselves, of their dangerous potential?

More importantly, and counter to Carawan's insistence that Deianira understands herself as acting wrongly in administering the love charm, Deianira *does* engage in a different kind of testing: not of the charm itself, but of the idea of its application. When she shares her plan with the chorus and asks for their counsel, she is testing her intuitions about the right course of action, in an effort to ensure that administering the love charm is not a violation of community norms and to gauge how her community might react to her after the charm's application. And the chorus tells Deianira not only that in undertaking her plan, she does not seem to have acted badly, but reminds her that she cannot know whether her actions will yield good or bad results until they are completed: "Knowing must come by doing; you cannot expect to have/any way of knowing except by trying" (592-93). While Carawan takes these lines to be an admonishment of Deianira, reminding her of the need to act with care, I am inclined rather to agree with Victoria Wohl's assessment that they reflect the paradox of tragic agency: "our actions have results we neither foresee nor control," Wohl writes, "but for which we are responsible nonetheless" (35). This reading is further supported by the chorus's later insistence, when Deianira confesses her fear that the charmed robe will kill Heracles, that Deianira should not worry overmuch because she does not know yet what her robe has wrought. "One must dread terrible deeds," the chorus remarks, "but one/must not judge the expectation before misfortunes have occurred" (723-24).

However, the chorus's response only addresses part of Deianira's fear. If Heracles should die, she vows, "by the same blow I will die together with him./For it is unbearable for any woman to live being called evil,/who wishes not to be born to wickedness" (719-22). I want to

suggest, with Naomi Rood, that Deianira here reveals an awareness that her intentions may not absolve her actions in the eyes of others. “In Deianira’s view,” Rood asserts, “what people see or say or hear about a person trumps what a person aims to be. What comes to light becomes what is, knowledge equals what is made known” (356). Rood considers Deianira’s silence, in her desire to act discreetly and in her eventual suicide, to be an attempt both to emulate Aphrodite’s unseen agency from afar and to control events and their interpretation. While I agree with Rood’s argument here, I depart from her corresponding claim that Deianira’s suicide functions to hide her from blame; after all, although Deianira considers it beforehand, she only commits suicide after Hyllus has blamed her at length for his father’s impending, painful death by the poisoned robe (Rood 357, *Trach.* 734-812). In light of this, her suicide functions more as an acceptance of blame than the concealment of it, as even the chorus exclaims that Deianira’s silent exit following Hyllus’s accusation seems to confirm her guilt (813-13).

Since her suicide cannot hide her guilt or shield her from blame, as Rood proposes, I contend instead that Deianira commits suicide because she sees how she has already been interpreted – without mercy, or concern for her intentions, even by her own son – and despairs of ever being encountered otherwise. Hyllus’s reaction seems to confirm that Deianira was right to be skeptical of the chorus’s pronouncement that anger at her ought to be tempered by knowledge of her good intentions (727-28), and if she lives in a world where “only what is seen matters, not what is unseen,” as Rood describes – and she cannot depend on others to see her intentions and meet her with good faith – perhaps it is better for her not to live at all (356).

That Deianira would rather die than be misinterpreted or misrecognized suggests that such misinterpretation or misrecognition would have serious repercussions on the possibilities for her life: not only would she be bereft of the husband she loves, but disavowed by her own son

as a murderess and likely to experience similar treatment from others, whether within her household (should she even be permitted to remain in it after Heracles' death) or out in the city of Trachis. Without the relations to husband, son, and household that constitute her, and without guarantee that others could encounter her as anything other than a murderer to be repudiated, Deianira's possibilities for action – and especially for action that could support a good life – would be compromised. Only so much is within her power; without the ability to control how others encounter her (and Rood argues that Deianira has failed in this), she cannot depend on others to receive her with compassion.

Paradoxically, this reading is confirmed through another episode with Hyllus, when he discovers his mother's body and regrets his anger, and later relates Deianira's suicide to Heracles: the chorus's admonition is borne out after all, as knowledge of Deianira's intentions tempers Hyllus's anger and amplifies his grief. The nurse reports to the chorus that Hyllus blames himself for his mother's death, describing his horror and misery at the realization that "he fixed her on that wretched deed in anger," because "he struck her groundlessly with a wicked accusation" (932-42). The implication is that just as Hyllus sees how his reaction forced Deianira to act, he understands (or we understand) that had the encounter gone differently, Deianira might still be alive.

In the face of her son's anger, as painful as it is and as hopeless as it may seem to endure, Deianira's suicide definitively cuts her off from the possibility of being encountered differently, however slim that possibility may be. We might look at the encounter between Deianira and Hyllus as another instance of testing, in which Deianira, having hoped for the best, discovers the worst: that her actions in sending the charmed robe have harmed her husband, and that her son disavows her for it, seemingly without regard for her intentions. Having thus "tested" the charm

and seen the reaction(s) to it, Deianira moves forward with what appears to be the only course of action still available to her, a final act that repudiates the criminal frame thrust upon her.

With the case of Deianira, Sophocles offers an account of human agency as materially affected by encounters with others; the kinds of actions and choices Deianira can make for the kind of life she wants to live change based on her interactions with her son, husband, and the chorus members. Such an understanding of agency complicates the idea of a test as something straightforwardly determinative: the premise of Carawan's indictment of Deianira for failing to "test" Nessus's purported love charm is that testing a course of action will give an actor certainty about the results and thus confidence in the action; the point of a test is to arrive at results that are consistent and generalizable. But the paradox of a test is that there is always the possibility that *things could turn out differently, this time* – otherwise, why would a test be necessary at all? Sophocles shows us that, like Medea, Deianira's encounters with others are what determine whether things could have turned out differently for her; rather than test, again and again, their willingness to receive and recognize her as other than a murderess, Deianira generalizes from the results of her test with Hyllus and sees no possibility for a different life.

Such an understanding of agency likewise troubles a straightforward accounting of responsibility or blame, understood as determining a chain of causation for a given result. Just as Deianira's actions are enabled or constrained by her encounters with others, a given outcome is not guaranteed to be the result of a single actor, or a single actor's will. In the case of Heracles' death, the chain of causation is multivalent. We may, as Heracles and Hyllus do at first, link Heracles' death by poisoned robe directly to Deianira. But we could also reach the chain backwards through time, to Nessus, who in his deception of Deianira planted the seed for his will – Heracles' destruction – to be carried out after his own death; we could wrap the chain around

Heracles himself, whose trespass in bringing home a second wife to share his marriage bed catalyzed Deianira to act; we could extend the chain upward to the heavens and trace it to Aphrodite, whose will it is (according to the chorus) that these events should occur, or even to Zeus or other gods who originated the prophecy of Heracles' death. Rather than a single chain of causation, there is a tangle of chains and possible causes, and even if it seems that one chain pulls hardest – for example, that Deianira's poisoned gift is the most proximate cause of Heracles' death – it seems equally clear that Heracles' death in this manner would not be possible without all of those forces acting at once, and sometimes even acting against each other (as Nessus's and Deianira's motives are at odds). In this way, Sophocles demonstrates that the question of responsibility and blame is secondary in the pursuit of justice for Heracles, both because there are too many actors to prosecute and because none of those actors could have secured this outcome alone: each of them, regardless of whether they are aware of it, acts on and is acted on by the others, carries out the will of another in attempting to carry out their own.

Thus, when Heracles learns from Hyllus that the “love charm” Deianira applied was a fatal gift from Nessus, he ceases to demand punishment for Deianira – forsaking justice as retribution – and instead laments for himself, reinterpreting the prophecy he had received long ago in light of this new information and coming to understand the path of his life (1157-79). Having shared this with his son, Heracles extracts promises from Hyllus as to the execution of his funeral and the care of Iole after his death, ensuring that his will will be carried out and offering his son a path forward from the wreckage of their lives. For Heracles, then, it seems that justice is twofold: it consists in part in coming to understand (however incompletely) his place in a web of forces and relations, which enables him to make sense of the events that have befallen him and integrate them into the narrative of his life; and in part in the vindication of his desires,

as his wish for Iole to be part of his family is fulfilled by Hyllus's promise to marry her, whatever his reservations, upon his father's death.

It is worth noting, however, that justice for Heracles is not also justice for Deianira, whose desires (not to be interchangeable, to be seen as trying to be good) are not vindicated, even as she too, however incompletely, understood the ways her actions were constrained by others before she died. With the exception of Hyllus's expression of reluctance to marry the woman he considers responsible for both his parents' deaths, Deianira ceases to be mentioned in the play after the revelation to Heracles that Nessus had provided her with the poison "charm." That immediately after receiving this information, Heracles shifts to lament for himself and reinterpret the prophecy of his death for Hyllus, structurally suggests that Deianira's actions are subsumed into this narrative, effectively rendering her a pawn of others and erasing her own motivations for action. Heracles' dismissal of Deianira even enables her to be read along exactly the tragic script she tried to reject, to the extent that she resorted to suicide: as a jealous wife seeking revenge on the husband who spurned her. I do not say this to return to Deianira full responsibility for Heracles' death, or exercise of agency uncomplicated by the actions of others. Rather, I want to give Deianira the justice that Heracles (and, arguably, Sophocles) withholds, by centering her in the interpretation of this play and seeing her as she wanted to be seen: as someone who, in endeavoring not to be replaced in her own household, understood herself as doing good.

Indeed, justice for Heracles is secured at the expense of justice for Deianira, as his reinterpretation of the prophecies about his life requires Deianira's actions to be subordinated to his fate in order for that fate to make sense. This framing of Deianira's actions not only has the effect of making Deianira a mere gear in the engine of Heracles' fate, as described above, but

also minimizes Heracles' part in Deianira's fate, rendering her desires inconsequential and his actions toward her, in bringing another wife into their home, invisible as an injustice or harm. In ignoring Deianira's desire not to be replaced as catalyst for her action in favor of an account of his life that places him at the center of a divine prophecy, Heracles, like Jason, avoids admitting any fault in their relationship, and thus omits the possibility that he may have had any obligation to Deianira, in particular, altogether.²⁷ Justice for Deianira, then, would have required a reordering of personal relations such that 'wife' would not be a role to be filled interchangeably by multiple women and that Deianira's particularity would be recognized by Heracles; but it would also have required a reordering of material relations such that Deianira would not have to depend on her husband and son as her sole sources of support, enabling the possibility of a life outside the *oikos* when Heracles and Hyllus rejected her explanations for the love charm.

When Heracles reassesses his impending death to integrate the news about Nessus into his knowledge of the prophecies, the fact of his death may not seem desirable or "fair," but he accepts it as foreordained; it is just in the sense that it has been decreed by Zeus. But *Trachiniae* leaves the justness of Deianira's death uninterrogated: after his initial outburst wishing that he could have killed Deianira himself, Heracles seems not to care that she is dead, which might be read as an endorsement of her suicide; and while Hyllus grieves his mother's death and blames himself for pushing her to make that choice, he too barely mentions her after Heracles' reinterpretation of the prophecies. Hyllus's grief recognizes Deianira's death as untimely and unjust, and even acknowledges his own part in it, but it does not go so far as to indict the other forces that made it impossible for Deianira to continue living the kind of life she desired. It is

²⁷ In this, Heracles resembles the tragic subject as elucidated by Gabriela Bastera in her book *Seductions of Fate*, a subject who uses the fatedness of his actions as a way to deny responsibility to others, thus cuts himself off from the possibility of ethical action. While I do not endorse Bastera's tragic model in every case – I believe the tragic subject is intensely concerned with ethical action – it is apt here.

good to say that Deianira should not have died, but she also should not have had to live in a world that made dying seem like her best alternative.

V. Justice as Hospitality

The predictive logics that govern Medea and Deianira's relations with others don't remain in the ancient or mythical past. They endure in contemporary practices of policing and punishment that evaluate an individual's riskiness to commit a crime based on statistical generalizations about factors that are largely beyond that individual's present control: their past actions, overweighting the determinative power of those actions and failing to allow for (and thus cutting off) the possibility of change; and characteristics like gender, race, class, and location, that are taken as given, rather than as socially and culturally constructed, and so failing also to account for the role risk assessment tools themselves have in constructing groups with those characteristics as risks or threats. I call this predictive paradigm *probabilistic*, for its attempt to project probable outcomes for an individual based on the characteristics they share with "risky" or "threatening" groups and to sentence or surveil accordingly.

Such probabilistic thinking at once relies on and reinforces an implicit logic of interchangeability – the assumption that all members of a certain group will act in the same way, and so merit (even in advance) the same treatment (despite the fact that, as Sonja Starr notes, individuals often do not conform to group averages) – that Deianira and Medea's actions refute. Probabilistic thinking frames an individual's outcomes as inevitable based on characteristics that have only the appearance of being natural and immutable (in the case of gender or race), or on past actions (like Medea's slaughter of her own brothers to help Jason escape Colchis with the golden fleece) whose importance to the trajectory of an individual's life cannot help but shift

with the passage of time. Deianira and Medea's actions expose the contingency of these outcomes by demonstrating how they are not the products of each woman's unimpeded agency, but rather are shaped through their encounters with others: Creon's designation of Medea as a threat and refusal to show her mercy or compassion materially constrains her possibilities for action and pushes her toward her revenge, just as Hyllus's disavowal of Deianira pushes her toward suicide.

Given that they cannot depend on being met by others on their preferred terms, or even with good faith – demonstrated by Deianira's fervent desire not to “hear [herself] called evil” when she tries to be the opposite (721-2) and Creon's stubborn, hostile distrust of Medea even after she addresses his fears – both women turn to testing as a strategy for survival. As analyzed above, Deianira engages in several instances of testing: first by applying the love charm to a scrap of wool, then by revealing her plan and misgivings to the chorus of serving women and asking for their counsel, and finally in her encounter with Hyllus, whose angry disavowal prevents any consideration of her good intentions. Deianira tests in order to gauge others' responses to her, understanding that their responses will bear on her possibilities for further action in support of a good life, and the result of each test guides her next step. She treads excessively carefully – she resorts to the love charm only when it becomes clear that her place within Heracles' *oikos* (and the good life it enables for her) is under threat, but refuses to harm Iole and does not intend to harm her husband; she acts within the household, an appropriate sphere for Greek women; she seeks the support of her immediate community, in the chorus of serving women – but to no avail. She is encountered as precisely the “bad and over-bold” woman she despises, and her possibilities for action correspondingly constrained, death (as she had

initially vowed, should her actions harm Heracles) seems better than continuing to live without the relations to husband and son that constitute her and secure her material existence.

Upon learning of Deianira's suicide, the chorus of *Trachiniae* offers a lament for its double grief – having lost Deianira, and anticipating Heracles' death – that encapsulates well their mistress's condition, misrecognized as bad when she only wanted to be good. They sing,

Which of these shall I lament first?
Which is more miserable?
One we can see in the house,
the other we await in fear:
it is the same to have and to await. (947-52)

It is the same to have and to await. For Deianira, awaiting Heracles' betrayal with his arrival and reunion with Iole in their home is the same as already having it: either way, her position in the *oikos* has become uncertain, and requires that she act to preserve it. Similarly, once Deianira has been marked a murderer and a threat by her own son, only further misfortunes await her – and being marked a threat is a misfortune in itself, both in its mis-estimation of Deianira's character and in its constraint of further action. Of course, the chorus here is not referring to Deianira's predicament, but its own: the death the women await outside the house weighs as heavily on them as the one they know has already occurred within it; they cannot tell which to grieve first. The dread the women feel as they wait for news or evidence of Heracles' death has already changed their orientation to the world, just as the dread Deianira felt at being encountered as other than she was changed hers.

The same is true for Medea: to have harsh treatment at the hands of Creon and Jason and to await it are the same, and being designated a threat by Creon is itself a kind of harsh treatment, altering the range of actions available to Medea and the way she is able to move through the world. Just as Deianira tests the chorus and Hyllus, Medea tests Creon to determine

the course of action available to her, and his refusal to see her as anything but a threat prevents her from living on in Corinth with her sons, even without Jason's protection. No longer able to depend either on Creon's tolerance or Jason's regard, she moves instead to avenge the wrong done to her and her children – replaced in Jason's *oikos* by Creon's daughter – and make a world in which she can live in accordance with her values, in which the ties of *philia* that bind Medea and her children to Jason are not interchangeable, but irreplaceable.

I want to return at this point to a passage from *Carceral Capitalism*, in which Wang considers the psychic toll of being deemed a risk or threat. She writes,

When a person is trapped in a cycle of debt, it also can affect their subjectivity and temporal orientation to the world by making it difficult for them to imagine and plan for the future. What psychic toll does this have on residents? How does it feel to be routinely degraded and exploited by the police? When municipalities develop a parasitic relationship to residents, they make it impossible for residents to actually feel at home in the place where they live, walk, work, love, and chill. In this sense, policing is not about crime control or public safety, but about the regulation of people's lives – their movements and modes of being in the world. (190)

Here, Wang suggests that the practices of police surveillance and exploitation of those considered threats is aimed not at public safety but at “the regulation of people's lives – their movements and modes of being in the world,” with the result that it becomes “impossible for residents to actually feel at home in the place where they live, walk, work, love, and chill” (190). For those considered threats, daily life requires just the sort of testing and strategizing that Deianira and Medea engage, in an attempt to mitigate bad outcomes – whether arrest, disavowal, or exile – that nonetheless await. And in awaiting those bad outcomes, even if they never materialize, someone designated a threat, like Deianira and Medea, moves through the world in a fundamentally different way – testing and retesting, gauging reactions, adjusting behavior to secure survival – from someone who is not, and can feel at home.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant writes that “the affective feeling of normativity...is expressed in the sense that one ought to be dealt with gently by the world, and live happily with intimates and strangers” (45). I will suggest in my next chapter that this “affective feeling” might be one criterion by which we determine just relations: can we depend on being dealt with gently by the world, as we live with both strangers and intimates? I contend here that at the very least, being *unable* to depend on this is a mark of *unjust* relations, especially as the probabilistic logic of predictive policing results in threatening status being distributed unevenly.

Even as these plays demonstrate the continuity and injustice of probabilistic logic (from ancient times to the present), they also offer an alternative. Neither Medea’s revenge, violently reshaping her world, nor Deianira’s suicide, rejecting it entirely, are desirable courses of action in our own time, for all their symbolic and communicative weight. While Deianira cannot depend on being met gently by those who have power over her (Heracles and Hyllus), she can and does extend that openness to Iole, resolving to treat Heracles’ “secret bride” as a guest in her home rather than as an enemy. Deianira imagines Iole’s intentions in her speech at 436-69, judging the girl to be ruled by love and engaging in nothing meant to harm her, but it’s important to note that Deianira has no way of knowing if this is true: Iole is silent throughout the play. Before she knows Iole’s true identity, Deianira promises not to cause Iole further unhappiness, but even after she learns it, Deianira pledges not to insult her, nor give way to rage (despite the threat she poses to Deianira’s marriage and place in the *oikos*). Unlike Heracles and Hyllus, Deianira does not need access to Iole’s intentions in order to meet her without hostility, instead trusting that Iole does not mean her harm – and so Deianira holds open the possibility for Iole to speak without fear of reprisal, even though she never does.

I want to call this openness *hospitality*, after Derrida. Derrida's concept of hospitality is a useful lens through which to understand the encounters between Deianira and Medea and their respective interlocutors, as each woman, seeking to act in support of a good life, is met either with hostility or openness that constrains or enables her possibilities to act in such a way. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida distinguishes between what he calls "the law of hospitality" – hospitality in its "traditional" sense, as reciprocal, conditional, formulated as a right or a pact; requiring the foreigner at the door to give his name and ask for admission in a language his potential host understands – and "absolute hospitality," which is to be offered not just to foreigners with "proper names," but to unknown and unnamed strangers, without the expectation of reciprocity or any other conditions (26). Although Derrida notes that absolute hospitality is in tension with the law of hospitality (because in requiring admission for everyone, absolute hospitality seems to undermine the host's power to choose whether to give entry, which is the condition for hospitality at all), he suggests it as an ethical imperative nonetheless. He writes,

To put it in different terms, absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (26)

Hospitality understood as offering the other a "place to take place" without conditions – refusing to refuse them entry, and so holding open their possibilities for action – seems to me to describe well the encounters between Deianira and Medea and their respective interlocutors that enable, rather than close off, the possibility of living a good life. Given the relationship between hospitality and knowledge for Derrida (the demand for knowledge of the other as the condition of offering or refusing "traditional" hospitality, versus the dismissal of knowledge of the other in absolute hospitality), his concept of hospitality also bears directly on my argument about

Deianira and Medea, since it is on the basis of knowledge or perceived knowledge that these women are deemed hostile, criminal, and correspondingly have their possibilities constrained – or deemed friends, and have their possibilities opened.

To be sure, there are important differences between these two plays and the situation of hospitality as Derrida imagines it. As he considers the paradox of the foreigner's request for admission, Derrida questions whether it is right to speak of hospitality or asylum with respect to him after all, as the foreigner's ability to make the request in a language his host understands seems to undercut his foreignness, the distance and difference between the two parties (16). But regardless of their degree of foreignness, the two parties Derrida imagines as offering and receiving hospitality are utter strangers to each other. This is not the case with Deianira and Medea, who seek – though not always in so many words – and receive or are denied hospitality from parties they already know. Rather than rendering Derrida's ethical concept of hospitality useless, however, *Medea* and *Trachiniae* extend and complicate it by foregrounding the dynamics of power, vulnerability, and agency that certainly exist between strangers, but are thrown into relief by the specificity of Deianira and Medea's encounters with figures with whom they are already in relation, making even clearer the ways that possibilities for action are formed and informed through those encounters, as well as in encounters with unknown others.

Just as Deianira extends hospitality to Iole, the chorus of *Trachiniae* extends it to Deianira herself, until the moment the women learn of her death. Throughout their encounters with Deianira, the chorus emphasizes the contingency of any bad outcomes: the women admonish her not to wear away hope, as Deianira worries at the play's beginning that the prophecy Heracles shared with her portends his death and not his return, and remind her of the cyclical joys and pains of human life. They suggest that Deianira has not planned badly, if she

has reason to believe in the love charm, and reiterate that knowing can only come by doing – she must make an attempt in order to be sure. Even after Deianira confesses her fear of having doomed Heracles with her gift, the chorus insists that she cannot decide on hope or fear before she knows what has happened (*Trach.* 125-30, 588-9, 592-3, 723-4). Just as Deianira has reason to consider Iole a threat, the chorus has good reason (especially after Deianira’s vivid descriptions of the mangled wool and Nessus’s death) to consider Deianira as “bad and bold” as she fears, and reject her as a murderess and plotter. But the chorus does not, instead holding out and holding open as long as it can the possibility that Deianira’s life might still be good.

While Deianira’s dread at being misrecognized as evil, which causes her to move through the world differently in an attempt to mitigate the bad outcomes of that misrecognition by others, and the dread the chorus articulates upon learning of Deianira’s suicide both collapse present and future, the hospitality that each party offers removes determinative power from both past and future, and suggests that even the present is uncertain. In refusing to designate Deianira as a threat, the chorus likewise refuses to close off her possibilities for action, offering “a place for [her] to take place” (in Derrida’s formulation) without conditions. Being met with such hospitality is a necessary condition of possibility for Deianira to live a different kind of life – one in which having and awaiting are *not* the same – but it is not sufficient. While the chorus of serving women can offer Deianira affirmation and belonging, it cannot provide her with the same material supports that her position in Heracles’ household does. Those supports are withdrawn when Hyllus condemns his mother, wishing she were dead and cursing her deed, and with that withdrawal Deianira’s capacities for action in support of a good life are severely constrained.

Medea, by contrast, is offered just such material support by Aegeus, who not only promises her safe harbor in Athens in response to her supplication, but swears not to surrender

her to anyone who might seek her there to do her harm. Because Medea has already established a relationship with Aegeus at the time of her need, and supplicates him not only on the basis of their friendship but with promises to help him conceive a child, their arrangement is more reflective of ancient Greek practices of guest-friendship and suppliance (*xenia* and *hiketeia*), which are based on mutual reciprocity, than of Derridean hospitality in its absolute sense. But while Aegeus has considerably more power to alter Medea's possibilities than the chorus of *Trachiniae* has to alter Deianira's, the hospitality he extends resembles theirs because he offers it with knowledge (the text implies) of Medea's past actions and current situation. Indeed, Aegeus appears to have the same knowledge of the terrible deeds Medea committed to get herself and Jason to Corinth that Creon has, but rather than taking those past actions to be determinative of Medea's future – encountering her as a threat, and so producing her as one through withholding hospitality and material support – Aegeus's offer of hospitality, which *includes* material support, is the necessary and sufficient condition of possibility for Medea to live a different kind of life.

We might think about the related forms of hospitality offered by Aegeus in *Medea* and the chorus of *Trachiniae* as positive and negative. Negative hospitality entails the refusal to constrain the other's possibilities by considering them a threat, and receiving the other unconditionally – this is the minimal form of hospitality that the chorus offers Deianira. Their refusal to regard her as a threat is necessary but not sufficient to support her actions in pursuit of a good life, as they are unable to shield her from the consequences of being deemed a threat by others with more power. Positive hospitality adds to this unconditional reception material support, as Aegeus offers Medea: in refusing to consider her a threat, he holds open the possibility that her life might still be good, and offers her the material support necessary to pursue that different life. Both the positive and negative forms of hospitality, and Derrida's

absolute hospitality, involve epistemological suspension – that is, the “unconditional condition” under which Aegeus and the chorus of *Trachiniae* extend hospitality to Medea and Deianira is that of holding off or suspending knowledge, or refusing to grant any knowledge they do have determinative weight. It is the refusal to deem threatening, at a minimum and even when faced with knowledge of past harms, that holds each woman’s possibilities open.

Of course, we might also say that in Aegeus’s case, it is precisely his knowledge of Medea that encourages him to offer her hospitality, especially when he learns what has befallen her in Corinth. Unlike Hyllus’s encounter with Deianira, in which his mother’s intentions are not even considered, Aegeus has sufficient understanding of Medea on her own terms to be able to receive her without fear. This is not to say that knowledge is or should be necessary for hospitality – I think I stand with Derrida in asserting that it should not – merely that it can be helpful when offering positive hospitality in the form of material support, given that different cases are likely to require different supports. Derrida himself takes up the problem of knowledge when he imagines the host asking the stranger’s name:

Does [hospitality] begin with the question addressed to the newcomer (which seems very human and sometimes loving, assuming that hospitality should be linked to love – an enigma that we will leave in reserve for a moment): what is your name? tell me your name, what should I call you, I who am calling on you, I who want to call you by your name? What am I going to call you? It is also what we sometimes tenderly ask children and those we love. Or else does hospitality begin with the unquestioning welcome, in a double effacement, the effacement of the question and the name? Is it more just and more loving to question or not to question? to call by the name or without the name? to give or to learn a name already given? (28-29)

The question of the name, for Derrida, stands in for seeking knowledge of the other. Is it more just and more loving to seek knowledge of the other, that I might offer them hospitality *better*, or to render hospitality as best I can, in the absence of further knowledge? In the case of Medea, at least, that knowledge is freely given: far from being hidden from view, her intentions,

values, and commitments are available to anyone who will listen, including Aegeus but also including the chorus of Corinthian women who witness Medea's trials, resolution, and fatal acts. The knowledge that Medea volunteers throughout the play make her revenge legible as an ethical action, and that knowledge bears on how (some) others receive her. In this respect, the dynamic of hospitality in both plays entails *understanding*, and not just knowledge: while extracting information from a stranger makes her an object of knowledge (and an object of *my* knowledge), understanding a stranger on her own terms sets up a relationship between host and guest that is not based on domination, and that enables the holding open of possibilities that is the promise of hospitality.

Like the chorus of *Trachiniae*, the chorus of Corinthian women in *Medea* show their mistress a measure of hospitality in how they receive her, not disavowing her even as they try to persuade her not to kill her children. But in contrast to the women of Trachis, the Corinthian women's hospitality is based not on uncertainty about how events will turn out, but on reasoning about what has already happened, given their knowledge both of Medea's circumstances and how she understands her possibilities for action. Medea is rarely onstage without the chorus, and the women's remarks throughout suggest that they understand Medea's actions as she herself understands them: not as irrational payback or acts motivated by the rage of a woman too ruled by *thumos*, but as communicating Medea's conception of a good life under circumstances that have made such a life impossible.

Rather than condemn Medea's desire for revenge on Jason, from the beginning of the play the chorus agrees that such revenge is right: the women declare their lack of surprise at Medea's grief and assert that she will take revenge rightly (267-69); they indict Jason's ill-treatment of his wife (576-8) and by contrast bless Aegeus's hospitality (759-63); and,

importantly, they emphasize that through his second, strategic marriage, Jason has played a role in bringing about the ruin of his household – suffering they judge him to deserve, even as they pity his new bride’s fate (990-5, 1231-5). The Corinthian women do not object to revenge *per se*, but reflect on Medea’s plan in the same terms with which she entreats herself, lamenting the damage she will do to herself, as well as to her children, in killing them. Although children are already a grief – born to die, a mother always risks losing her children, even when they are grown and if they are good instead of bad – the chorus begs Medea not to waste that care, reminding her of the life she has had with them just as she herself mourned the life they would no longer get to live together (1081-1115, 1251-70). The life the chorus predicts for Medea should she murder her children, like the life Medea foresees for herself, is full of grief.

All of this is to say that the chorus understands Medea on her own terms – by her own “name,” freely given – and in doing so is able to understand the ethical valence of her revenge. The Corinthian women model a hospitable encounter, a hospitable reading practice, that refuses to flatten Medea’s complexities, or to let their own horror at her actions shape her possibilities. Rather than considering Medea either an inhuman goddess or a criminal type (as many critics and male figures within the play do, respectively), the chorus firmly maintains Medea within the circle of human concern. Indeed, while Jason compares Medea to various monsters – Tuscan Scylla, a lioness – the chorus compares her to another human woman, Ino, who also killed her children, suggesting that Medea’s actions, while grave, remain within the realms of human capability and comprehension (1282-90).

Moreover, the chorus considers Medea’s actions with an eye to the conditions that made them possible, and indicates the conditions necessary for such a view to be taken by others.

Immediately after Medea first voices her plans for revenge, the chorus imagines a world in which men's and women's positions are reversed:

The streams of holy rivers flow backward,
customs and all things are turned back too:
men's plans are deceitful,
and their promise by the gods no longer holds fast.
Stories will change, and our lot will have glory:
honor is coming to the race of women,
no longer shall ill repute
haunt women.
The songs of ancient bards will cease
to sing our faithlessness.
For Phoebus, lord of song, did not
give our minds the divine song of the lyre –
else I could have sung a hymn in answer
to the race of men. Long time has
much to say of our lot,
and of men's. (410-31)

Here, the chorus of Corinthian women sing a counterfactual: if the holy rivers flowed backward, and customs too, and if women, not men, had the gift of song, not only would it render men's actions legible as deceitful, but women would be able to rebut uncharitable accounts of their own sex. Then, the chorus repeats what has happened to Medea instead: betrayed by her husband, exiled from her home, and replaced by a new mistress, "the grace of oaths is gone, and shame/abides no more in mighty Greece" (439-45). The juxtaposition of Medea's plight with the chorus's imagined world for women links the structure of the world as it is to the injustice Medea suffers, and suggests a similarly structural means for redress. In order for Medea and other women to live differently (with honor, and the power to engage with men), "the world's great order [must] be reversed" – to paraphrase Rex Warner's translation of these lines (καὶ δίκαια καὶ πάντα πάλιν στρέφεται, 411) – and a different world take place.

VI. Conclusions

The same is true of our own world, in our own time. Not only does the probabilistic logic that produces Medea and Deianira as criminals endure in predictive policing and risk assessment practices, but these practices, too, are profoundly inhospitable. Predictive policing algorithm tools like COMPAS weaponize information extracted in previous encounters with the criminal justice system to (re-)produce certain individuals as threats, and that threatening designation becomes grounds both to impose punishment and to withhold the material support necessary to pursue a good life. From the perspective of a risk assessment algorithm, as well as that of individuals subjected to it, to have and to await are the same – the assessment, the “test,” is also the proof that the individual is in fact as the algorithm says: a threat. If they haven’t done wrong yet, it is only because they are always just about to, and it is better (as Creon argues) to act preemptively, before the harm has occurred, than to wait and come to regret it. In this way, predictive practices cut off the epistemological suspension (the minimal, negative form of hospitality) that enables acting otherwise, dismissing the possibility that the individuals in question could have changed from their pasts, or might yet change in the future. Of course, individuals *can* still act otherwise – like Fosque and Zilly, they can make amends, repair relationships with family and community, and situate the harms they perpetrated in the narratives of their lives – but those actions neither guarantee their safety nor cause predictive tools to read them differently. As a result, such individuals might face the same dilemma as Deianira, whose intentions are good but disregarded by those with the power to enable or constrain her possibilities to act in support of a good life; or Medea, who, judged a threat no matter how she acts, has nothing else to do but become one.

In such cases, it would be more just (recalling Derrida) to extend not just negative

hospitality, but positive hospitality in the form of material resources to enable action in support of a good life. This is not only because, as *Trachiniae* and *Medea* have demonstrated, material support enables action in pursuit of the possibilities that epistemological suspension holds open, but because to encounter individuals who have done harm with hospitality rather than hostility more accurately reflects the kinds of subjects those individuals are, and contests what Wang calls a “liberal politics of personal agency” that holds individuals solely responsible for their actions and claims that those who work hard or act correctly get what they deserve – a claim that the experiences of the black and brown communities Wang writes about, as well as the cases of Deianira and Medea, show to be untrue (Wang 138). Such a view of agency does not adequately take into account the ways that “personal agency” is already relational, enabled and constrained through our encounters with others, and implicates parties – including communities and structures of power – beyond the individual actor. In helping us to reimagine the subject of justice, *Trachiniae* and *Medea* likewise help us to retheorize the retributive paradigm of legal justice in terms that *do* justice to the kinds of beings we are, offering an alternative to “the liberal politics of personal agency” by staging situations that expose how the exercise of such “personal” agency is complicated that is especially useful to cases, like Deianira’s and Medea’s, that hinge on probabilistic predictive logics of risk or threat.

I want to give an example. Toward the end of his book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Matthew Desmond relates the sentencing hearing of Vanetta, a young black woman with three children under the age of five, who had been arrested for armed robbery along with her boyfriend and another woman after snatching purses at gunpoint from two women entering a Blockbuster. Vanetta’s hours had been cut at the Old Country Buffet where she worked, and she couldn’t afford her electricity, and then her rent, and received an eviction

notice. In her confession, Vanetta said, “I was desperate to pay my bills, and I was nervous and scared and did not want to see my kids in the dark or out on the street” (244). At the sentencing hearing, after her public defender’s plea for leniency, Vanetta spoke on her own behalf, taking “full responsibility” – like Fosque and Zilly – for what she had done, and apologizing both to the victims of the robbery and the court (265). At the time of the robbery, she said, “I was overwhelmed by the difficulties. But this doesn’t excuse what I have done. ...At this time I’m asking for leniency for me but, especially, for my children” (265).

Despite Vanetta’s plea for leniency, her defender’s belief that punishment could be accomplished in a community setting, rather than in prison, and the judge’s own acknowledgement that Vanetta’s crime was one of desperation, she was sentenced to eighty-one months in the state prison system, broken down into fifteen months of confinement and sixty-six of extended supervision (267). Leading up to his decision, the judge noted that between the time of the crime and the hearing, “the overall economic situation hasn’t improved,” and in fact may have gotten worse because of the moving around Vanetta had to do in the interim, implying that since Vanetta’s circumstances had not changed for the better, she was likely to commit crime again. In a passage that bears striking rhetorical similarity to the speeches in *Medea* imagining other lives and worlds, Desmond gives an account of the judge’s reasoning that foregrounds the unfairness of this judgment, based on a prediction – an informal risk assessment – that refuses to recognize the ways Vanetta’s actions were made im/possible, and at the same time movingly spins out the life Vanetta might have had under different circumstances. I quote it here at length:

What the judge was saying, in essence, was: We all agree that you were poor and scared when you did this violent, hurtful thing, and if you had been allowed to go on working five days a week at Old Country Buffet, refilling soup pots and mopping up frozen yogurt spills, none of us would be here right now. You might have been able to save enough to move to an apartment that was de-leaded and clean in a neighborhood without drug dealers and with safe schools. With time,

you may have been able to get Bo-Bo the medical treatment he needs for his seizures, and maybe you could even have started taking night classes to become a nurse, like you always wanted. And, who knows, maybe you could have actually become a nurse, a real nurse with a uniform and everything. Then you could really give your kids a childhood that would look nothing like the one Shortcake gave you. If you did that, you would walk around this cold city with your head held high, and maybe you would eventually come to feel that you were worth something and deserving of a man who could support you other than by lending you his pistol for a stickup or at least one who didn't break down your door and beat you in front of your children. Maybe you would meet someone with a steady job and get married in a small church with Kendal standing proudly up front by the groom and Tembi as the poofy-dressed flower girl and Bo-Bo as the grinning, toddling ring bearer, just like you always dreamed it, and from that day on your groom would introduce you as "my wife." But that's not what happened. What happened was that your hours were cut, and your electricity was about to be shut off, and you and your children were about to be thrown out of your house, and you snatched someone's purse as your friend pointed a gun at her face. And if it was poverty that caused this crime, who's to say you won't do it again? Because you were poor then and you are poor now. We all see the underlying cause, we see it every day in this court, but the justice system is no charity, no jobs program, no Housing Authority. If we cannot pull the weed up from the roots, then at least we can cut it low at the stem. (266-67)

Desmond's analysis of what Vanetta's sentencing means reflects an understanding of agency that is close to the one I have articulated in this chapter, in its acknowledgement of the ways Vanetta's possibilities for action have been materially constrained by her circumstances and others' perceptions of her, and like the chorus of *Medea*, he makes visible what is happening to Vanetta, in the workings of the justice system, as itself an injustice. Moreover, the measurement taken of Vanetta, the test applied to determine her judgment – is she at risk to commit a crime again? – becomes the proof needed to convict her. The poverty Vanetta lives in becomes part of her in the eyes of the court (as if her poverty were a bad seed that originated within her and not outside her; as if she, too, were wicked as Tuscan Scylla), a basis for the court's prediction that she will act the same way again, cutting off the possibility of living or being otherwise. And the prison sentence she serves will likely only confirm the judgment of her as a threat, materially (re)producing her as such because of her poverty, because of having been

arrested and incarcerated, and dramatically decreasing the possibilities, for work and for life, available to her in the future.

The retributive paradigm of legal justice may not allow for it to be “[a] charity, [a] jobs program, [a] Housing Authority,” but a paradigm of justice that seeks to enable, rather than cut off, action in support of a good life would. When a lack of material supports so constrains possibilities for action that doing harm seems best, as in Vanetta’s case, wouldn’t it be more just – rather than to constrain her possibilities further with a prison sentence – to extend positive hospitality in the form of the resources necessary to change her situation, and live a different kind of life? To do so would be to understand the existence of poverty as an injustice in the first place, a sign of disordered norms and relations between individuals and communities, and better attend to a subject of justice who is relationally constituted and whose actions are enabled and constrained in their encounters with others.

Because this version of justice attends to the interpersonal and systemic forces that bear on our capacity to act, it requires a greater (not lesser, as some might suggest) degree of accountability, on the individual, communal, and political level. On an individual level, it requires us to acknowledge our hand in the lives of others – in whether we are making a world in which it is possible to depend on being treated gently and live in harmony with strangers and intimates – on the communal level to interrogate norms (like the ones reflected in predictive policing algorithms) that subject some lives to violence and harm in excess of the precarity of everyday life; and on the political level to shift our understanding of justice from negative terms (ameliorating harms) to positive ones (promoting goods) and to deploy power accordingly. It requires us, as the chorus of *Medea* observes, to remake the order of the world so that a new one

can take place: to choose to hold open the promise of a good life, and not to realize the threat of a bad one.

CHAPTER IV
Beyond Retribution: Justice and Affect in Euripides' *Ion* and *Bacchae*

Κρέουσα. ποῖ δίκην ἀνοίσομεν,
εἰ τῶν κρατούντων ἀδικίαις ὀλούμεθα;

CREUSA. O miserable women, O deeds of the gods
What then? Where shall we turn for justice,
if we are destroyed by the injustices of the powerful? (Euripides *Ion*, l. 252-54)

I. Introduction

Creusa, queen of Athens, has just arrived at the temple of Delphi to ask the oracle whether she and her husband, Xuthus, will ever have children – and, secretly, to learn the fate of the child she conceived by Apollo and exposed many years before. Creusa's reflection on "the injustices of the powerful" comes on the heels of remembering that grief: she fears the god allowed their son to die, and if that's the case, from where can she seek justice? How can she indict a god? Who would even recognize her loss? Confirmation of her son's death, coupled with the possibility of never bearing another child, would be enough to destroy her. Indeed, when the chorus informs her of the oracle's pronouncement – that Xuthus will be granted a son, but not Creusa – her response is swift and decisive: *ᾤμοι, θάνοιμι*. I wish I were dead (762).

Creusa's feeling of helplessness is likely familiar to anyone who has suffered a loss at the hands of someone much more powerful, and to anyone who has sought redress for an unjust loss. While modern readers of Euripides' *Ion* might turn to the legal system for justice, Creusa cannot – and so her question ("where shall we appeal to justice?") raises another: what would "justice"

for the loss of her son look like, especially since she cannot act against a god? That justice in any retributive form is not available to Creusa raises the question of whether another kind of justice might be possible, a question that in turn invites readers of the play to reconsider the broadly retributive version of democratic legal justice that we live with, including the form of the legal trial itself.

In ongoing scholarly conversations about justice, especially among classicists and political theorists, turning to Euripides' *Ion* (and to his *Bacchae*, which I will also explore later) may seem unusual. *Ion*, like many of Euripides' plays, is hard to pin down. *Is* it a tragedy, or is it a domestic comedy, as Bernard Knox alleges? Is it another instance of Euripidean apostasy, making fools of the gods by showing their pettiness? *Ion* is clearly concerned with race, birthright, and citizenship – but does it endorse or critique Athenian autochthony and empire? *Ion* has generated much valuable scholarly work on these questions and others, but seemingly very little on the questions of justice I outlined above. This may be the result of scholars simply overlooking the political aspects of the play that I will examine, but I think it is more likely that *Ion* tends to be passed over when thinking about justice because there is another, much-preferred set of Greek tragedies to engage: Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

It is widely accepted among classicists that the three plays of the *Oresteia* – which follow the murders within the royal family of Argos after the Trojan war – stage the transition from an aristocratic justice based on revenge killings to democratic legal justice, in which retribution is determined and administered by the courts. This interpretation turns on two elements of the final play (*Eumenides*): first, the verdict in Orestes' murder trial is decided in his favor by Athena, breaking the jury's deadlock and seemingly ending the cycle of violence by leaving Clytemnestra's murder unavenged. And second, charmed by Athena's words of persuasion and

offer of an honored place within the city, the Furies transform at play's end into the Eumenides – the “Kindly Ones” – forswearing untimely killing and promising to be guardians of Athenian prosperity.

This consensus reading of the *Oresteia* is compelling, not least because it seems to end so happily, with the removal of revenge from justice and the promise of future prosperity. It is seductive because it allows us to rest easy, like the Kindly Ones beneath the city: all has been balanced, anger placated, Orestes cleansed of his crimes. Yet perhaps we, and the Furies, should not rest so easy. To be content with the consensus reading requires that we overlook that the founding of the democratic court rested on a plea of justification, not justice, treating Orestes and Clytemnestra unequally; and that Orestes' motives for murdering his mother – which the court validates – were still deeply entrenched in the aristocratic values that insisted on avenging the murder of kin as the only way to recognize kin as such. And while revenge may have been banished from the city at the trilogy's end, retribution remains intact, transformed into legal punishment and animating the law. Further, failing to question retribution suggests a comfort with understanding justice as retributive that I believe we should be wary of. Not only does the *Oresteia* leave the problem of justice and retribution unresolved, but that lack of resolution should spur us to look elsewhere for answers: to Euripides, who interrogates the easy identification of justice with retribution in his *Ion* and *Bacchae*.

One of the key ways Euripides interrogates retributive justice in *Ion* and *Bacchae* is through the plays' female choruses and protagonists. I emphasize the gender of these protagonists and choruses in part because a significant amount of scholarship on these plays focuses on the male figures – Pentheus and Dionysus in *Bacchae*, Ion and Apollo in *Ion* – despite the centrality of the female figures to the action, and in part because it is through a consideration

of gender that the problematic dynamics of retributive justice and the potential for alternative forms become visible. Even in the *Oresteia*, attending to Clytemnestra reveals a constitutive exclusion – of women, and of the kinship bond – at the foundation of democratic justice; the female figures in *Ion* and *Bacchae* further interrogate the institution of legal or legitimate retributive justice by challenging two of its core practices: the trial form, and the administration of punishment.

The choruses of *Ion* and *Bacchae* are unique among tragic choruses, perhaps even among Euripides' other works. According to Helene Foley, who provides a thorough inventory of tragic choruses, their uses, and scholarly responses in her essay "Choral Identity in Greek Tragedy," the conventional wisdom is that choruses are on the whole passive, although female choruses tend to act or take risks especially in cases of "revenge/conspiracy, suppliance, or funerary or other rituals" (17). The chorus' role in tragedy was to aid in the tragic contest by providing spectacle through dancing and showcasing the actors' range in its portrayal of gender and cultural others, and to reach the audience through lyric and emotional means, rather than to "trespass on the actor's ground" by giving rhetorical speeches. Choruses tend to observe and give advice, sing prayers to the gods, and are interested in the protagonist's fate but rarely share in it, possibly because, as characters of lesser status, they "receive less pointed attention from the gods" (Foley 14). Sheila Murnaghan concurs in this respect: choruses are "perennial survivors" who aid the main characters in articulating and interpreting their sufferings, but "do not experience those sufferings directly; they remain to some degree safe, detached, and self-regarding" (106). By contrast, the choruses of *Ion* and *Bacchae* are not only involved and invested in the fates of the protagonists, Creusa and Agave, they are even the primary drivers of aspects of the plays' action.

Ion's chorus of serving women offers one alternative to purely retributive justice through their intense affective identification with their mistress. They identify Creusa's situation as unjust and, recognizing that she is barred from seeking justice, declare their desire to share her fate, acting with and for her, should she seek revenge. The chorus's investment in Creusa's wellbeing, and especially in her grief at having lost her son, complicates the association of revenge with anger and retribution, and suggests resolution of Creusa's grief as necessary for justice. In their songs and in their actions toward Creusa, the chorus emphasizes the affective and communal aspects of seeking justice.

The chorus of Euripides' *Bacchae* is likewise important, but for a different reason. This chorus of foreign women, touched by Dionysus with divine frenzy, both enable and enact with Agave the terrible crime at the center of the play: the dismemberment of Agave's son, Pentheus. But while Agave is exiled for dismembering her son, the chorus faces no consequences, a result that doesn't seem quite right, troubling the logic of individual agency and individual punishment for a crime. Agave, entangled with the chorus of bacchantes, offers a different version of the tragic subject, not as a lone actor, but as acting with and acted on by others and by forces beyond herself. In this way, not only does Euripides call into question the logic of retributive justice in general, but he offers a tragic subject that a simple form of retributive justice cannot accommodate, in turn raising the question of what kind of justice could be adequate to such a subject.

Taken together, Euripides' *Ion* and *Bacchae* present a compelling case for non-retributive justice: the former, by proposing that justice must attend to the affective dimensions of a crime or loss; the latter, by demonstrating the continuing violence of punishment. Both, too, grapple

with the problem of holding powerful wrongdoers to account, offering instead a vision of justice whose parameters are shaped by the needs of victims of harm.

II. Euripides' *Ion*

From the moment she appears onstage, Creusa is a figure of grief. Greeting her in the courtyard of the temple at Delphi, Ion is taken aback by her tears, and asks how it is she can be crying, while others are happy to be in Apollo's sanctuary (l. 241-246). Creusa answers that she was caught up in an old memory:

CREUSA. O stranger, it is not unschooled of you
to wonder about my tears:
When I saw these halls of Apollo,
I re-measured an old memory;
I held my mind there at home, though I am here. (l. 247-251)

From Hermes' prologue at the beginning of the play, the audience knows that the memory Creusa is referring to is her rape by Apollo and forced exposure of the child. Then, in an aside, she delivers the lines with which I opened this chapter:

CREUSA. O miserable women, O deeds of the gods
What then? Where shall we turn for justice,
if we are destroyed by the injustices of the powerful? (252-254)

From the very first, then, Euripides makes clear the central sources of the play's conflict: Creusa's grief, and her search for justice. So we are returned to one of my first questions: if retributive justice is not available to Creusa, what other kind of justice for her can there be? Creusa indicates that one possibility for justice would be for Apollo to make amends, by promising her fertility to bear another child: "If Loxias is willing now to repair his wrongs from before," she says, as Xuthus enters the temple sanctuary, "though he will not become wholly dear to me,/whatever he ordains – because he is a god – I will accept" (l. 425-29). She cannot get

her first child back (so she thinks), but for Apollo to grant her the ability to bear another would mean that he recognizes her loss. But with the oracle's answer in the negative – only Xuthus will be granted a child – it appears Apollo has refused her. In this, Creusa's loss is amplified; not only has she lost her son, and not only has she borne that loss in silence and shame, but Apollo insults her further by giving a bastard son to her husband and ignoring her plea for amends.

In a palinode that falls almost exactly in the center of the play, Creusa recounts the grave harms Apollo did her so many years ago, both the pain of the rape and the grief of having to abandon the son she bore as a result. Creusa's song illustrates well the unequal power dynamic she faces in any attempt at justice; it is her hopelessness at being able to secure any sort of happiness in the wake of her loss that spurs her to speak at last. Her silence and shame have earned her nothing, while Apollo continues to play his lyre and prophesy from his "golden throne," even gifting a son to Xuthus – to whom he owes nothing – over her. I translate it here in full:

CREUSA. O my soul, how shall I keep silent?
How can I expose the secret bed
and abandon shame?
What obstacle is yet in my way?
Against whom am I set in a contest of virtue?
Not my husband, who has become my betrayer.
I am denied a home, denied children;
the hopes are gone which I longed
to arrange well but could not,
hiding the marriage,
hiding the much-wept birth.
But by the starry throne of Zeus,
and by the goddess upon my promontory,
and by the sacred shore of Triton's
watery pool,
I will no longer hide the marriage bed, so that,
having unburdened my heart, I will be at ease.
My eyes drip with tears,
my soul suffers, ill-counseled
by men and by gods,

whom I will show
are thankless betrayers of marriage beds.
O you who let sound the voice
of the seven-toned lyre, just as
a voice sounds hymns lovely to hear
in rustic lifeless horns,
I will cry out blame on you, O son of Latona,
by these rays of sunlight.
You came to me, flowing hair gleaming with gold,
when I was plucking
saffron-colored blossoms to strew,
reflecting golden light in the folds of my cloak:
Clinging to the white wrists of my hands,
you carried me off, crying out *Mother!*,
to a marriage bed in a cave,
god and consort,
shamelessly
paying homage to Cypris.
Miserable, I bore you a son,
whom, in fear of my mother,
I cast out in your bed,
where you wedded me, miserable, wretched,
in unhappy union.
Woe is me – even now my son is gone,
snatched up, a feast for birds –
my son and yours, wretched!
But you play the lyre,
singing your paeans.
You!
I call you, son of Latona,
who give oracles
upon your golden throne,
your seat at the center of the earth;
I will proclaim my speech
in your ear:
Oh! Wicked bedfellow,
who received no favor
from my husband,
you settle a child in his house:
but my son, yes, and yours, unknown,
is gone, carried off by birds of prey,
leaving behind his mother's swaddling clothes.
Delos hates you, and the crimson laurel shoots
hate you, beside the delicate-leaved palm

where Latona brought you forth, a holy birth
in heavenly fruit. (859-922)

In this passage, Creusa moves from reluctance to speak, to vowing to disclose what happened to her, to a vivid account of her rape, to a full-throated accusation of Apollo, charging him with hard-heartedness and neglect for failing to care for her and their child after the rape. We might note, with J.H. Kim On Chong-Gossard and Nicholas Rynearson, the wealth of sensory detail with which Creusa describes the rape (the gold of Apollo's hair, the gold of the flowers she gathered, both ablaze with light; the pressure of Apollo's grip on her wrists, the sound of Creusa's cry for her mother), transporting herself and her audience back to the scene of her pain.²⁸ In doing so, we might also note, with Anne Burnett, the distinctly ugly light in which Creusa's monody casts Apollo, as a brutal and violent god.²⁹ But I am most interested in examining the way Creusa frames her disclosure, especially in relation to its potential purpose as a metatheatrical gesture toward the *agon* of both the tragic festival and the legal trial: as a contest of virtue or judgment.

As Adele Scafuro demonstrates in her extensive survey of legal and literary discourses of sexual violation in classical Athens, a strong taboo of shame discouraged women from disclosing or discussing rape. Indeed, Scafuro turns to Creusa's monody in the *Ion* because it is one of the only instances in Greek tragedy of a woman speaking about sexual violation in her own voice, and sees in it the creation by Euripides of a gendered discourse around sexual violation marked by the presence (for women) or absence (for men) of shame. She argues that it is Creusa's abandonment of shame in this monody that enables her to give an account of her rape in her own

²⁸ See Chong-Gossard, J.H. Kim On, "Female Song and Female Knowledge in the Recognition Duets of Euripides." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Supplement, no. 87, *Greek Drama III: Essays in Honour of Kevin Lee*, 2006, pp. 17-48; and Rynearson, Nicholas, "Creusa's Palinode." *Arethusa*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2014, pp. 39-69.

²⁹ Burnett, Anne Pippin. "Human Resistance and Divine Persuasion in Euripides' 'Ion.'" *Classical Philology*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1962, pp. 89-103.

voice, and attributes the “softening” of that account later in the play either to the renewed presence of shame or to a desire to shield her son from the violence of his conception and anger at his divine father.³⁰ But Scafuro ultimately characterizes Creusa’s loss of shame in her monody as a loss of control (“of her tragedy, of her emotions...of her language,” 146) that must eventually be overcome. By contrast, I see Creusa’s shedding of shame as deliberate and considered – and crucial for her pursuit of justice.³¹

In the first ten lines of her monody, Creusa reflects bitterly on the lack of necessity for any further shame, now that she knows Apollo’s answer to her plea. πρὸς τίν’ ἀγῶνας τιθέμεσθ’ ἀρετῆς? she asks. *Against whom am I set in a contest of virtue?* Who is left to shame her, or be ashamed by her, for her “secret bed” and “much-wept birth” by Apollo? Certainly not Xuthus, who has become her “betrayers” with the joy of a child she cannot share, and whose own conduct in likely fathering that child on an unknown woman lacks shame itself. And not Apollo, either, whom Creusa might consider her husband and betrayer as much as Xuthus: by not reciprocating as a husband or lover should, and caring for their child or blessing Creusa with a new birth, he no longer earns her silence, which has shielded *his* godly name from shame and blasphemy. Without children (παίδων) or a home and family line (οἴκων) to protect with her silence, Creusa no longer needs to control her image in the eyes of others – to engage in a “contest of virtue” – and so speaks without reservation.

³⁰ Scafuro, Adele. “Discourses of Sexual Violation in Mythic Accounts and Dramatic Versions of ‘The Girl’s Tragedy.’” *differences*, vol. 2, 1990, pp. 126-159. Of the moment when Ion questions Creusa’s account of his paternity, Scafuro writes, “There is no rage here for the son’s demeaning question, nothing further about the circumstances of the divine conception, only the fact of the father’s identity in an oath of paternity. She spares her son disappointment in his father and the knowledge of her suffering” (147).

³¹ In viewing Creusa’s loss of shame as deliberate, my reading is consonant with that of Chong-Gossard (2006), who makes a persuasive case against the association of female lyric with hysteria. He writes that “there is no dramatic reason in the Euripidean duets why the difference in meter should indicate that the male figure is less emotionally involved; in fact, since I will argue that persuasion is one of the goals of women’s song in recognition situations, Euripidean men have very noticeable emotional reactions to women’s words and encourage women to keep singing, rather than try to calm them down” (31).

Of course, Creusa is not actually exiting the contest of virtue, or ceasing to speak in ways that might affect others' perception of her. In addition to making use of the rhetorical and persuasive qualities of lyric song, Creusa is performing for two audiences at once: the internal audience, of the chorus of serving women and her old tutor, and the audience of Athenians watching (and judging) the play on stage before them as part of the tragic contest in the City Dionysia.³² As I will discuss in more detail later, the effect on Creusa's internal audience is immediate and positive, as her serving women and the Old Man offer Creusa support both in bearing her grief ("Ah! such a great store of misfortunes is opened/anyone might weep at them," laments the chorus at 923-4; while the Old Man affirms that he knows "how to grieve with friends," 935) and in seeking justice for the compounded harms of the loss of her son and the potential threat to her and to the Athenian royal line posed by Apollo's "gift" to Xuthus. For them, the grief Creusa expresses in her monody is reason enough to judge that an injustice has been done, regardless of the standing of the one(s) who harmed her.

Both audiences, internal and external, deliberate on Creusa's predicament and pass different kinds of judgment: within the play, on whether what has happened to Creusa is in fact a harm, and what ought to be done in response; outside of it, on *Ion*'s dramatic success or failure relative to the other tragedies performed. This is not a coincidence: as has long been established, the tragic contest as a civic institution reflected "a strong sense of a specifically democratic polis ideology," both in its organization (the drawing of lots to choose judges in the contest, the payment of citizen males to attend) and in its constitution of the citizen body as such through a

³² On the rhetorical force of lyric, particularly in Euripidean tragedy, again see Chong-Gossard: "Actors do not sing when they can give orders instead. ... Rather, the woman's less powerful position takes the form of a necessity and obligation for her to explain herself and make herself believable. Intensity of emotion (on both male and female sides) results from this power differential, since emotion is a common and useful companion of persuasion" (45-46).

collective experience of performing the evaluative and participatory duties of political life (Goldhill 64-65). Jean-Pierre Vernant emphasizes that the “final act” in each case is a judgment, and draws an explicit parallel between the structure of the tragic contest and the new structure of legal justice in democratic Athens:

Tragedy represents, specifically, a part of the establishment of a system of popular justice, a system of tribunals in which the City as City, with regard to individuals as individuals, now regulates what was formerly the object of a sort of contest among the *genè* of the noble families, a change resulting in the quite different system of arbitration. Tragedy is contemporaneous with the City and with its legal system. (278)

I draw attention to this symmetry to establish that judgment is a preoccupation in the form and substance of both the tragic contest and Greek tragedy itself, including in *Ion*, where many might not expect to find it. Creusa’s monody is performed before the “jury” of the chorus; it self-consciously evokes the form of the legal trial and signals Euripides’ engagement with problems of justice in *Ion*: discerning harm, weighing evidence (especially insofar as that evidence can establish the credibility of either party in the dispute), judging desert, and deciding “who would ‘give’ and who would ‘take’ justice” in the legal conflict.³³ In his *Ion*, Euripides uses Creusa’s predicament to problematize the logic of a legal trial. He subverts its adversarial format as staged in many other tragedies, where it constitutes a contest of judgment that, rather than establishing guilt, decides whether further harm is justified. By contrast, Euripides stages alternatives to legal justice: first, Creusa’s attempt at revenge through harming a mortal dear to Apollo, and second, the practices of affective identification, disclosure, and recognition performed by Creusa and the chorus, which ultimately enable the justice she seeks. In this way, *Ion* exposes the limitations of

³³ I borrow this phrase from Danielle Allen, who in her book *The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens* describes arbitrations aimed at “judging the justices” rather than arriving at a compromise between litigants in the following way: “The decision to take an oath and ‘judge the justices’ was precisely a decision not to reconcile the angry parties but to reassess their relative status positions in the city by deciding who would ‘give’ and who would ‘take’ justice” (112).

understanding justice as a contest, and proposes an interpersonal, rather than impersonal, model of justice that better serves community reintegration after harm.

Because Creusa cannot seek justice from a god, she must seek it in other ways – and, at least at first, seeking justice looks like seeking revenge. Unable to confront Apollo directly, and unwilling to harm Xuthus (“I honor our marriage-bed; he was faithful once,” 977), with the encouragement of the Old Man and the support of the chorus Creusa eventually decides to poison Ion as he attends a feast Xuthus has organized in his honor. While it may seem that taking revenge on Ion makes little sense – after all, he hasn’t harmed her yet; his great crime is having been born – on closer examination, we can see how harming Ion functions as an oblique way to harm Apollo, displacing Creusa’s conflict with the god into the mortal realm. By attempting to poison Ion, Creusa interferes in Apollo’s godly relations, undoing a gift he chose to give and harming someone whom he favors. And for Creusa, this roundabout chain of harm – harming Ion to harm Xuthus to harm Apollo – may be the only way to reach Apollo at all.

Creusa’s circuitous plan succeeds, albeit in a circuitous way. It is precisely because Creusa attempts to poison Ion that Apollo sends Athena to Delphi to ensure mother and son are reunited safely and to deliver a prophecy about the future of their family line – but not before Creusa and Ion confront each other in the temple, in a recognition scene that offers the play’s strongest disruption of the trial form and the retributive logic it entails. Though they begin the scene as adversaries locked in a battle for dominance over interpretation of the conflict between them, by the end of the “trial” Creusa and Ion are working toward the same end – their reunion – and are restored to each other, fulfilling the logic of commensurability that underlies retributive justice in a way that would be impossible under any other circumstances.

Ion discovers the plot to kill him when he makes a libation of the poisoned wine given to him by the Old Man, and watches as a bird who drinks from it convulses and dies. He interrogates the Old Man and learns the identity of his would-be murderer, and sets out to find Creusa, to avenge himself for her attempt on his life. Meanwhile, Creusa hears of the failure of the poisoning from a messenger, and rushes inside Apollo's temple to claim sanctuary on the altar. Upon his arrival at the temple, Ion's words immediately establish the adversarial tenor of the confrontation to come, as he describes Creusa as a viper and a serpent glowering a murderous flame, as daring as the Gorgon whose blood she had tried to poison him with, and a villainess who cowers at Apollo's altar to escape punishment for her wrongdoing (l. 1261-5, 1278-80). Creusa responds in kind, positioning Ion as "the enemy of [her] house," who is poised to "burn Erechtheus's house," take her home by force, and would have killed Creusa himself, given the chance (1291, 1293, 1295, 1301). The terms of their contest are zero-sum: if Creusa is to be vindicated in her attempt on Ion's life, then he must be a vicious usurper; if Ion is to be justified in his desire to kill Creusa, then she must be a monster.

Ion and Creusa's adversarial stance remains consistent throughout their confrontation, even as the ground on which they argue their positions shifts. First, each attempts to justify their actions toward the other by laying claim to Apollo's protection: Creusa insists that as a suppliant in Apollo's temple, she has given her body "to the god to keep, a holy offering" (1285), so Ion cannot harm her, while Ion counters that Creusa tried to poison him while he was still in the temple's care. When Creusa disagrees, claiming that Ion no longer belonged to Apollo but to Xuthus at the time of the poisoning, Ion changes tack slightly, asserting that he acted piously while Creusa does not (1290). Next, they skirmish over their respective claims to the city of Athens: in response to Creusa's claim that Ion's presence in Athens would bring down the house

of Erechtheus, Ion objects that he has claim to the land through his father, who aided Athens in war. Creusa rejects this claim out of hand – Xuthus is merely an ally, not a true inhabitant of Athens, and Ion’s only inheritance from him is a sword and spear – and Ion finally shifts to command and persuasion (“Leave the altar and the temple of the god,” he orders at 1306, and then at 1310, he pleads, “What pleasure is there for you in dying on the god’s wreaths?”), while Creusa commits to death before surrender, insisting that in dying on Apollo’s altar she will “aggrieve the one who gave [her] grief” (1311).

It is worth noting here that neither Ion nor Creusa has actually harmed the other yet, though Creusa’s failed poisoning of Ion and the possibility of Ion’s violent takeover of Creusa’s home in Athens loom large. Even so, the two engage in this contest of judgment in order to justify the harms they intended or still intend to do to each other, as well as to establish their authority to do that harm, as the more righteous party. As the cases of Deianira and Medea similarly demonstrate, the zero-sum stance taken by Ion and Creusa presupposes both a static understanding of a person’s character and an uncomplicated understanding of their exercise of agency. Such a stance assumes that a person’s actions can be judged conclusively as good or bad regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves, and that a person cannot perform both good and bad actions, acting either well or badly, and so being good or bad. In order to justify their actions (and so themselves, as good or bad actors), Creusa and Ion have reason to find fault with each other – and moreover, to avoid framing the harms they want to perpetrate *as* harms for which they could be held accountable. That the contest of judgment requires such an adversarial orientation of Creusa and Ion suggests that, far from recognizing or reckoning with harm, it actually discourages doing so.

Their contest is interrupted by the entrance of the Pythian priestess, bearing the basket in which Ion arrived at the temple as an infant. Miraculously, Ion finds that the basket and its covering have not decayed; more miraculously, Creusa recognizes the basket as the work of her own hands, and rushes from the altar to throw her arms around her son. Ion, suspicious, demands Creusa prove that she is who she says – his mother – by identifying the items in the basket without seeing them. So commences the second part of the trial scene, with a trial of a different kind, as Creusa is set the task of proving her identity through bearing witness to the contents of the basket, and consents to die if she fails (1415).

As Creusa names the items in the basket – a piece of weaving with a Gorgon in the center, a gold bracelet shaped like two snakes, and a wreath of olive branches, still green – she and Ion gradually become reoriented toward each other, culminating in Ion’s recognition of her as his mother. Though at first Ion maintains his adversarial stance, sure that Creusa will fail, by her second correct answer he longs for her success on the third, shifting from adversary to ally as they work toward the same end: their ultimate reunion, with the confirmation of their respective identities.³⁴ Ion sets out to judge Creusa harshly – to prove that she is a liar and a would-be murderess – but instead finds that she is dearest to him, the mother he had given up hope of knowing. Without the priestess’s intervention, Ion and Creusa’s hostility could have led to their mutual destruction. Instead, they become reoriented toward each other in a loving relationship, as mother and son, and in coming to know each other, in the specificity of their relation to each other, they also come to know themselves. In this way, Euripides subverts the script of the trial

³⁴ Ion’s adversarial comments: “What kind? The weavings of girls are many” (ποιόν τι; πολλὰ παρθένων ὑφάσματα, 1418; pushing Creusa for further specificity), “What appearance does it have? That you may not catch me in this way” (μορφὴν ἔχον τίν’; ὥς με μὴ ταύτη λάβῃς, 1420; assuming that Creusa is trying to fool him), “Is there anything besides this, or are you lucky in this thing only?” (ἔστιν τι πρὸς τῷδ’, ἢ μόνω τῷδ’ εὐτυχεῖς; 1426; after Creusa successfully describes the weaving, eliciting further description of the basket’s contents).

form, revealing the inadequacy of its adversarial framework to achieving an end that is actually desirable to both parties.

With this resolution to the trial scene, Euripides likewise gives the lie to two aspects central to the Western paradigm of retributive legal justice: that it is distinct from revenge in its “impartial” freedom from affect or emotion and releases the harmed party from acting on the harmful emotion of anger, and that the consequence meted out by the court is both commensurable with and sufficient to address the harm done.³⁵ For Creusa, revenge and legal retribution (through the trial form) are collapsed, as her attempt to avenge herself on Apollo through harming a mortal dear to him slides directly into a confrontation with Ion, litigating harms and modeled on the legal trial. Moreover, the aim of Creusa’s revenge is achieved by play’s end: her grief is recognized and affirmed by the gods, and she has been given a son.

Most importantly, however, in seeking revenge she regains exactly what she had lost. Unlike Clytemnestra of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, whose revenge on her husband still enacts a crude substitution of a life for a life in her attempt to recognize Iphigeneia; or Hecuba in Euripides’ play by the same name, whose more exacting revenge attempts to transmit the fullness of what she has lost in Polydorus to his killer, Creusa’s revenge ultimately involves no such calculations. The “magical thinking” of retributive justice – that retribution will somehow bring back the one who has been lost, or undo the injury suffered – is actually fulfilled, and through its fulfillment

³⁵ While the myth of an impartial and anger-free democratic court with its roots in classical Athens endures, it is not supported by historical research. Danielle Allen (in *The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens*) examines anger in Athens in the 5th century BC as a social phenomenon that implicates not just the wrongdoer but the community, and notes that Athenian legal practices, rather than delegitimizing anger as a basis for punishment, instead localized punishment in “a limited set of ‘legitimately angry punishers’” (135), who judged the desert of the wrongdoer to be punished and the equivalency of the punishment on the criterion “not that the punishment should fit the crime but that anger should” (173). Similarly, David Cohen (in *Law, Violence, and Community in Classical Athens*) makes a case for understanding Athenian litigation as “feuding behavior,” and argues that “Athenian courts, rather than providing a forum for the resolution of disputes and avoidance of further conflict, instead furnish an arena which litigants seek out to pursue and intensify antagonisms” (8-9).

Euripides problematizes that very retributive logic.³⁶ Only Ion equals Ion. Any other exchange would be inadequate.

Even with the restoration of Ion, justice for Creusa – especially from the perspective of modern readers and audiences – may seem incomplete. After all, neither Ion nor Creusa can recoup the years they could have had together, had they not been separated; and Apollo’s admission of responsibility for the harm he caused is at best implicit and oblique, delivered by Athena as his proxy in Delphi, who says only that Creusa’s account of Ion’s parentage is true, and that Apollo had actually arranged things well (from the “ease” of Creusa’s childbirth to Ion’s upbringing in the Delphic temple) from the beginning. Readers inclined to interpret Apollo’s absence from the play as avoidance of accountability may find support in Athena’s own words, as she explains that Apollo sent her from Athens because he “did not think it fitting to come into your sight,/lest blame for things in the past should arise” (1557-8). That Creusa’s allegation of rape, if substantiated, could bring shame upon Apollo is likewise supported by Ion’s first reaction to Creusa’s account of what happened to her “friend”: if the gods paid mortals the penalty for rape, he says, they would empty their temples, and it would no longer be right to speak ill of humans, who only imitate the gods’ pleasures, but necessary instead to speak ill of the gods who set the example (l. 436-51).

But Apollo’s lack of accountability is also precisely the nature of gods: as Anne Burnett writes in her vindication of Apollo, “Any attempt to impose human will upon divine is foolish,

³⁶ In referring to the logic of retributive justice as a kind of magical thinking, I am repurposing an argument from Martha Nussbaum, who in her book *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* insists that the “payback wish” – the desire for a wrongdoer to suffer – that she argues is constitutive of anger itself, is “false and incoherent” because it “makes the mistake of thinking that the suffering of the wrongdoer somehow restores, or contributes to restoring, the important thing that was damaged” (5). While I disagree strongly with Nussbaum’s claim that anger must entail a payback wish (or that a desire for revenge necessarily arises from anger alone), I think she is right that retribution is an inadequate (if not always incoherent) response to harm, which is why it is mystifying that retributive justice administered through the courts is the prevailing paradigm in the US context.

and it may be punished. If a man could force from a god the answer to whatever question he chose, the god would be nothing more than a magician's demon slave" (100).³⁷ While gods may *have* relations with humans, they are not *in* relation with or to them; as such, gods are free to act on humans, bestowing favor or violence as they please. Unlike humans, whose relations with each other are governed by norms of reciprocity, gods have no obligation to act in one way or another, and their great power insulates them both from the punishment a retributive paradigm of justice would demand in response to harm and from understanding their actions (insofar as they achieve a desired end) as harmful at all. Burnett takes this understanding too far when she absolves Apollo of any responsibility for Creusa's suffering, arguing instead that Creusa inflicts pain upon herself; but her characterization of *Ion* as "dominated from start to finish by a single successful dramatic intention" – the fulfillment of Apollo's desire to seed the Athenian royal line with divinity – highlights, however inadvertently, the way the gods' own justification of their actions (Apollo only wished to situate Ion within "the noblest of houses," after all) disregards the very humans they purport to help (97). Burnett asserts that the human cost of the gods' prerogatives is incidental, as Apollo "could not foresee Creusa's reaction to the adoption of Ion by Xuthus, because he knows nothing of excess, violence and unreason" (98). But I want to

³⁷ In her article "Human Resistance and Divine Persuasion in Euripides' *Ion*," Anne Burnett seeks to rehabilitate Apollo (unfairly maligned as "lecher and seducer" or "botcher") by demonstrating the "unity" of the play as "a drama of mortals who have been chosen by a god as his instruments; they do not fully understand the nature of the divinity in whose hands they are, and the revelation of the quality of Apollo's power is the true purpose of the tragedy" (94). To do so, she asserts that the pain and grief Creusa suffers, and the alterations to Apollo's initial plan for Ion, are the result not of the god's carelessness but of human weakness: "Creusa herself kindled her doubt into a flaming grievance; from her inability to trust Apollo she created a conviction that their son was dead, and this is the source of her apparent suffering" (90). Moreover, Burnett argues that the rape Creusa describes in her monody is not actually a cause of suffering for her ("her charge is not one of rape but of desertion and nonsupport," 91) and that the lyric beauty of her monody undercuts the charges against Apollo, writing that "Creusa is full of rage against a god who seems to her hideous, but the voice of her hatred is sweet, and the listener is left with the sum of Apollo's beauties sounding in his ear" (95). In response, I will call on Adele Scafuro, who addresses Burnett in her own article ("Discourses of Sexual Violation in Mythic Accounts and Dramatic Versions of 'The Girl's Tragedy.'"): "That violence occurred is ensured by Kreousa's shriek for her mother. Why we must have emphatic expressions of violence to establish that Kreousa's rape is 'central to our understanding of Apollo's act' is puzzling to me. The fact that Kreousa specifies rape at all is the crucial point" (156-7).

suggest that within the structure of Greek tragedy, such a perspective actually enables Apollo (and the gods more generally) to act the way he does: Apollo cannot conceive of himself acting excessively, violently, or unreasonably, even as he rapes Creusa, abandons her, and spirits away their son, because he does not understand his actions as having consequences – or those consequences mattering – beyond his own intentions.

This is a magnification of the gendered forms of relation embodied by Jason and Heracles in my previous chapter, who treat their wives as interchangeable with other women and frame their own actions as non-harms to which their wives have no right to object and which cause them no suffering. Like Jason and Heracles, Apollo arranges human relationships according to his will; unlike those mortal men, he cannot be made to reckon with the results. In highlighting Apollo's inability to be touched or harmed by mortal actions in the same way Jason and Heracles are, I am not suggesting that fear of punishment or reprisal is a successful deterrent to violent actions. Instead, I am proposing that because Apollo lacks any obligation to (human) others, it is impossible for him to be in just relations with them. Unable to understand himself as doing harm, Apollo's sense of justice is as deformed as that of Jason and Heracles.

My assessment of Apollo here is anachronistic: I cannot prove that Athenian audiences would themselves have considered Apollo's actions harmful (especially since, as Burnett and Scafuro both note, there is a mythological tradition of gods fathering children on mortal women, with varying levels of force and consent), nor am I interested in making a case for the supposed "feminism" of Euripides himself, insofar as he presented a female account of sexual violation onstage.³⁸ But by having as its perpetrator of harm someone who is fully beyond the reaches of

³⁸ In "Discourses of Sexual Violation," Scafuro writes: "In revivifying Kreousa's charge against Apollo's forced union, I should like to make clear that I am not revivifying the view that Euripides created Apollo as "a lecher and a seducer" to be castigated by his audience. I do not think the audience would respond to Kreousa's charge against Apollo in that way: the Athenian male's response to rape is perhaps not precisely of the same order of outrage that it

human justice – who can neither conceive of himself as doing harm nor be called to account by human means – *Ion* again uncovers the limits of justice understood as retribution and based on the contest of the trial form. Even if Creusa could win a contest of judgment against Apollo (and such an outcome is unlikely, at least before the “jury” of the Athenian audience), and even if Apollo “paid the penalty” for rape, emptying his temple in restitution, the only requirement of a punishment is that it be endured: not that the wrongdoer understand the harm done *as* a harm and recognize its impact on the harmed party, not that they express remorse, and not they commit to doing no further harm.³⁹ These are outcomes neither required nor accommodated by the trial form, which (as we have established) discourages admitting guilt at all. Moreover, in focusing exclusively on the individual wrongdoer, the administration of retributive legal justice in the form of punishment turns away from the conditions that made the harm possible, all but ensuring that it will happen again.

Given the flaws that *Ion* has exposed in conceiving of justice as a contest of judgment whose result is punishment, it makes sense that the play offers an alternative process that centers not Apollo, but Creusa. Just as it is possible to interpret Apollo’s absence from the stage as avoidance of consequences or the indifference of the powerful, we might also understand it as pointing the spotlight elsewhere, letting someone else take center stage and command the audience’s (or jury’s) attention. With *Ion*, Euripides has created a drama where women’s speech – sung in “emotional” lyrics rather than spoken in “rational” trimeters, conveying embodied and bodily knowledge – prevails, as the harms to Creusa are recognized by the chorus, which

is in some modern civilized society. But this is not to say that a woman would not feel outraged, and Euripides has in fact created a voice to express exactly that. What we might perceive as disharmony or disjunction (sympathy for the victim without any concomitant urge to punish the offender severely) is a mark of Euripides’s perhaps idiosyncratic creation of the female voice without a marked summons for change in the status quo” (155).

³⁹ I am indebted to Danielle Sered for this framing of accountability versus punishment, elaborated on in detail in her 2019 book *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and the Road to Repair*.

deliberates with her to decide the best course of action, desires to share her fate, and understands her feelings as a key criterion in determining whether justice has been done.

In pointing to the ways that Creusa and the chorus pursue justice without involving Apollo, I don't mean to suggest that the process they enact and the justice that Creusa receives is inferior to or less desirable than an outcome in which Apollo is punished. Nor do I suggest that it is preferable that a wrongdoer be left out of a justice process and not be given the chance to explain why they committed a harm and to reckon with its consequences for the harmed party (though in the case of Apollo, there is certainly no shortage of figures willing to speak on his behalf, both within the play and outside it). What I *am* suggesting is that at the same time *Ion* demonstrates how the retributive and trial forms are inadequate for justice in *any* case, it offers an alternative in the relationship between Creusa and the chorus that is adequate in *this* one – and that recovers an affective dimension of justice that could be salutary in our own time.

In the face of Apollo's indifference and Creusa's despair, the chorus of her serving women provides an alternative model of just relations, and in their speeches offer clear criteria for whether justice has been done. After witnessing the "reunion" between Ion and Xuthus and hearing the oracle's pronouncement, the chorus deliberates on whether to share the news of Xuthus and Ion's new familial relationship with Creusa, predicting "tears and mourning cries" and "attacks of moaning" for their queen when she learns of Xuthus' son (l. 676-80). The serving women immediately understand the oracle as harmful to Creusa, both because it will cause her pain in general ("tears and mourning cries," "attacks of moaning") and because it is specifically a blessing in which she cannot share, which only draws attention what she has already lost. Indeed, the chorus emphasizes that Xuthus's gain is at Creusa's expense, and after having led her to hope that she might share in that joy (695-98). Now, the chorus suggests, Xuthus's joy is poisonous:

Now she is harmed by his good luck, while he prospers.
She falls into grey old age, but her husband
does not honor his friends.
Wretched, this stranger who came to her home,
to great wealth, and did not make her fortunes equal.
May he perish, let him die, having cheated my mistress. (700-704)

Assessing the effects of Xuthus's actions, past and present, the chorus pronounces that Creusa (who is "falling to gray old age") is "harmed by his good luck." Moreover, the women identify his actions explicitly as harms: "he does not honor his friends," he "did not make her fortunes equal" to his after coming to her house a stranger, "he cheated [her]."

The chorus's language leading up to and throughout their deliberation when discussing Creusa is noticeably emotional: the women wish that Creusa could experience "the joy of children" that Xuthus now possesses alone; they consider Ion's rejection of making a home in Athens to be well-spoken if Creusa can prosper by his words, but instead they foresee "tears and mourning" for Creusa when she learns of Apollo's gift to her husband, but not to her. In this, the chorus of women is especially attentive to Creusa's emotions in relation to others' actions, regarding her sorrow as an undesirable consequence that could have been avoided, and should be remedied.

The women's concern with how Creusa understands her circumstances through her relations to others demonstrates not only that they recognize Creusa's situation as conventionally harmful (it is an insult to and betrayal of her status as wife and her royal house that Xuthus would name a bastard son his heir), but that they take Creusa's affective response seriously as an indication of whether justice has been done. That is: while Creusa's initial pain at being told the truth affirms the wrongness of her situation (it is indeed such as to cause pain), any later pain indicates that the cause of the first pain has not been adequately addressed. The sense that Creusa

has been done a great injustice whose redress is only possible through disclosure of the truth is what motivates the chorus to speak the truth to Creusa, and truly commence the action of the play, as Creusa would not have discovered Xuthus and Ion's relation, or been motivated to act on it, without the chorus's involvement. Though the chorus describes Creusa as being "harmed by [Xuthus's] good luck," Creusa does not yet know that luck, to be wounded by it. Since Xuthus and Apollo would defer that pain indefinitely, the women's telling will be the occasion of injury.

The very fact that the chorus chooses to tell Creusa about the oracle's response reflects a judgment on its part, that concealing the truth would cause more harm to Creusa than disclosing it. Indeed, not disclosing to Creusa what they heard would only compound the harm already done to her, as it would allow Xuthus's perceived betrayal to go unapproached and would potentially put Creusa in danger of violence from his usurping son. From this, it becomes clear that doing right by Creusa – acting justly toward her – requires that the truth be disclosed, even if its disclosure is not welcome.

Moreover, the chorus's model of just disclosure provides a structure through which Creusa can find the justice she desires: her grief recognized by Apollo, the one who wronged her. It is after the chorus's disclosure of the oracle that Creusa makes an important disclosure of her own, relating in detail and in its entirety her rape by Apollo and the child she bore him in secret and was forced to expose (l. 860-920). Indeed, Creusa's story is given three more times, underlining the importance of truth-telling to justice in her case: Creusa tells it again to the Old Man, in a stichomythic exchange; to Ion, when they are revealed to each other in the temple; and her account is ultimately confirmed by Athena, acting as Apollo's proxy at play's end. Creusa's disclosure both acts as a catalyst for her pursuit of justice, and is itself part of the process of seeking justice: she names the harms that have been done to her and their perpetrator,

giving testimony that is witnessed by the chorus of serving women and the Old Man, her childhood tutor. While both the chorus and the Old Man feel strongly about Xuthus's supposed betrayal (evidenced by the chorus's curse at 703-12, and the Old Man's salacious imagined account from 808-31 of how Ion came to be Xuthus's son, culminating in the suggestion that Creusa must kill them both before they kill her), after Creusa reveals the extent of her grief, and its true cause, they encourage her to seek justice, and affirm that they will be by her side: the Old Man himself volunteers to poison Ion, and the chorus prays for her success and pledges to share Creusa's fate (Old Man: 986, 1018-20, 1039-47; Chorus: 1048-1105, 1119-21, 1229-49).

The chorus, so deeply invested in Creusa's wellbeing and determined to share her fate to the point that they identify her actions as their own, share also in her joy. The women deliver the play's final lines:

CHORUS. For in the end the good obtain what they deserve,
while those who are wicked by nature never prosper. (1621-22)

While these lines seem like a standard gnomic pronouncement by a tragic chorus, we can understand them on two levels. The first is as a general statement about justice: that it is just when the good are honored and the evil do not prosper. But the second is as an assessment of what has just occurred. It would not have been just if Ion had indeed been Xuthus's bastard son, and smuggled into Athens by deceit. But this is not what happened; instead, Creusa is honored as she deserves, with the son whom she had lost. In that respect, the chorus's final lines indicate that at last, justice has been done, with the end to Creusa's grief and the fulfillment of her joy. The relation between the chorus and Creusa in *Ion* demonstrates the principle of intersubjectivity that Danielle Allen has identified with respect to anger: that a harm has effects beyond the victim

and the perpetrator, and thus in the same way that Allen claims justice must heal a community's anger, it must also heal its grief.⁴⁰

III. Euripides' *Bacchae*

Euripides' *Bacchae* is a near-perfect inverse of his *Ion*: whereas in *Ion*, the main conflict arises from a mortal woman seeking justice from a god, and that conflict is displaced into an adversarial relationship between mother and son that resolves with their mutual recognition and reunion; in *Bacchae*, the main conflict arises from a god seeking justice from his human family, and the violence at its center is the result of a failure of maternal recognition, as Agave, maddened by Dionysus, dismembers Pentheus, her own son. While Dionysus represents this violence as just punishment, resolving his complaint against the royal family of Thebes, the harshness of the "punishment," as well as the further punishment of exile that Dionysus ordains for Agave, her sisters, and her parents, seems itself to require further resolution, as it compounds harms for his mortal family and offers no redress.

Like the Apollo of Euripides' *Ion*, Dionysus is a god, beyond the reach of human action or consequence and able to act on humans with impunity. But unlike Apollo, who never appears in his own person or voice to justify his actions toward Creusa, Dionysus dominates the action of the *Bacchae*: he appears onstage first, to give an account of his grievances against the royal family of Thebes; his will has begun to be carried out even before the play begins, and his divine power ensures that no one he deems deserving of his "justice" can evade it. The 63 uninterrupted

⁴⁰ In "Democratic Dis-ease," Allen alleges that the disease of anger itself can be understood as a kind of intersubjective exchange, building in part on the ancient Greek idea that vision involved the "transfer of properties from seer to seen" (196). As Allen explains, "To be subject to the murderer's look was also to see the murderer with one's own eyes. This in turn meant being inspired to anger and thereby infected by the murderer with the disease of anger" (196). In the case of the Furies of the *Oresteia*, Allen argues, the "anger" that dripped from their eyes "was itself a form of disordered intersubjectivity; it marked out the fact that something had gone wrong in the relations between people" (196).

lines of Dionysus's opening monologue serve both to situate the audience in the world of the play, providing necessary context to interpret the events to come, and to prime the audience to accept Dionysus's actions, as he preemptively justifies the suffering he will inflict on his human family. In framing his actions toward his family as a response to an offense (not unprovoked violence), Dionysus positions himself as enacting just retribution; because he is a god, Dionysus is able to cut off (like Athena in the *Oresteia*) the possibility of any further violence. In doing so, Dionysus likewise discourages his audience from understanding his retribution as requiring further redress, or as itself potentially unjust.

Dionysus's power to control the frame of his interpretation is not incidental. Rather, it is integral to his divinity, as the god of theater and patron of the very dramatic contest at which Euripides' *Bacchae* was staged. As Helene Foley points out in "The Masque of Dionysus," Euripides makes Dionysus the orchestrator of a performance which reveals his godhood both to the people of Thebes, within the play, and to the audience of Athenians outside it, "through spectacle, costume and sound as he controls and stage directs the play" (110). In his book *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae*, Charles Segal attributes to Dionysus even more power, characterizing him as a "poet-director" as well as "an actor among actors" when he takes his human form before Pentheus: not only does Dionysus "[dress] and [instruct] his 'actors' for the role they will have to play," but "he is also the poet-director, for in the same gesture he masks his characters to transform illusion into reality and to question whether reality may not be illusion" (225). While the theatrical illusion of masks and costuming make it possible for the Athenian audience to "see" Dionysus, Pentheus, and the other characters as they act out Euripides' drama, Dionysus's more miraculous illusions within the play – changing his shape to that of a mortal man, setting fire to the palace, transforming Pentheus (through physical disguise)

into a maenad – grant him power over what other characters are able to see, and thus what they are able to know and do.

But despite Dionysus’s success in orchestrating the events of the *Bacchae* to his satisfaction, the play does not grant him an uncomplicated victory. His own followers, who make up the doubled chorus of the play (foreign maenads in Thebes, with Dionysus; Theban bacchantes on Mount Cithaeron, outside the city), undermine his vision of justice even as they revel in it: in enabling and taking part in Pentheus’s death, they resist both Dionysus’s attempt to set limits on the effects of his punishment and his attribution of responsibility to a single actor (Agave). Like his *Ion*, Euripides’ *Bacchae* grapples with the problem of holding the powerful to account (especially when, as Dionysus does, the powerful set the parameters for what “justice” is); but where *Ion* demonstrates the limits of the legal trial under a retributive paradigm for securing accountability, *Bacchae* calls into question the retributive paradigm altogether, showing how punishment, rather than putting a stop to further violence, itself enacts it.

Dionysus has arrived in Thebes before he arrives onstage, and in his opening monologue introduces both himself and the plan for the city of Thebes – and his royal relatives in particular – that he has already set in motion. In lines 23-42, Dionysus describes the injury, committed in the past but presumably ongoing, that precipitated his arrival in Thebes. He has come to Thebes in the shape of a mortal man, he proclaims, “because my mother’s sisters, who least should have,/said that Dionysus was not born of Zeus,/but of some mortal man who had bedded Semele,/and it was a cleverness of Cadmus/to attribute the sin of her bed to Zeus, for which they boasted loudly/that Zeus killed her, because she lied about her marriage” (26-31). For that offense, Dionysus has “stung them from the house/with madness, to the mountain where they

dwell, frenzied of mind,/and compelled to bear the trappings of my rites” – and not just his aunts (Autonoe, Ino, and Agave, mother of Pentheus), but all the women of Thebes (32-34).

Shortly thereafter, Dionysus articulates a second reason for his appearance in Thebes: the establishment of his worship there. Dionysus says both that “this city must learn, even if it is unwilling/that it is uninitiated in my bacchic rites” (39-40) and that Pentheus in particular, to whom Cadmus has given his kingly power, refuses to honor him in his prayers or libations, “[fighting] against the gods in me” (45-46). As a result, Dionysus vows to “prove to [Pentheus] and all of Thebes” that he is a god. In doing so, he situates his actions in a chain of causality, beginning with the offense to his mother Semele that requires his response, and he positions the royal family of Thebes as wrongdoers. Either offense – ignorance of Dionysus’s cult, or blasphemy toward his mother – would seem to merit the god’s intervention in Thebes, and while Dionysus might address them separately in his monologue, they are in fact linked: in denying Semele’s account of her son’s divine parentage, her sisters have likewise denied that son’s – Dionysus’s – divinity, preventing his worship in Thebes. Dionysus’s aim in “proving himself a god” to the people of Thebes is similarly dual: in being forced to see Dionysus as the god he is, establishing his cult in Thebes, the royal family will also be forced to acknowledge the truth of Semele’s union with Zeus, vindicating her from the charge of blasphemy.

Dionysus’s motives in laying waste to the house of Cadmus have posed a problem for interpreters of the *Bacchae*, perhaps in part because of the ambiguity of the lines in which he articulates them (39-42). I present here the four lines in question, followed by my own translation:

δεῖ γὰρ πόλιν τήνδ’ ἐκμαθεῖν, κεί μὴ θέλει,
ἀτέλεστον οὖσαν τῶν ἐμῶν βακχευμάτων,
Σεμέλης τε μητρὸς ἀπολογήσασθαι μ’ ὕπερ

φανέντα θνητοῖς δαίμον' ὄν τίκτει Δί.

For this city must learn, even if it is unwilling,
that it is uninitiated in my Bacchic rites,
and I must defend my mother Semele,
and appear to mortals as the god she bore to Zeus.

I take the second line to be the object of ἐκμαθεῖν (to learn well), the thing that the city of Thebes must learn (the city must learn *that it is uninitiated in Dionysus's rites*); and the τε in the third line to be a conjunction (and) that indicates that ἀπολογήσασθαι (to speak on behalf of, to defend) is governed by the δεῖ of the first line (it is necessary). I take φανέντα (appear), in the final line, in apposition with δαίμο', to indicate the circumstances under which or means by which Semele will be successfully defended (when Dionysus has appeared before mortals as a god). So an even more literal translation might read, "It is necessary that the city learn well, even if it is not willing,/it is uninitiated in my Bacchic rites,/and necessary on my part to defend my mother Semele,/having appeared to mortals as the god she bore to Zeus." As an aorist participle lacking either temporal adverbs (to indicate the time in which this action has been completed relative to other verbs in the sentence) or causal or concessive particles (to indicate the reason for the action or limitations on it), φανέντα can be taken as expressing an attendant circumstance under which the main action takes place. But since there are two infinitives in the sentence (the city of Thebes must *learn*, Dionysus must *defend*), and it is not obvious from the Greek which one φανέντα corresponds to, it becomes an open question whether Dionysus will appear as a god in order to vindicate his mother, or to initiate Thebes into his cult.

This ambiguity is reflected in the work of other translators, who vary in the way they position Dionysus's appearance before humans as a god. In a selection of five translations ranging from 1850 to 2015, I found that three (T.A. Buckley, 1850; Philip Vellacott, 1954; and CK Williams, 1990) render the final line as the means by which Semele will be vindicated by

Dionysus.⁴¹ The other two (William Arrowsmith, 1959, and Anne Carson, 2015) elide the distinction between the two aims and means: Arrowsmith’s punctuation obfuscates the relationship between clauses (“Like it or not, the city must learn its lesson:/it lacks initiation in my mysteries;/that I shall vindicate my mother Semele/and stand revealed to mortal eyes as the god/she bore to Zeus”), while Carson simultaneously foregrounds the two groups to be shown the god’s divinity (“So **they** will learn,/so **Thebes** must learn,/to call me son of Zeus/and call me/*daimon*,” bolding my own) and downplays the source of conflict about that divinity by omitting Semele’s name and the reference to her defense against blasphemy altogether.

I raise the issue of translating these lines because they enact, in miniature, the difficulty of situating and evaluating Dionysus’s actions toward his human family and the city of his birth. The distinctions I am drawing between possible translations may seem minute, but bear on how both audiences and critics are able to interpret the events that follow. The ambiguity of lines 39-42 invites the assessment that the violence the house of Cadmus will face at Dionysus’s hand is simply overdetermined: whether to “teach Thebes a lesson” or to vindicate Semele, the Cadmeans will face consequences. But that very sense of overdetermination may discourage further analysis of Dionysus’s actions, or else encourage prioritization of one motive (generally the establishment of his cult in Thebes) over the other (the reckoning with his human family), with real consequences for discerning how the *Bacchae* theorizes justice and retribution.

Why does it matter whether Dionysus “appear[s] to mortals as the god [Semele] bore to Zeus” in order to establish his cult in Thebes or to vindicate his mother? Because over the course

⁴¹ These translations are as follows: “For the city must learn, even if it is unwilling,/that it is not initiated in my Bacchic rites/and that I plead the case of my mother, Semele,/in appearing manifest to mortals as a divinity whom she bore to Zeus” (Buckley); “Thebes must learn, unwilling though she is, that my Bacchic revels are something beyond her present knowledge and understanding; and I must vindicate the honor of my mother Semele, by manifesting myself before the human race as the god whom she bore to Zeus” (Vellacott); “This city must learn, against its will or not,/that it is uninitiated in my mysteries./As for Semele, her memory/will be vindicated when I appear/to mortal eyes as the power she bore Zeus” (Williams).

of the play, Dionysus reveals his divinity in two ways that are not equally violent: through the performance of miracles, without shedding his human disguise – releasing the chains of the foreign Bacchae and escaping the bonds with which Pentheus tries to imprison him, causing an earthquake to shake the palace and lightning to set it ablaze, enabling the Theban maenads on Mount Cithaeron to call forth water and wine, milk and honey from trees and earth and to suckle animals at their breasts – and through appearing in his godly form at the end of the play to proclaim the sufferings still to come for the house of Cadmus, after Agave and Cadmus have painstakingly reassembled Pentheus’s body. The former seems sufficient to establish that Dionysus is a god, and the servant and first messenger, both men of Thebes, suggest as much. The servant, upon delivering the disguised Dionysus to Pentheus and describing the scene of the foreign maenads bounding away, the chains on their legs having snapped of their own accord, avows that “This man who has come into Thebes is full of many wonders” (πολλῶν δ’ ὄδ’ ἀνήρ θαυμάτων ἤκει πλέως/ἐς τάσδε Θήβας, 449-450); and the first messenger, after describing the maenads’ miracles on the mountainside, advises Pentheus to accept Dionysus into the city, whatever god he is, “for he is great in other ways as well, having given mankind the grapevine to ease their troubles” (τὸν δαίμον’ οὖν τόνδ’ ὅστις ἔστ’, ὃ δέσποτα,/δέχου πόλει τῆδ’: ὡς τά τ’ ἄλλ’ ἐστὶν μέγας,/κάκεινό φασιν αὐτόν, ὡς ἐγὼ κλύω,/τὴν παυσίλυπον ἄμπελον δοῦναι βροτοῖς, 469-72). Similarly, though the second messenger’s account later in the play of the carnage of Pentheus’s dismemberment and his affirmation that men ought to be humble before the gods (1041-1150) seem to suggest that he takes the events he has witnessed to be proof of Dionysus’s divinity, it is not clear (because of the two other accounts of miracles) that a further display was necessary to achieve that end.

If that is the case, then what is the purpose of Pentheus's death at his mother's hands, the central instance of violence in the play? Even Dionysus's charge of blasphemy against his aunts seems as if it could be resolved by their partaking in his sacred rites on Mount Cithaeron, clothed in the fawnskins and bearing the thyrsi of his worshippers. Indeed, the whole house of Cadmus – including Pentheus, once he is bewitched by Dionysus and gives up his desire to bring the Theban women back by force – surrenders to the god. Surely if Dionysus wants to make his mortal relatives see that he is a god, this is sufficient: Cadmus and Tiresias voluntarily took up the thyrsus and bacchic dances upon Dionysus's arrival in Thebes, Cadmus's daughters revel on the mountainside, and Pentheus is paraded through the streets of Thebes in maenad's attire, all performing to the glory of Dionysus. Yet Dionysus escorts Pentheus to Mount Cithaeron and to his death, unleashing the maddened Theban maenads on him and causing him to be torn apart by his own mother in a particularly grisly scene: as the messenger describes it, after Agave began the dismemberment by tearing off Pentheus's left arm, "One [woman] carried off an arm from the elbow,/another took a foot in its own boot: his ribs/were stripped by their rending: every one of them bloodied/their hands, while they were playing ball with Pentheus's flesh" (1133-36).

In their assessment of Dionysus's actions in the *Bacchae*, classicists often explicitly identify the god's destruction as revenge: Anne Burnett calls it both "divine punishment" and "heavenly revenge" (15), Patricia Reynolds-Warnhoff refers to the "fine gift of vengeance" venerated by the chorus as "a form of wisdom originating with the gods" (96-97), Helene Foley discusses how the theatricality of "the god's revenge" on Pentheus enables the audience to interpret it both comically and tragically (121), and Charles Segal repeatedly refers to the destructiveness of "Dionysus's vengeance" in his analysis of the relative placement of Agave's

and Cadmus's laments in the lacuna at the end of the *Bacchae*.⁴² But while there seems to be a consensus that Dionysus's actions are *vengeful*, there is no concomitant tendency to analyze those actions as *unjust*, even when the critics themselves identify them as such, and even when such actions would be roundly renounced if undertaken by other, female figures (as the vengeance of Hecuba, Medea, and Clytemnestra routinely are). Rather, Dionysus's actions are taken either to be part of divine δίκη ("justice"), an ordering of the universe of which humans, by virtue of being mortal, can have only limited understanding (Burnett, Reynolds-Warnhoff); or to illuminate for the play's audience the duality of the god ("most terrible and most gentle to mankind," 861) and his cult, uncovering the potential for violence in his worship which in turn mirrors the suppressed potential for violence at the heart of the Athenian polis (Foley, Segal). Both of these approaches to Dionysus's actions treat his violence lightly: the former considers it an unfortunate side effect of an inevitable divine justice (with the implicit judgment that such violence is deserved), while the latter sees its function as directing attention to the dark side of Dionysian ecstasy or the necessity of balancing wild and civilized tendencies in human and political life, without thinking through its political consequences.

When critics identify Dionysus's actions as revenge without analyzing them as such, they accept Dionysus's own framing of those actions – subordinating the violence he wreaks to the harms *he* claims to have suffered or the necessity of establishing his cult – and they miss an opportunity to explore the tension Euripides sets up between the rhetoric of just punishment the god wields and the excessive, retaliatory violence he enacts. Whereas it is unclear why Dionysus should require the slaughter of Pentheus by his own family in order to prove his divinity or

⁴² See Anne Burnett, "Human Resistance and Divine Persuasion in Euripides' 'Ion'" (1962), Patricia Reynolds-Warnhoff, "The Role of τὸ σοφόν in Euripides' 'Bacchae'" (1997), Helene Foley, "The Masque of Dionysus" (1980), and Charles Segal, "Lament and Recognition: A Reconsideration of the Ending of the *Bacchae*" (2000).

establish his rites in Thebes, when we consider Dionysus's orchestration of Pentheus's death as an instance of revenge, its purpose becomes clear.⁴³ Like Clytemnestra, Hecuba, Medea, Deianira, and even Creusa (at first), Dionysus undertakes revenge in order to force a particular recognition: that in accusing his mother of having slept with a mortal man, and not Zeus, Agave and her sisters harmed Semele – blasphemed her – and by extension himself, because their accusation prevented him from being recognized as a god in Thebes. And like those of the aforementioned female tragic avengers, the form of Dionysus's revenge mirrors the harm it responds to. Just as Agave and her sisters failed to recognize Semele as divine consort and her son as a god, so they fail to recognize Pentheus, compelled by Dionysus to see him as a monstrous interloper rather than their own blood, to disastrous and tragic effect. In this respect, Pentheus's death would have been necessary to avenge Semele even if he had not also blasphemed her (and her son), because only his non-recognition by his mother and aunts immediately recalls their non-recognition of Dionysus and his mother.

In her article “Pentheus and Dionysus: Host and Guest” – the same one in which she refers to Dionysus's destruction of his mortal family as “heavenly revenge” – Anne Burnett makes a case for reading the *Bacchae* as a drama of “divine punishment,” a subgenre of tragedy whose plots hinge on acts of blasphemy (*dyssebeia*) against gods by mortals, followed by divine acts of punishment in requital.⁴⁴ Burnett argues that these punishments are necessarily excessive, both in order to “seem to be not simply an allegorized version of the world's justice but rather true emanations of the supernatural,” and more importantly to reinforce the strict division

⁴³ Some might argue that the *Bacchae* stages the very Dionysian rites Thebes must learn, as the Theban women partake in divine ecstasy and enact sparagmos – Dionysian ritual sacrifice by dismemberment – with Pentheus. But even if we read Pentheus as *pharmakon* and his death as ritual sacrifice, doesn't necessitate his death *at his mother's hands* – that cruel twist is clearly vengeful.

⁴⁴ Such dramas of divine punishment include, according to Burnett, *Agamemnon*, *Women of Trachis*, *Hippolytus*, and *Andromache*, among others.

between men and gods: while punishments between humans can be calculated and proportionate, punishments between humans and gods cannot, because of the absolute difference and absolute power of the gods (15). “By reminding men of the absolute difference between their human and divine judges,” Burnett writes, “the punishment of the *theomachos* [god-fighter] enforced the laws of *eusebeia* [piety] and so made continuing life possible, for those laws were the only ones under which men could exist” (15, bracketed definitions my own).

In arguing that gods, by virtue of being gods, cannot respond to offenses by humans in a proportional way, Burnett inadvertently provides support for the claim I made with respect to Apollo in Euripides’ *Ion*: that the imbalance of power between humans and gods makes it impossible for gods to be in just relations with humans, in part because that structural imbalance prevents the more powerful party from viewing the effects of their actions on the less powerful as meaningful. Because gods are in a position of absolute power relative to humans, “justice” for the gods is qualitatively different and beyond human understanding; an excessively harsh response reifies that difference and restores the order of the world. Perhaps this difference is why critics who characterize Dionysus’s actions as revenge tend not to analyze them further as an injustice, even as they condemn revenge in other contexts: his revenge is ultimately in the service of preserving an existing hierarchy of relations, one which already benefits him and others like him, while the vengeance of female figures like Medea, Clytemnestra, and Hecuba aim to disrupt it.

If Burnett’s assessment of divine justice is correct, and it is simply beyond the grasp of human understanding, it would follow that Dionysus should not be obligated to justify his actions, or indeed to put any limits on his response to his family’s blasphemy: surely, the harsher the punishment, the better Thebes will learn its lesson. Yet Dionysus *does* take pains throughout

the play, albeit inconsistently, to frame the suffering he will cause as limited in extent, and its victims as deserving of harm: limited to Semele's sisters, whose slander occasioned his journey to Thebes; limited to Pentheus, who refuses to honor him in prayer and later blasphemes Dionysus when he attempts to imprison the god; limited to certain conditions, with his declaration in his opening monologue that he shall only "[lead] the maenads into battle" *if* the city of Thebes attempts to carry them off the mountain by force (50-52); and limited in consequence, as implicit in his promise that he will leave Thebes for other lands "when [he has] set things right" in the city (48-49) is the sense that he will not be abandoning the city to further violence – the suffering he visits on the royal family will be the final link in the chain of harm that binds them together.

But as Dionysus's rhetoric works to distance his violence from the excesses of revenge by framing that violence as punishment instead, it dramatizes the same discomfort with retribution as the basis for punishment that Danielle Allen identifies in the work of modern punitive theorists. In her essay "Democratic Dis-ease: Of Anger and the Troubling Nature of Punishment," Allen alleges that most punitive theorists follow John Rawls's "unhappy acceptance" of retribution as the basis for justifying punishment. Because reform and deterrence – the other common justifications for punishment – are insufficient on their own (reform cannot explain the use of "hard treatment" instead of rehabilitation, and deterrence cannot explain why the extent of punishments should be limited), Allen claims that Rawls "marries deterrence and retribution": deterrence explains why there must be a penal system and to what end it exists, while retributive guidelines are necessary to determine individual cases of punishment (192).

For all that Dionysus attempts to frame his revenge on his human family as punishment, his own language frequently reveals the slippage between the two. Even as Dionysus professes to

have driven his aunts from home in madness because of their offense, he admits that he has actually caused *all* the women of Thebes to run to the mountains (καὶ πᾶν τὸ θῆλυ σπέρμα Καδμείων, ὅσαι/γυναῖκες ἦσαν, ἐξέμηνα δωμάτων; “and all the female line of Thebes, as many/as are women, I have driven from their homes, mad,” 35-36); similarly, though Dionysus names Pentheus as singularly guilty of refusing him, he vows to prove he is a god not just to Pentheus, but *all* of Thebes (ὧν οὐνεκ’ αὐτῷ θεὸς γεγὼς ἐνδείξομαι/πᾶσιν τε Θηβαίοισιν; “on account of these things I will prove to him and all the Thebans/that I am a god,” 47-48). In both cases, Dionysus’s slide between family and city foreshadows the way the violence he ordains for his family will not ultimately be contained within it. Moreover, with respect to Pentheus, Dionysus orders punishment *and* revenge, at lines 847-50 and 1079-81, respectively. In the first instance, Dionysus addresses his foreign maenads in an aside, having sent Pentheus to change into women’s dress, and offers a prayer to himself:

γυναῖκες, ἀνὴρ ἐς βόλον καθίσταται,
 ἦξει δὲ βάκχας, οὗ θανὼν δώσει δίκην.
 Διόνυσε, νῦν σὸν ἔργον: οὐ γὰρ εἶ πρόσω:
 τεισώμεθ’ αὐτόν. (847-50)

Women, this man is brought down in our net;
 he will go to the Bacchae, where he will pay the penalty of death.
 Dionysus, now the work is yours: if you are not far off:
 let us punish him.

Both of the verbs Dionysus uses to refer to the violence awaiting Pentheus have connotations of punishment, as *διδόναι δίκην* (literally “to give justice”) is frequently used in ancient Greek literature to indicate suffering punishment, along with an array of similar usages in the field of law; and *τίνω* in the middle voice (as it is in line 850) can be translated “to make another pay” for a thing, as well as “to avenge oneself on” or “to punish” someone. By contrast, the second messenger’s speech reports the only instance of the verb explicitly for taking vengeance in the

whole of the *Bacchae* (τιμωρεῖσθε, the present imperative form of τιμωρέω, etymologically linked with τιμωρία, revenge), as Dionysus rouses the Theban maenads against Pentheus:

ἄγω τὸν ὑμᾶς κάμει τὰ μὰ τ' ὄργια
γέλων τιθέμενον: ἀλλὰ τιμωρεῖσθέ νιν. (1080-81)

I bring to you the one who makes you and me and my sacred rites
a mockery: take vengeance on him.

In exposing their shared basis in retribution, Dionysus's slides between the language of punishment and of revenge suggest that the two might be equivalent, or at least that he considers them to be: punishment and revenge will equally vindicate Semele and satisfy Dionysus's anger at his family's blasphemy. If this is the case – that revenge and punishment are animated by the same desire to see a wrongdoer “pay the penalty” for his harm – then Dionysus seems to prove right Rawls's hypothesis about the retributive foundation of punishment, which has the effect of opening punishment to the same critiques facing revenge. By having Dionysus frame the destruction of his mortal family as a punishment, Euripides both suggests that “punishment” can provide a legitimating cover for an act of revenge, and reveals punishment as a vexed object, not as distinct from revenge as the legal paradigm of retributive justice would suggest.

Just as Dionysus in his opening monologue positions the violence yet to unfold in the play as a response to harms against him and his mother committed by the daughters of Cadmus, so he reiterates this causal relationship when he finally appears in his godly form at the play's end, bolstering it with the language of desert. While a portion of Dionysus's climactic speech is lost, comprising part of the lacuna beginning at line 1329, translators who have reconstructed it from fragments and from *Christus Patiens* forcefully convey the sense that the house of Cadmus and the people of Thebes have brought their suffering on themselves.⁴⁵ In William Arrowsmith's

⁴⁵ In a translator's note, Arrowsmith explains that bracketed lines are ones he has invented “not to complete the speeches, but to effect a transition between the fragments.” Arrowsmith has reconstructed Dionysus's speech from

1959 translation, after ordaining exile and slavery for the people of Thebes as a result of their blasphemy, Dionysus proclaims of Pentheus,

This man has found the death which he deserved,
torn to pieces among the jagged rocks.
You are my witnesses: he came with outrage;
he attempted to chain my hands, abusing me
[and doing what he least of all should have done.]
And therefore he has rightly perished by the hands
of those who should least of all have murdered him.
What he suffers, he suffers justly.

In Philip Vellacott's 1954 prose translation, Dionysus similarly foretells exile for the Thebans, and identifies Pentheus as "first and chief in sin," as he

not only rejected my just claims, but put me in fetters and insulted me. Therefore death came to him in the most shameful way of all, at the hands of his own mother. This fate he has justly suffered; for no god can see his worship scorned, and hear his name profaned, and not pursue vengeance to the utmost limit; that mortal men may know that the gods are greater than they. (225)

And CK Williams' 1990 translation conforms to the same model, as Dionysus links Pentheus's "deserved" punishment to his outrageous actions in lying about Dionysus's birth, chaining him up, and attempting to punish him, even appealing to his audience – perhaps both the external audience of Athenian spectators and the citizens of Thebes within the play – to remember that they themselves had beheld Pentheus's "impudence":

Behold our Pentheus. He found the death
he deserved: torn to pieces.

You beheld him. You beheld his lies.
His impudence. You beheld him
when he tried to chain me and abused me
and tried – and *dared* to try –

Christus Patiens lines 1360-62, 1665-66, 1668-69, 1678-80, and 300. Likewise, in the notes to his translation of the play, Vellacott says only that the lines he attributes to Dionysus in the lacuna are pieced together "from a considerable number of fragments [from ancient writers] probably belonging to this gap," and that he has presented them "in a form something like that we may expect Euripides to have used" (234, note for p. 223). Both Arrowsmith and Vellacott refer to E.R. Dodds's commentary on the *Bacchae* as the basis for reconstructing the lacuna in this manner.

to punish me.
I am Dionysus! Behold me!

The hands that should have been the last
to do this to him where the very hands
that did it. Why? Because he did
what he should not have done.

In addition to the noteworthy parallel between the description of Pentheus's death ("by the hands of those who should least of all have murdered him," "in the most shameful way of all, at the hands of his own mother," "The hands that should have been the last/to do this to him were the very hands/that did it") and Dionysus's earlier characterization of his aunts' slander ("my mother's sisters, who least should have,/alleged that Dionysus was not born of Zeus," 26-27, my translation), which supports my claim about the mirroring form of Dionysus's revenge, both Arrowsmith's, Vellacott's, and Williams' translations all emphasize that Pentheus's death arises directly from his "abuse" or "insult" to Dionysus, and as such is just and deserved. But all three also elide the true agent of Pentheus's punishment and death: Dionysus says only that Pentheus "has found the death which he deserved" or that "death came to him," implying that the cause of Pentheus's death is Pentheus himself; or attributes immediate responsibility for Pentheus's death to "those who least of all should have murdered him" or "his own mother," whose hands tore him limb from limb. All three translators render to similar effect Dionysus's proclamation of the fate awaiting Agave and her sisters (which also falls in the lacuna), uniformly identifying the punishment of exile as directly resulting from *their* crime, which has left them "polluted" (Williams) and "unclean" (Arrowsmith), requiring "a full and just penance for the foul pollution *they* have incurred," (Vellacott, emphasis mine).

While these reconstructions of Dionysus's speech are necessarily conjectural, they are consonant with his words at other points in the existing *Bacchae* manuscript, as when he asserts

that Pentheus “will hide where it is right for [him] to be hidden,/having come a crafty spy on the maenads” (955-56), and agrees when Pentheus claims that he will “grasp what is deserving” (ἀξίων μὲν ἄπτομαι, 971), saying that Pentheus goes to “terrible suffering” (δείν’ ἔρχη πάθη, 972) from which he will “find fame rising to heaven” (ὥστ’ οὐρανῷ στηρίζον εὐρήσεις κλέος, 973).⁴⁶ In both of these examples, Pentheus and Dionysus use words that emphasize fittingness or desert to suggest that the “reward” Pentheus will receive will arise from or accord with his own actions or character. When Dionysus’s speech resumes after the lacuna and he pronounces Cadmus and Harmonia’s fate (transfiguration into snakes, making war on other cities, plundering the shrine of Apollo, and finally being rescued by Ares and conveyed to the land of the blessed), the god makes a similar claim that *they* (whether addressing Cadmus and Harmonia in particular, or the city of Thebes in general) could have prevented this outcome:

ταῦτ’ οὐχὶ θνητοῦ πατρὸς ἐκγεγῶς λέγω
 Διόνυσος, ἀλλὰ Ζηνός: εἰ δὲ σωφρονεῖν
 ἔγνωθ’, ὅτ’ οὐκ ἠθέλετε, τὸν Διὸς γόνον
 εὐδαιμονεῖτ’ ἂν σύμμαχον κεκτημένοι. (1340-43)

These things are what I, Dionysus, born not of a mortal father
 but of Zeus, say: if you had known to be of sound mind
 when you did not wish to be, you would be happy,
 having gained the son of Zeus as an ally.

Dionysus’s meaning here is clear: had the Thebans acted differently, and revered Dionysus from the start, they would not be in the position they are now. Since they did not, they have brought their ruin on themselves.

Throughout the *Bacchae*, then, Dionysus makes use of a rhetoric of punishment that

⁴⁶ The Greek at lines 955-56 is: κρύψη σὺ κρύψιν ἦν σε κρυφθῆναι χρεῶν,/ἐλθόντα δόλιον μαινάδων κατάσκοπον. Of import here is the use of χρεῶν, a form of χρῆ, used in impersonal expressions of necessity, fate, or appropriateness. These forms are used persistently in the *Bacchae* to describe the actions of the Cadmeans, for example when the second messenger describes Agave’s madness when she attacks Pentheus as οὐ φρονοῦσ’ ἂ χρῆ φρονεῖν, “not thinking as she should” (1123).

serves not only to legitimize his act of revenge, but also to distance him from the suffering he causes by constructing the Cadmeans (and Pentheus and Agave in particular) as singularly responsible *subjects of punishment*. When Dionysus situates his human family's wrongdoings in a simple chain of causality (as he does in his opening monologue) and links their ensuing suffering exclusively to their own actions or character (as he does in the passages analyzed above), he implies that punishment is inevitable, and even natural, the effect of an internal rather than external cause. Moreover, in suggesting that his family and the city of Thebes brought punishment on themselves, Dionysus makes them the agents of their own destruction, a characterization that seems fulfilled as Pentheus and Agave appear to punish themselves (Pentheus is killed by his mother, Agave kills her son), though of course not under their own power. As a result, Dionysus's role in the administration of punishment is mystified, as are his motives: rather than Dionysus having *set out* to punish the royal family of Thebes, prior even to his arrival onstage, Pentheus and Agave (however unknowingly) punish themselves, in Agave's case in such a way (committing kin-murder) as to merit the further punishment of exile. Rhetorically framed as natural, inevitable, and enacted by the wrongdoers upon themselves, the punishment Pentheus and Agave suffer is distanced both from the revenge Dionysus has professed to seek and from Dionysus himself as agent and avenger. In this way, punishment's foundation in retribution is hidden, perhaps making it easier for on- and offstage spectators to accept.

While Dionysus's rhetoric of punishment depends on a subject who alone brings about both the harm they enact and the punishment for it, Agave and the chorus of maenads push back against such an understanding of a singularly responsible subject. Instead, their interactions demonstrate a more complex and diffuse operation of agency, extending and complicating the

model of relationality we see in *Ion*. In contrast to Creusa's serving women, who desire to share her fate and verbally appropriate her actions as their own, the *Bacchae*'s chorus of maenads acts with and for Agave – but, crucially, while they help to bring about Agave's fate, they do not share in it, as Agave is exiled for the murder of Pentheus, and the chorus goes on dancing, following Dionysus. Thus, at the same time that the chorus and Agave problematize the subject of punishment Dionysus has rhetorically constructed, as they act across space and time toward the same end – Pentheus's death – those very same actions also re-center Dionysus as the great orchestrator of the events that unfold, as he both plans Pentheus's death at his mother's hands and enables the violence Agave and the chorus commit.

The chorus of Euripides' *Bacchae* straddles a tragic chorus's conventional dramatic and metatheatrical roles, foregrounding the multiplicity of its identity. At different times, the chorus takes on a familiar expository role, providing context for events which have just happened or are about to occur; at other times, the chorus ventriloquizes popular religious beliefs, both within and outside the play; and at still other times the chorus is privy to information it cannot possibly know, predicting and narrating offstage events in such a way as to seem almost to call them into being. Moreover, while the chorus is ostensibly foreign – since it is made up of Dionysus's Asian followers – we are told in Dionysus's opening speech that all the women of Thebes have joined their number, “even the daughters of Cadmus.” And while the bacchantes revel on Cithaeron, they also appear simultaneously onstage, as the chorus. This chorus blurs boundaries – not just between human and animal (as the maenads exhibit superhuman strength and cavort with fauna) or Theban and foreigner, as has often been noted, but between individual and collective, even across space and time, continuous but internally differentiated.

It is within this chorus that Agave is “embodied and embedded,” acting with, through, and because of the Bacchae.⁴⁷ Agave herself doesn’t appear onstage, alone, until almost 1200 lines into the play, bearing Pentheus’ head on a stick and proclaiming it to be a young lion’s. Prior to that moment, her actions are only referred to by Dionysus and the chorus. One might argue that their Dionysian frenzy grants the bacchantes ecstatic vision or clairvoyance, but I wish to take seriously the chorus’s multiplicity, its presence in two places at once, and its continuity with Agave at the same time she is differentiated from it. The chorus’s own words, particularly in the fourth stasimon, make such a reading possible:

CHORUS. Go, swift hounds of Madness, go to the mountain
where the daughters of Cadmus have their revel,
drive them mad
against him, dressed in women’s clothing,
the mad spy on the maenads.
His mother will see him first,
as he watches from a smooth rock or treetop,
and she will call to the maenads:
Who is this who has come to the mountain, come to the mountain,
O Bacchae, this seeker of the Cadmean women who run on the hills?
For he was not born from the blood of women,
but of a lioness, or he is offspring
of one of the Libyan Gorgons. (l. 977-96)

The chorus delivers this speech immediately after Dionysus and Pentheus depart for Mount Cithaeron, and these lines have a number of effects: they transport the audience, with Pentheus and Dionysus, to Mount Cithaeron, on the backs of the “swift hounds of Madness;” they function as a command and a prayer to Lyssa’s hounds for the effect they desire (Pentheus’ death at his mother’s hands); and they predict that very death. But the chorus’s words here are more than a prediction. Given that the fourth stasimon is immediately followed by the arrival of a messenger bearing news of Pentheus’ death, the chorus’s speech functions as simultaneous

⁴⁷ I borrow the phrase “embodied and embedded” from posthumanist feminist Rosi Braidotti.

narration of events that are occurring offstage; their descriptions of Pentheus' position relative to the maenads (“[watching] from a smooth rock or treetop”) are confirmed by the messenger's description of how the events unfolded. Moreover, I want to suggest that the chorus is not imagining what Agave will say upon seeing Pentheus, but speaks as and for her, becoming (in Wasserman's words) “really that other *thiasos* on the mountains; it is really Agave's voice which we hear...” (qtd. in Podlecki 145).

If this is the case, why include the messenger's speech at all? Some might argue that the chorus's exchange with the messenger following the fourth stasimon (starting at l. 1041) is an instance of the chorus playing an expository role; their question (“Tell me, declare it, what kind of death did he die./the unjust man contriving unjust things?”⁴⁸) provides an occasion for the messenger to recount Pentheus' dismemberment in lurid detail likely intended to shock the audience. While this explanation is plausible, I believe the exchange also functions in the reverse: the messenger's account of what happened on Mount Cithaeron serves to confirm the multiplicity and even the agency of the chorus, of which Agave is a part. The chorus already knows how Pentheus has died, because they've prayed for it and because they are *there*, on the mountainside, as much as they are on the stage. In that sense, the chorus is responsible for Pentheus' death on both a theatrical and a very real level, driving Agave mad, speaking as Agave before the audience, and taking part in the dismemberment on Mount Cithaeron.

When Agave finally appears onstage, having returned to Thebes, the chorus invites her to recount the events on the mountainside. The chorus's words are carefully neutral toward Agave, but the audience will find them loaded. The chorus already knows what happened to Pentheus, and can see the head Agave bears as the head of her son, so their questions to Agave seem almost

⁴⁸ ἔννεπέ μοι, φράσον, τί νι μὲν ὄρω θνήσκει / ἄδικος ἄδικά τ' ἐκπορίζων ἀνὴρ; (1041-42)

mocking – they are forcing her to recount a version of events that they know is false, and the revelation of which will cause Agave much grief. But we might also read this dialogue as an instance of the chorus and Agave together reconstituting the events on the mountain as she experienced them, and in a way that, combined with Agave’s dialogue with Cadmus shortly thereafter, conveys to the audience the complex workings of agency and responsibility at play.

The dialogue is mostly comprised of short lines, as the chorus interjects questions (“Where was he caught?” “Who killed him?” “And then?”) that build the tension in Agave’s account until it culminates in her exhortation to celebrate her “prize.” Agave’s words emphasize both her pride in and responsibility for what she has done: she caught the “lion’s cub” with only her hands, she was first among her sisters for the kill, she is confident her son and father will praise her skill. There is no doubt who has done the deed; it is Agave. And yet Agave is only able to accomplish these things because of her position among the maenads and under Dionysus’s power, nor does she dismember her son without help. Agave succeeds in slaughtering Pentheus only because she is maddened, only because she is made strong, only because she is among others who also tear the limbs from his body.

Taken together, these moments suggest an understanding of subjectivity that is in stark contrast to the singularly responsible subject of punishment proposed by Dionysus, who acts alone and suffers punishment alone. Agave is acting within larger structures – she is a Theban, and doomed to be taught a lesson by her divine nephew; she is part of the chorus, debauching and dismembering on Mount Cithaeron – but those larger structures are also acting through her. It is a moment when, to paraphrase Brooke Holmes, we see a subject “deeply embedded within a network of forces both within and beyond herself,” living in a “both/and: [madness] and self-willed passion, actions that are [hers] and not [hers]...events...rebounding across populations and

generations and the [trajectory] of [her] own [life]" (149,150). Like Deianira, Medea, and even Creusa, Agave's possibilities for action are materially shaped by her relationships with others – the chorus of bacchantes in particular – but her relationship with the chorus is itself situated in and manifests Dionysus's power: his power to enable the shared knowledge of the two choruses (Theban and foreign), to perform miracles (as when he bends the great pine on which Pentheus was perched to the ground, so that the maenads could reach him), to drive humans mad and endow them with superhuman strength, and to compel violence between those who least have reason to harm each other.⁴⁹ Even Agave's painstaking reassembly of Pentheus's body, undertaken with her father when she has emerged from Dionysus's madness, testifies both to her own guilt ("Upon these hands/I bear the curse of my son's blood. How then/with these accursed hands may I touch his body?" Agave laments, in William Arrowsmith's translation) and to Dionysus's power: an audience watching Agave's return to reason, horror at her deed, and grief for her son could not forget the god who ordained these events; each scrap of Pentheus's flesh that indicts Agave indicts Dionysus, too.⁵⁰ In so challenging both the rhetoric of punishment and the paradigm of retributive justice it supports, Euripides' *Bacchae* asks, and perhaps fails to answer, what justice could look like if it were to take into account its subjects' enmeshment in forces beyond themselves. As the play's ending stands, human justice can neither account for divine interference nor touch the gods, even if the gods (like Dionysus) appear to act in very human ways, rendering their freedom from consequences dissatisfying.

⁴⁹ I do not mean to suggest here that *Dionysus* is now singularly responsible for Pentheus's death, nor that Agave and the chorus are not "agents" or have no power of their own. I am simply drawing attention to Euripides' own subtle orchestration of the events onstage, as his text problematizes both the notion of an individually responsible subject of punishment (through the performance of diffuse agency by Agave and the chorus), and the naturalizing rhetoric of punishment that Dionysus wields (through re-surfacing his role and his desire for retribution).

⁵⁰ The *compositio membrorum* – the re-membering of Pentheus's body by Agave and Cadmus – takes place in the lacuna; Arrowsmith has reconstructed it from *Christus Patiens*.

This dissatisfaction finds its strongest voice within the play in Cadmus, who confronts Dionysus directly after the god has declared the punishments still awaiting the royal family:

CADMUS. Dionysus, we beg you, we have done wrong.

DIONYSUS. You have learned too late; when it was necessary, you did not praise me.

CADMUS. We have learned these things: but you punish excessively.

DIONYSUS. Indeed, for I, born a god, was ill-treated by you.

CADMUS. It is not fitting for gods to be made like mortals in their anger. (1344-48)

Here, Cadmus attempts to reason with Dionysus, admitting that he and his family have done wrong, claiming that they have learned to praise the god – recalling one of the reasons Dionysus gave in his opening monologue for his arrival in Thebes – and asserting that Dionysus punishes them too harshly. The excessiveness Cadmus refers to could be the manner of his family’s first punishment, with Pentheus’s gruesome death, or the further trials Dionysus has proclaimed await them, or both: surely one or the other would be punishment enough, ruinous on its own; to be punished further even after learning the lesson Dionysus desired to teach leaves the house of Cadmus devastated.

But even if we accepted that devastation as just, it would still be excessive. Dionysus’s punishment of his human family exceeds its bounds at every turn: though he tells Pentheus that “[he] alone [will] suffer for [his] city, alone” (μόνος σὺ πόλεως τῆσδ’ ὑπερκάμνεις, μόνος, 963), Pentheus’s suffering is suffering for Agave, too, and for Cadmus, whom Dionysus had praised for his treatment of Semele at the beginning of the play. The madness that afflicted Agave and her sisters also afflicted all the women of Thebes, who will return to their lives and their families having torn a man apart (though in doing so they did not commit blood crime) and participated in miracles; and the exile Cadmus’s daughters face will make them suppliants and metics in other cities, a problem for other citizens. The punishment of the Cadmeans not only affects the city of

Thebes – whose palace is smoking, whose whole royal house is brought low – but also, with Cadmus and Harmonia doomed to lead hordes into battle against other cities, ensures that those cities, too, will suffer, without any indication that they will deserve it. For all that Dionysus’s words attempt to set limits on the effects of the punishment of his Theban kin, and for all that his power is focused on them, that punishment ripples outward, from his family to the city and beyond. Just as Dionysus’s rhetoric of punishment depends on a singularly responsible subject – one whose agency is neither enabled nor constrained by others – it likewise depends on a subject who is not constituted in and by their relationships with others, and whose presence in a community, absence from it, or suffering within it has no effect on other members. That the drama of the *Bacchae* demonstrates the inadequacy of such a subject to the conditions in which its characters live and act calls into question whether punishment can rightly be justified on these grounds.

When Dionysus suggests that his punishment is in fact appropriate to his ill-treatment in Thebes (at once acknowledging the excessiveness of his response and reactivating his rhetoric of punishment to imply proportionality and inevitability), Cadmus responds that this kind of excessiveness is appropriate for humans, not gods. In this, Cadmus seems to echo Ion’s reflection on the impunity of the gods at *Ion* 436-51, when he prays for Creusa’s account of Apollo’s rape of her “friend” not to be true: “Don’t let it be so,” Ion exhorts,

but, since you [gods] are powerful,
pursue virtue. For if any among mortals
is evil, the gods punish him.
How then is it right that you, having written laws for mortals, bring lawlessness
on yourselves? (439-43)

Cadmus’s admonishment of Dionysus similarly reminds the audience that unlike humans, who are limited both in their ability to hold gods accountable and (in the case of tragedy’s female

avengers) in their ability to seek redress or recognition of a harm from other mortals, the gods' power has no such limitations – and thus they are not constrained, as humans are, in their choice of action. As a god, Dionysus could as easily have chosen mercy for his human family; and if the workings of divine justice are truly beyond human understanding, Dionysus's mercy would have been as just as his punishment, and required no further explanation.

Instead, Dionysus dismisses Cadmus's complaint altogether, answering simply that "Long ago my father Zeus approved these things" (πάλαι τάδε Ζεὺς οὐμὸς ἐπένευσεν πατήρ, 1349). Because the demonstrative pronoun *τάδε* (which I have translated "these things") lacks a more specific referent, we can understand Dionysus's words here in two ways, as referring both to a general and a particular situation. Dionysus could be claiming that "long ago my father Zeus approved *your* punishment," again situating the punishment of the house of Cadmus as inevitable (because foreordained by Zeus), and/or that "long ago my father Zeus approved excessive punishments," as a general case, leaving the Cadmeans without possibility for redress for their suffering (because the use of excessive punishment has been approved by Zeus). Either way, it is not Dionysus's concern: by deferring to Zeus, he again distances himself as a cause of his human family's suffering. There is nothing for them to do but endure it.

At this point, Cadmus and Agave recognize the futility of attempting to resist Dionysus's will, and move to lament for themselves and their fates before finally bidding each other and the city farewell. The play's final lines, like those of Euripides' *Ion*, are delivered by the chorus:

Many are the forms of the divine,
and the gods accomplish many things unexpectedly:
what was expected did not come to pass;
the god found a way of achieving the unexpected.
Just so did this affair turn out. (1388-92)

But unlike the final lines of *Ion*, it is not immediately clear what the chorus of maenads is

referring to in these lines, or what relation they have to the events of the play. After all, what is unexpected about what has transpired? Dionysus has spent the duration of the *Bacchae* attempting to establish a direct causal link between the blasphemous actions of the house of Cadmus and the punishment its members suffer, and everything he declared he would accomplish in his opening monologue has come to pass. Perhaps from the point of view of the Cadmeans, who likely did not anticipate their destruction in such horrifyingly specific detail, their undoing is unexpected – but again, Dionysus’s rhetoric of punishment depends on their deliberately choosing to blaspheme in full knowledge of the likely result: if they had known better, things could have turned out differently. Indeed, Dionysus’s punishment of his human family demonstrates retributive justice working precisely as intended, delivering the outcome Dionysus himself chose without any threat (because of Dionysus’s position as a god) of further violence in requital.⁵¹ If Dionysus’s success must be framed as “unexpected,” it is worth considering why.

One possibility could be the need to maintain the subjects of Dionysus’s punishment as what Anne Burnett calls “fitting targets” of divine wrath: punishing ordinary humans with ordinary human frailties would make “heaven...seem cruel indeed” (16). By framing Dionysus’s successful achievement of his aims as “unexpected,” the chorus implies that the conflict between Dionysus and his human family was one between equals, or at least one in which the imbalance of power was not so great, retroactively attributing more power to the human wrongdoers than they actually had in order to make Dionysus’s punishment seem less egregious. Likewise,

⁵¹ Of course, the legal paradigm of retributive justice would take the administration of punishment from Dionysus’s hands; but as a god and the play’s most powerful figure, Dionysus can be taken both to represent the law (*nomos*, the customs and norms of behavior on which human life depends, including the hierarchical order of god-man-beast) and to remain outside of it himself (as a god, he is not subject to human laws). But Euripides *does* take the administration of punishment from Dionysus’s hands: although Dionysus orchestrates the scenes of punishment, and even dresses Pentheus for his death, the punishment is carried out by Agave and the Theban maenads.

framing Dionysus's success as "unexpected" suggests that the outcome of the play was uncertain (rather than chosen and orchestrated by Dionysus), again justifying Dionysus's punishment by implying that his Theban family forced his hand. By either rationale, the chorus closes the book on the house of Cadmus: all that has occurred, however unexpected, is simply a form of the divine, a testament to the power of the gods. Indeed, by characterizing the successful execution of punishment by a powerful god "unexpected," the chorus performs the same rhetorical gesture Dionysus does when he hides the retributive basis of punishment by naturalizing it as something a wrongdoer ultimately does to themselves: they hide the fact that because of Dionysus's great power, his punishment was not inevitable, and he could have chosen otherwise. In this way the play's final lines seem to shore up the existing structure of power – in which the gods reign supreme, and their punishment is just – and render a truly unexpected alternative to punishment unthinkable within the world of the play.

But at the same time that the chorus's final lines signal the closure of the play and the foreclosure of any redress for the Cadmeans, they also (unexpectedly) draw attention to the very constructedness of Dionysus's position, both his role as orchestrator of the events of the play, on the levels of plot and theatrical spectacle, and his self-framing as long-suffering and reluctant punisher who does not truly bear responsibility for the suffering of the punished. While the placement of the chorus's lines at the end of the play ensures that there will be no rebuttal to Dionysus's self-framing, their juxtaposition with the spectacle of power the play's audience would have seen and heard makes them dissonant, inviting the audience's dissatisfaction. I want to suggest that this dissatisfaction is the *Bacchae*'s invitation: having seen the contingency of Dionysus's punishment and the rhetoric it depends on, the audience is invited to think beyond it.

IV. The Feeling of Justice

By eliciting viewers' and readers' dissatisfaction in *Ion* and *Bacchae*, Euripides intervenes in our understanding of justice, and in particular of institutions of retributive justice – and their connections to certain structures of power – that might otherwise be taken for granted. In *Ion*, the relationships between Creusa and Ion and Creusa and her chorus of serving women respectively draw our attention to the limitations of the adversarial form of the legal trial and to the importance of attending to affective and communal dimensions of seeking justice. Not only are Creusa's feelings what reveal injustice, but justice has not been done until her (and her community's) grief has been attended to; and Creusa's grief is resolved by receiving from the god who wronged her what she thought she had (but had never actually) lost. The *Bacchae* likewise exposes both punishment's excesses – as it affects more than its individual targets – and its inability to accommodate the more complex forms of agency demonstrated by Agave and the chorus of maenads, who share in the slaughter of Pentheus but not its consequences.

In both plays, dissatisfaction derives at least in part from the “injustices of the powerful” that Creusa laments: the imbalance of power that bars the mortal (and especially female) figures from seeking legitimate justice, on the one hand, and condemns them to suffer without redress, on the other. If my analysis of *Trachiniae* and *Medea* in the previous chapter takes up the question of whether it is just to punish those who, constructed as criminals, do harm because their capacities for action in support of a good life have been severely constrained (and if not, what ought to be offered instead), then my reading of *Ion* and *Bacchae* asks what possibilities for justice there are when the wrongdoer is powerful, and so does not do harm out of a lack of better options. Because in these plays the figures who do harm are beyond the reach of human means of justice – either through the trial form, or through the administration of punishment – *Ion* and

Bacchae present a limit case for the efficacy of these measures, and demonstrate that they are unsuited to achieve justice even in cases involving less powerful wrongdoers. But the source of dissatisfaction remains, as Apollo and Dionysus harm mortals (though in Dionysus's case, that harm itself is framed as punishment for another, previous harm) seemingly with impunity.

While dissatisfaction with the outcome of the *Bacchae* is easy to understand – audiences may feel, with Cadmus, that Dionysus's punishment of his mortal family is too harsh – dissatisfaction with the outcome of *Ion* is less so. After all, *Creusa* is not dissatisfied with the resolution of the harm done to her: she had and continues to have the support of a community of women, the son she thought she had lost has been restored to her, and she even makes a gesture of understanding (if not of forgiveness) toward Apollo, saying at play's end that she praises him, “whom I did not praise before,/because he returns to me the child he once neglected” (1609-10). If *Creusa*, whose account of the harm Apollo did her has been taken seriously throughout the play, and who most has standing to decide whether that harm has been redressed, does not seem to require anything more to consider justice to have been done – what more could an audience desire?

As I suggested earlier in this chapter, an audience could desire accountability for Apollo, even as it knows that it is not the nature of gods to be accountable to humans. But because the imbalance of power between Apollo and *Creusa* is so great, Euripides has removed the possibility that accountability could take the form of retribution, as revenge or as punishment – Apollo cannot be made to suffer the way *Creusa* suffered, or because he made *Creusa* suffer – and so if the audience's dissatisfaction arises from a lack of retribution, it reveals a conflation of retribution with accountability that the play itself contests. Although Apollo never appears onstage to answer for his actions, his will (in terms both of his intentions in spiriting *Ion* away,

and his plans for the future of the Athenian royal family) is expressed through Athena. In this way, Creusa is able to understand her past – her rape, the loss of Ion, and his return to her – in a new light, in learning that Apollo had provided for their child after all, and intends to continue benefiting her family line. The provision of this knowledge constitutes limited accountability at best: it doesn't vindicate Apollo's choices or require that Creusa reconcile with him, but it also doesn't guarantee that he won't do similar harm again. It is simply knowledge that Creusa has now that she didn't have before, and which allows her to make sense of what happened to her. What Creusa (re)gains through this knowledge, the practices of disclosure and affective identification she engages with the chorus, and the restoration of her son, is more than what punishment of Apollo could have given her.

What *Ion* reveals – and what *Bacchae*, too, suggests – is that the terms of justice are not zero-sum, that the pursuit of justice in the wake of harm does not have to consist of a choice between retribution and nothing at all. Taken together, these two plays provide a powerful refutation of the rhetoric of punishment and the account of subjectivity retributive justice depends on, offer victim-centered alternatives to retributive practices in the form of disclosure and affective identification, and elicit the viewer's or reader's dissatisfaction as a means to imagine justice beyond retribution. Euripides does not offer a complete theory of non-retributive justice, but the critiques and practices that become visible in these works offer a place to begin.

Indeed, though Euripides himself would not have had the language to describe it as such, these alternative practices of justice and critiques of retribution have much in common with contemporary frameworks of restorative and transformative justice, as developed by anti-violence activists and abolitionist thinkers of color. Broadly, both restorative and transformative justice frameworks eschew the administration of punishment through the legal system in favor of

community-based practices that center the needs of the person harmed and the repair of relationships between the harmed person, the wrongdoer, and the community, and attempt to understand the context in which the harm occurred. While the principal aim of restorative justice is to repair relationships through engaging the victim and wrongdoer in a voluntary process of accountability (which can include things like offering a public apology, working to make amends, and committing not to repeat the harm), transformative justice is also explicitly concerned with transforming the conditions that made the harm possible, from the forms relationships take within a community to the institutions and policies that make violence more likely.⁵² In abolitionist scholar and activist Mariame Kaba’s words, “Restorative and transformative justice take into account the needs of those affected by an incident of harm, the contexts that produced or shaped them, and seek to transform or rebuild what was lost rather than view punishment as a final resolution” (79).⁵³

In the written work of Mariame Kaba and Danielle Sered – both of whom are restorative justice practitioners – it is clear that a restorative justice framework is attentive to the feelings and desires of survivors of harm when devising accountability mechanisms. In accounts of their experiences in restorative justice contexts (in Kaba’s *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us*, and Sered’s *Until We Reckon*), both write about survivors’ need to heal from the harm done to them, the frequently expressed desire to understand *why* the perpetrator of harm acted as they did, and the desire for assurance not only that the perpetrator won’t do harm again, but that no one else will suffer as they have, none of which are addressed through retributive legal processes. Sered,

⁵² Sered outlines five dimensions of accountability: “(1) acknowledging responsibility for one’s actions; (2) acknowledging the impact of one’s actions on others; (3) expressing genuine remorse; (4) taking actions to repair the harm to the degree possible, and guided when feasible by the people harmed, or “doing sorry;” and (5) no longer committing similar harm” (96).

⁵³ This quote is taken from Kaba’s essay “Arresting the Carceral State” with Erica R. Meiners, collected in *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us*.

reflecting on the desire for revenge some survivors feel (and which alone seems to be addressed by legal punishment), argues that it can be understood at bottom not as a desire for others' suffering, – which is the source of penal theorists' discomfort with retribution – but a desire for recognition, ideally by the person who has done harm, of the effects of that harm and the pain the harmed person feels. “When we enact revenge,” she writes,

the world is different because of what happened to us. Someone who wasn't hurting is hurting now because of us. That difference, ugly and largely unsatisfying as it may be, can feel like an affirmation of our connection and our influence on the larger thing of which we are a part. But though it may be a form of what we need, revenge is not itself the thing we need. It is not more pain that affirms us and quiets the terror and injustice of isolation. What we need is for something in our world to reflect what is different in us. What we need is to be recognized. As so many characters in movies say before carrying out retaliatory violence, “You see me now.” Revenge is in part an inescapable demand to be witnessed. (105)

In this, Sered's explanation of revenge both parallels my own analysis of the revenge taken by female figures in Greek tragedy, who use revenge as a means to seek recognition for their pain and loss from those who harmed them, and directs our attention, like Euripides, to alternatives.

Proponents of restorative and transformative justice are also attuned to the potential for dissatisfaction in *their* audiences: a dissatisfaction that arises from the belief that the only alternative to punishment is complete impunity for wrongdoers. As Kaba notes in a 2019 interview with Ayana Young, this belief can feel deeply personal and be deeply culturally ingrained. In the context of discussing the desire for punishment, Kaba articulates several ideas that are criticized by thinkers like Martha Nussbaum in the context of revenge, including punishment's roots in religious depictions of vengeful gods, and the sense that punishment is “a necessary ingredient toward being able to get back to right relationship in some way” – that punishment can restore balance or undo a status injury (150). In her interview with Young, Kaba is sympathetic to those who are still invested in punishment, acknowledging,

I too am conditioned in this culture and was punished myself as a child. Very hard to think of what else to do when violence or harm occurs in the world but to punish. It permeates so much that when somebody chooses to do something else, we sometimes react violently to that person who doesn't choose to punish, who says actually I want to try a different way. Then it's like, "You aren't holding up your end of the bargain here. What are you saying about my values if you refuse to go after this person in a punishing way?" (150)

Here, Kaba also gestures toward the difficulty of thinking beyond legal punishment as a pathway for justice, especially when what the world will look like without it is uncertain. Restorative and transformative justice practices are not yet mainstream, and the work of dismantling retributive structures is not prescriptive about what will replace them. But again, the feelings of dissatisfaction and confusion Kaba imagines in a person who is not yet persuaded by restorative justice can serve as an invitation to examine their own investments: what does punishment do for them? What do they believe it accomplishes? Is it possible that something besides punishment could achieve those things? But in Kaba's imagined dialogue, the person who isn't yet persuaded by restorative justice nonetheless intuits a core principle: implicit in saying "*You* aren't holding up your end of the bargain," and asking "What does this say about *my* values?" when someone chooses not to punish, is the sense that decisions about what constitutes accountability and justice ought to be made in communities, not alone.

In bringing Euripides' *Ion* and *Bacchae* into conversation with Kaba and Sered on the question of justice, I mean to show both that the insights I find in Euripides are not unusual, and that restorative and transformative justice frameworks can find helpmates in ancient literature, again emphasizing the contingency of legal retribution as the dominant justice paradigm. Together, they demonstrate that doing justice has a profoundly affective dimension that deserves more attention: a sense of dissatisfaction, like the feeling of dread discussed in the previous chapter, and the anger and grief tragedy's female protagonists and choruses articulate so

eloquently, can all function as powerful signals that something has gone wrong in our relationships, and play a role in both surfacing and ameliorating harm. But I also want to build on these insights, and suggest that one avenue for theorizing justice beyond retribution could be not just to take seriously what justice *doesn't* feel like, but to consider what it *does*.

In their book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant describes the feeling of normativity in the following way: “the affective feeling of normativity...is expressed in the sense that one ought to be dealt with gently by the world, and live happily with intimates and strangers” (45). Building on my invocation of Berlant’s work in my previous chapter, by offering this passage, I am raising the possibility that we might think about justice as a kind of shared affect, the *feeling* of being in just relations with others. This is not to say that our assessment of whether something is just should be guided solely by individual feelings or emotional responses, only to suggest that considering whether something *feels* just to a community – and thinking deeply about why that is or isn’t so – is one way to ensure that whatever institutions we build to secure justice without reproducing violence are in harmony with the needs, desires, and sense of justice of the community they are meant to serve.

Berlant might object to my use of their thought to advocate for understanding justice as (at least in part) a feeling. In their essay “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, Politics,” they challenge both the idea that pain – a fundamentally subjective experience – is a source of truth, and the idea that the presence of pain necessarily indicates injustice, and the absence of pain justice. Like Kaba and Sered, Berlant is concerned with the role of pain in communal life, and not just for the individual. “What does it mean for the struggle to shape collective life,” they ask,

when a politics of true feeling organizes analysis, discussion, fantasy, and policy?
When feeling, the most subjective thing...takes over the space of ethics and truth?

When the shock of pain is said only to produce *clarity* when shock can as powerfully be said to produce panic, misrecognition, the shakiness of perception's ground? Finally, what happens to questions of managing alterity or difference or resources in collective life when feeling *bad* becomes evidence for a structural condition of injustice? What does it mean for the theory and practice of social transformation when feeling *good* becomes evidence of justice's triumph? (111-112)

Berlant's skepticism is well-founded. If we are imagining, with Euripides, a subject who is constituted in and by her relations with others, and whose capacity for action is likewise enabled or constrained through those relationships, this is precisely the kind of subject (as Berlant similarly points out) whose constitution in "looser spaces of social life and personhood that do not congeal in categories of power, cause, and effect the way the law does" renders it illegible to punitive law as it currently stands (125). Moreover, Berlant warns against prioritizing the resolution of pain, whether personal or systemic, through recourse to the law over working to change dominant structures of normativity that they link to "diminished expectations for liberty in national life": "The reparation of pain," they argue, "does not bring into being a just life" (128).

I want to suggest that attending to affect as a means of surfacing injustice – taking notice of the times when we feel *bad* – doesn't necessarily entail reducing the truth of our experience to a moment of pain or trauma, nor does it necessarily entail accepting that pain as truthful without question: Berlant is right when they say that pain can as easily produce panic and misrecognition as clarity, and right that the absence of pain on its own does not indicate the presence of justice. But restorative and transformative justice frameworks, which in their focus on repairing relationships without resorting to punitive law already acknowledge that legal justice cannot recognize more complex and contextual forms of agency and subjectivity, also already aim at altering the hegemonic conditions that enable violence and harm. Moreover, Kaba, Sered, and

other abolitionist thinkers share Berlant's own suspicion of trusting pain or its absence unconditionally. In the same interview with Ayana Young quoted above, Kaba warns forcefully against allowing personal feelings to be the sole indicator of justice or its absence. "The concept of the personal being political as a basis for feminist organizing in the past is so true, and yet it is so fraught at the same time," she says,

What it's not saying – and I think what sometimes people want it to be saying – is that how I personally feel should be made into policy. And we can't operate in a world where that's true. We shouldn't codify our personal feelings of vengeance to apply to the entire world (152).

Kaba also points to the importance of community in offering support and guidance when how we feel doesn't align with the values we purport to hold, to ensure that "our feelings don't end up governing how we're going to live in the world... how all of us are going to be governed together" (153). While feeling *bad* can spur us to action, Kaba suggests, that action ought to be undertaken in community to ensure that it matches our values, so that our own pursuit of feeling *good* – and seeking revenge could make us feel good, if only in the short term – doesn't end up dominating others.

Justice as shared affect is inherently relational because it has to do with how we can expect to move through the world and be treated by others, but it is also relational in the sense that it can only exist and have meaning in the context of ongoing relationships, which require us to demonstrate that we can accommodate and be accountable to others regardless of how close or distant they are, or how much or little we know of them. As such, the feeling of justice is a process, not a product: the process of striving to be in just relations with the others with whom we share the world. And although we will never "arrive" at justice for this reason, it is still possible to imagine the feeling of justice as a presence: not just (as is the case with Hecuba) the absence of indifference but the presence of recognition; not just (as with Deianira) the absence of

dread but the presence of comfort; not just (as with Medea) the absence of hostility but the presence of hospitality; and not just (as with Creusa) the absence of grief but the presence of joy.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion: The Uses of Tragedy

I. Where I sit

I am sitting at a study carrel in SUNY Albany's Science Library, which is a beautiful building made almost entirely of glass. My study carrel is in my most coveted spot, in a windowed alcove on the second floor, overlooking the grand ground floor entry lobby, on the one side, and the sidewalk and huge concrete planters, on the other. It's the end of my last semester in my last year of college, and I'm working on my honors thesis. I've been thinking about Aeschylus's *Oresteia* for nearly a year – first the Ted Hughes translation, then the Hugh Lloyd-Jones, and finally picking my own way through the Greek words using the Liddell and Scott lexicon. I've been maddened and entranced, aching with indignation for Clytemnestra and the daughter she sought to avenge; I have been struggling to find a way for the trilogy's ending to make sense. I find it deeply dissatisfying that Orestes should be absolved of murdering his mother. But these words, spoken by the chorus of Furies in repudiation of Orestes' potential acquittal in the *Eumenides*, *feel* right, though I can't yet say why: "There is a place where what is terrible is good,/and must remain,/guardian of the senses./It is useful to learn through suffering./Who, whether city or mortal,/if he did not educate his heart in reverence,/would honor justice the same way?"

I have already identified for myself my investment in the dysfunctional, murderous house of Atreus. As someone with an excess of family (seven grandparents, three siblings from my parents' two marriages, too many aunts and uncles and cousins to count, and a mother who died

when I was an infant), I tell myself it makes sense that I would gravitate toward a work of literature in which the limits of kinship are so clearly at stake. I am looking for a way to make sense of myself in the network of relationships I am tangled in. I am looking for a mother who loves her daughter so much she'd die for her. I am looking for myself in the daughter who died first.

It's not until my second year of graduate school that I begin to understand the Furies' warning: it's not just that some divine power must govern the senses, inspiring fear and awe; it's that the knowledge born through suffering and which ensures the honoring of justice is the terrible knowledge of loss, of what it is to lose another person. It is knowledge Clytemnestra has and the Furies protect, and that Agamemnon and Orestes refuse; it is knowledge that Athena's newly-minted democratic court – if it is to function – must likewise ignore. And I wonder: if the court of law cannot see loss the way the Furies do, what else can't it see? What other claims to justice must be foreclosed? Which claims are prized?

The more Greek tragedy I read – not just Aeschylus, but Sophocles and Euripides, too – the more I see in it a deep concern with the question of what it is to do justice, as gods act harshly against mortals, whose fates are complicated by prophecies and implicated in the actions of ancestors and progeny, generations before and after; and as female figures persistently act in ways that force those in power to educate their hearts in reverence: to learn what it is to lose, to see themselves in networks of relationships, and to honor justice.

II. Thinking with

Maybe this revelation – that Greek tragedy, as a genre, is concerned with justice; that its female characters play a pivotal role in complicating, expanding, and re-imagining what justice

could be – is obvious, and so not a revelation at all. But it has been a revelation to me, one I’ve learned over and over in the last six years, and one I could not have arrived at on my own. I may have come to Greek tragedy (and to graduate school) obsessed with its mothers, but kinship isn’t the only nexus of relationships that matters for justice: friendship is one, citizenship is one, even agency is networked, as tragedy’s female figures are enabled to act in certain ways by their relationships with others, and are constrained from acting in other ways, with their life possibilities shaped accordingly. My work has likewise been made possible only through my relationships with others – with family, with friends, with teachers and mentors – which are also, always, more than just relationships, but whole ways of being in and encountering the world. I am only able to see and to find in Greek tragedy what I do because of these relationships, which have oriented my dissertation work not just toward kinship, or toward gender, but toward justice, and finding a way to read Greek tragedy that might enlist it in the service of making a more just world.

The question of reading is an important one to me: both why *read* Greek tragedy (as opposed to watching it in performance), and why read *Greek tragedy* (as opposed to the wealth of other literature)? My answer to the first question is simple, though perhaps not wholly satisfying. I have very rarely seen Greek tragedy performed, and so cannot speak knowledgeably about it. But I also want to make a positive case for engaging with the plays through reading, rather than performance.

Performance raises questions that reading alone can’t necessarily answer. For example: what does it mean for the plays’ theorization of gender that all female characters were played onstage by male actors in their 5th century B.C. Athenian context? How does that theorization of gender change or become activated differently in 21st century performances whose casting is not

restricted by gender? And how does the likely composition of the plays' audiences – predominantly male, at the time of Greek tragedy's performance in the City Dionysia; more diverse in our own time – impact how those characters and their actions are received?

Conversely, reading also raises questions that can't be answered in performance. Attending to the text through close reading and structural analysis enables other questions to come to the fore. For example: why do female figures appear in these plays at all? What kinds of action are they allowed, and what forms of relation are they made to represent? If they differ from the male figures – in affect, intention, or assumed values – to what end? Engaging with the tragedies through reading enables those other questions to arise – questions about performance, historical context, representation, intertextuality, and more – and opens multiple paths of interpretation, without prioritizing any. Questions raised in the process of reading can remain in tension or unresolved in a way that performance cannot always afford: Medea's speeches, for instance, could be delivered onstage in a way that supports her characterization as a murderous and jealous wife, or in a way that suggests her choices are reasoned and deliberate; but reading allows for the possibility of both.

Encountering Greek tragedy through reading is also, and importantly, to take part in a project of rereading, both of the text – as close reading can uncover a tragedy's tensions and contradictions – and of its reception in translation, scholarship, and criticism – as close reading a tragedy can also entail reading *against* a dominant interpretation. It is for this reason that reading tragedy isn't as solitary as it may seem: while I don't share the experience of viewing a performance with an audience, I *do* share the experience of reading *Hecuba* or *Medea* or *Ion* with everyone else who ever has. Just as the text does not exist in a vacuum, my relationship to it and my reading of it do not either, and engaging with others' readings and the history of a play's

interpretation and reception help me to see how it has been enlisted to support particular ways of understanding the world, and how it might yet yield ways of imagining the world otherwise.

To the second question – why read *Greek tragedy*? – my answer is similarly simple. Why read *any* literature at all? For the kinds of thinking it enables us to do. I discovered Greek tragedy more or less by accident, through a class on *Antigone* as an undergrad, and all the academic work I’ve done since then has just been an excuse to keep thinking about it – or rather, to keep thinking with it. I think *about* Greek tragedy in the sense that I am curious about its features as a genre, its role in civic life in Athens, and its plots. But I think *with* Greek tragedy in the sense that it opens questions – and opens *me* to questions – that are of enduring importance, and offers unexpected answers. For example: some of tragedy’s mothers are murderous, seeking revenge on their children’s killers or those who have otherwise harmed them. What does that revenge accomplish, and could it be pointing to something worth hanging on to – something that “legitimate” forms of legal justice can’t accommodate?

The answers that I find in tragedy are unexpected only in the sense that people might not expect that I find them *there*: that *Greek tragedy* could offer a vision of justice that is more expansive and more nourishing than justice as retribution, that it could critique, and not just valorize, the democratic court of law, that it could make a case for attending to affect and emotion as real dimensions of doing justice, and implicate systemic forces, and not just individual agency, in incidents of violence and harm. But it does – or at least, it *can* – and that, for me, is its use: in thinking with Greek tragedy, it becomes possible to reconsider our own world – its norms, its institutions, its values – and imagine that it could be another way. This capacity isn’t exclusive to Greek tragedy, and I think tragedy is at its most capacious when it is not centered – when it is only one part of a larger conversation, read against itself and alongside

other texts. More than beauty, more than “tradition,” more even than my own attachment to the plays, tragedy’s potential to be put to use keeps me turning and returning to it.

III. To be of use

I want to be of use. (How else can I justify myself?) I want my work to be of use. And so I want to end with a reflection on teaching Greek tragedy, and the uses my students have found for it. I cannot take credit for my students’ insights, much as I might like to. At most, I have given them themes or questions to consider. They are engaged and capable thinkers; they do the rest. I put some tragedies in front of them, and they put the tragedies to use. So:

It is April 2019, and I am teaching Euripides’ *Hecuba*. On our second day of discussing the play, my student discussion leaders split the class into small groups and task each with analyzing one of the play’s major deaths (Polyxena, Polydorus, and Polymestor’s sons) in terms of its “moral, judicial, and social impact” – that is, its impact on our assessment of the moral goodness or badness of the characters’ actions, on our understanding of how law and justice are at work in the play, and on the social relationships between the characters. The discussion that follows highlights the ways that these impacts are entangled, as the students observe that Polyxena’s death by sacrifice to placate Achilles’ angry ghost preserves Agamemnon’s “legal” authority as king, but also preserves a hierarchical power dynamic that values Greek lives over Trojan ones, and a dead man’s wishes over a living woman’s suffering. This line of inquiry in turn leads students to reconsider their assessment of Hecuba’s actions: in a world with unequal access to power, and where that power is exercised in unjust ways, does it make sense to call Hecuba’s revenge on Polymestor unjust? And if that is true in the world of the play, what does that suggest about similar situations in our own world?

It is January 2020, and I am teaching Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. As my students draw out the tensions within the play – between different kinds of power, between competing obligations to kin and to “the law,” between conceptions of justice as (in their words) “subjective” or “objective” – they begin to interrogate the motivations and efficacy of punishment itself. They connect the two kinds of punishment at work in *Prometheus Bound* – Zeus's immediate punishment of Prometheus, and Prometheus's deferred punishment of Zeus, if we consider his withholding of information that Zeus wants a punishment – to the real-world temporality of incarceration as a response to wrongdoing. They note that incarceration can seem like an immediate “solution” to the problem of crime, but that the longer-term response of policy change is more equipped to tackle systemic problems at their roots. And they wonder: how can the isolation of a wrongdoer from a community, with no real possibility of reintegration, serve anything but a retributive purpose? How is it meaningfully different from the vengeance they've been taught to condemn?

The act of constructing meaning together in the classroom is also a kind of reading, one students perform collaboratively as they encounter and re-encounter a tragedy (or any text) with their peers. As students are in dialogue with each other – building on each other's ideas, generating new insights, and formulating questions – they also enter a dialogue with the text at hand. Their responses to each other enable them to respond to the text differently, as their conversation uncovers tensions within the play and makes visible its potential for multiple interpretations: that Hecuba could act in a way that is morally painful *and* ethically coherent, that the Oceanids could be spectators *and* actors in the theater of Prometheus's punishment, that Prometheus himself could be noble *and* culpable. By reading collaboratively, students come to see and hold open these possibilities, learning to put themselves in relation with the text at hand

and to think with characters on the margins, and so create the potential for different kinds of readings, ones that may even seem to trouble or exceed the texts themselves.

I like to think that thinking with tragedy, as my students have done and as I try to do, could be, in however small a way, an exercise in educating our hearts in reverence: not for the past, not for the text, not even, necessarily, for the “justice” that the Furies invoke and which we try to puzzle through together; but for the networks of relationships that constitute us and implicate us, beyond even the ones we might recognize, and the obligations of care they entail.

There are some lines from Anne Carson’s translation of Euripides’ *Orestes* that are constantly on my mind. “I’ll take care of you,” Pylades says to Orestes, as they contemplate the madness the Furies will inflict on him in their pursuit. Orestes warns, “It’s rotten work.” And Pylades replies, “Not to me. Not if it’s you.” To aid in that rotten work of caring – the unceasing work of seeing harm and striving to end it, of putting oneself in the service of others, of extending hospitality to strangers, of tending to grief and rage as well as to joy – what better use could there be?

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