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978-0-521-85873-1 - Euripides and the Poetics of Nostalgia

Gary S. Meltzer

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Reviled by critics from Aristophanes to Nietzsche as sophistic, iconoclastic, and sensationalistic, Euripides has long been held responsible for the decline of Greek tragedy – and, to some degree, of Athenian culture. Yet the author of such wrenching and disturbing plays as the *Medea* and the *Bacchae* has a fundamentally conservative side: his drama conveys longing for an idealized, pre-sophistic age that still respected the gods and traditional codes of right conduct. The Euripidean nostalgia for a lost voice of transcendent truth that would speak clearly to all, combined with his proclivity for skeptical analysis, epitomizes the discursive practice of his era, as exemplified by Thucydidean history, Aristophanic comedy, and Platonic philosophy. In fact, this book grounds its interpretation of the plays in key passages from the “scientific” historian Thucydides, who also expresses yearning for a bygone “simplicity” or “singleness of heart.”¹ But the unstable mix of nostalgia and skepticism gives particular power and pathos to Euripidean tragedy, which consistently calls attention to the unbridgeable distance between a mythical past and the playwright’s own world. The fact that Euripides explicitly addresses this distance in his drama also sets him apart from his fellow tragedians, helping explain Aristotle’s assessment of him as “the most tragic of the tragic poets” (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453a29–30; my translation).

¹ For example, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* Thucydides laments the disappearance of the “simple way of looking at things [τὸ εὐηθές],” which he regards as the “mark of a noble nature” (3.83.1). The English translation of Thucydides is by Rex Warner: *Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 1954). The Greek comes from Thucydides, *Historiae*, ed. Henry Stuart Jones. 2 vols. Rpt. 1979–1980 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942).

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The combination of romantic longing for a simple, clear voice of truth with cynicism and scientific detachment speaks to our own post-modern condition. As in late-fifth-century B.C. Athens, a defining historical moment for Western culture, contemporary society faces a crisis of values, voice, and meaning in a period of social decline, radical change, and war. Indeed, Euripidean tragedy poses questions that still preoccupy us: Is there a higher power, a transcendent being or principle of truth and justice? If so, what is the capability of language to represent this power or principle? What are the strengths and limitations of debate and reasoned analysis in reaching truth and justice? In an increasingly fragmented and relativistic world, if belief in such powers or principles is not shared by all, on what objective standard can we ground any moral appeal?

This book investigates the way these questions are asked and answered by four plays that span the three decades or so in which Euripides' extant dramas were produced (438–405 B.C.).² The paradoxical answer given by the plays illuminates the postmodern response to the problem of the lost voice of truth and justice.

* * *

Polynices. The word of truth is single and plain,
 and justice doesn't need shifting, intricate interpretations,
 since it makes its own case. But the unjust argument,
 since it is sick and deficient, needs clever medicine.

.....

Eteocles. If the beautiful and the wise were the same for all,
 men would not have the two-sided strife of debate.
 But nothing is like or equal among men
 except names – and names are not facts.
 (469–72; 499–502; my translation)³

² Although Euripides first competed in the Athenian tragic festival, the City Dionysia, in 455 B.C., his first extant drama, the *Alcestis*, wasn't produced until almost twenty years later (438 B.C.); the last was the *Bacchae* (405 B.C.), staged after the playwright's death in 407/406 B.C.

³ The Greek text for the *Phoenician Women* passages runs as follows:

ἀπλοῦς ὁ μῦθος τῆς ἀληθείας ἔφυ,
 κού ποικίλων δεῖ τ'ἀνδιχ' ἐρμηνευμάτων·

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The debate over the kingship of Thebes in the *Phoenician Women* crystallizes the conflicting perspectives of nostalgia and cynical detachment in Euripidean drama. The debate stems from a controversy between two brothers over which one of them should rule following the demise of their father, Oedipus the king. After Eteocles violates the oath he has sworn to share rule jointly with his brother, Polyneices gathers allies from neighboring towns and stands ready to invade Thebes to reclaim rule.⁴

Polyneices bases his claim for justice on the fact that his brother violated his sworn oath. Later on in his speech, Polyneices asserts that the same gods who uphold the sanctity of oaths uphold the justice of his claim to kingship (491–3); his “word of truth” (469), based as it is on divine sanction, conveys its meaning univocally and clearly, without slippage, distortion, or artifice. Indeed, the word (as signifier) is completely and immediately transparent to the meaning (signified) of which it is the vehicle. In Polyneices’ view, this word “makes its own case” (more literally, “has a due measure or fitness”) without the need for “shifting, intricate interpretations” – that is to say, its meaning is so self-evident and authoritative as to be irrefutable. His “word of truth” is, therefore, an autonomous, divinely authorized medium.

Polyneices’ assertion of belief in a simple “word of truth” harks back to an earlier age in which meaning was supposedly univocal and authorized by the gods. At the end of his speech, Polyneices contrasts the simple, clear “facts” of his position with the “twists of argument” of those who would oppose it (494–5). His assertion that his “word

ἔχει γὰρ αὐτὰ καιρόν· ὁ δ’ ἄδικος λόγος
 νοσῶν ἐν αὐτῷ φαρμάκων δέϊται σοφῶν. (469–72)

 εἰ πᾶσι ταῦτόν καλὸν ἔφυ σοφόν θ’ ἅμα,
 οὐκ ἦν ἂν ἀμφίλεκτος ἀνθρώποις ἔρις·
 νῦν δ’ οὐθ’ ὅμοιον οὐδὲν οὐτ’ ἴσον βροτοῖς,
 πλὴν ὀνόμασαι· τὸ δ’ ἔργον οὐκ ἔστιν τόδε. (499–502)

Unless otherwise noted (as here), all translations of Euripides will come from *Euripides 1–5* in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955–9). The Greek text of the *Phoenissae* is drawn from *Euripidis Fabulae*, vol. 3, ed. Gilbert Murray. Rpt. 1975 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909).

⁴ Aeschylus treats this fraternal conflict in his *Seven against Thebes*, and Sophocles dramatizes its aftermath in his *Antigone*.

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of truth” (*muthos tês alêtheias*, 469) is universally recognized (495) rests on his claim of divine authority for it. For him, a “word” (or “story,” because the Greek *muthos* indicates both) sanctioned by the gods is, like the myths of old, a vehicle of truth that transcends politics, rhetoric, and history.

In Polyneices’ view, Eteocles’ “unjust argument,” lacking the divine authority of the “word of truth,” must rely on sophistic distinctions and elaborations – on “shifting, intricate interpretations” – to mask its inherent weakness. According to Polyneices, Eteocles’ “unjust argument” needs “clever medicine” (*pharmakôn . . . sophôn*, 472) to make its case – a clear allusion to the art of rhetoric that the sophists – the itinerant lawyers, speechwriters, and public-relations men of Euripides’ day – would teach to anyone willing to pay. The opposing voices or arguments alluded to by Polyneices specifically recall the teachings of the sophist Protagoras, who reportedly claimed that “there are two contradictory arguments about everything”⁵ and boasted that he could “make the weaker argument the stronger.”⁶

In referring to his brother’s “unjust argument” (*adikos logos*, 471), Polyneices associates it directly with the Protagorean “weaker” (or “worse” or “unjust”) argument of Euripides’ own era. Eteocles responds to his brother’s charge of using the “clever medicine” of sophistry by throwing the word for “clever” back at him, using it in the sense of “wise”: “If the beautiful and the wise [*sophon*, 499] were the same for all, / men would not have the two-sided strife of debate.” Eteocles’ reply not only dramatizes the difference he has with his brother but also illustrates the very point he is making: the brothers themselves cannot agree on the meaning of the word *sophos*. What might be hair-splitting cleverness for Polyneices is wisdom for Eteocles.

⁵ Robin Waterfield, trans., *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and the Sophists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 211.

⁶ W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 182. For a positive interpretation of Protagoras’ boast, see Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric. Studies in Rhetoric/Communication*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 110–11, who points out that the “weaker” cause need not carry pejorative connotations: Protagoras might be claiming to be able to help the weaker but just cause prevail over the stronger but unjust one.

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Eteocles then gives the theoretical underpinning for his own claim to justice by arguing that “nothing is like or equal among men / except names – and names are not facts.” In rebutting Polyneices’ claim that the “facts” of the case are plain to all, Eteocles draws a sophistic distinction between “facts” and “names.”⁷ The so-called facts trumpeted by Polyneices are not grounded in reality; they are merely “names” or words (signifiers) whose meaning (signified) differs for different people. Far from being self-evident, the meaning of such terms as the “beautiful” and the “wise” (or the “true” and the “just”) is subject to dispute.

The debate between brothers, therefore, reveals several layers of conflict; they disagree not only about the meaning of individual words but also about the very possibility of arriving at clear, shared meanings for words. Underlying these differences is a disagreement about how language works and how meaning is made. Whereas Polyneices assumes that the gods both define and dispense truth and justice, Eteocles claims that meaning is constructed by human beings in the political arena, through the “two-sided strife” of argument, debate, philosophical discussion, and so on.⁸ Eteocles maintains, therefore, that the so-called word of truth merely conveys his brother’s self-interest, which is no more transcendent than his own position. For Eteocles, language is an instrument that is inextricably linked to politics and history.

The clash between the single, clear “word of truth” and the “two-sided strife of debate” enacts the central agon of Euripidean drama: the controversy over the phonocentric tradition that dominates the history of Western philosophy from Plato to Saussure, according to Jacques Derrida. This tradition is grounded in a “metaphysics of presence,” which Derrida defines as a “system in which the central signified, the

⁷ Gorgias makes this distinction the third tenet of his treatise *On Nature* (or *On What Is Not*): “The spoken word is our means of communication, but the spoken word is not the same as substantial things and things with being. Therefore, it is not the case that we communicate things with being to our neighbours; what we communicate is the spoken word, which is different from these entities.” Translated by Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, p. 235.

⁸ The Greek phrase I translate as “the two-sided strife of debate” (ἀμφίλεκτος . . . ἔρις, 500) is ambiguous, referring not just to debate but to any form of verbal contention.

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original or transcendental signified, is . . . absolutely present outside a system of differences.”⁹ In explaining the assumptions underlying this belief, Derrida argues that “the thought of being, as the thought of this transcendental signified, is manifested above all in the voice,” and refers to the “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning.”¹⁰

The phonocentric tradition therefore privileges the spoken over the written word, assuming that voice “is the signifying substance *given to consciousness*” or “is consciousness itself.”¹¹ Voice is deemed to be capable of fully and immediately conveying not only presence but also meaning (the “signified”), which transcends or effaces the word (the “signifier”). It is as if the inner will of the divinely privileged speaker, fully embodied in his spoken word, gains access to the realm of Being itself, achieving a mythical harmony between inner and outer, signified and signifier, self and other. Such a voice or discourse has no need for any external sign or embellishment to convey its meaning, because it “makes its own case,” as Polyneices puts it.

By contrast, Polyneices regards “shifting, intricate interpretations” as a weak substitute for the self-evident, self-present “voice of truth.” The same opposition Polyneices draws between living, healthy speech and a misleading, deficient, but clever imitation of it is also found in Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*, which Derrida extensively analyzes in an early essay.¹² In the dialogue, Socrates argues that writing, far from providing “a recipe [*pharmakon*, 274e6] for memory and wisdom,” produces “forgetfulness” in those employing it, because they rely on “external marks” instead of their own memory to help them remember (275a).¹³ Since writing is a mere imitation of the “living speech” that

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 280. In this passage Derrida is actually defining this metaphysics by its opposite, so I have removed the term “never” from his formulation.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 20, 12.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. and ed. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 22.

¹² See Jacques Derrida, “The Pharmacy of Plato,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, translations of Plato come from Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*. *Bollingen Series* 71

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cannot answer questions on its own (275d; 276a), exponents of writing will gain not wisdom “but only its semblance” (275a).

In referring to writing as a “recipe” for forgetfulness, Plato uses the same word (*pharmakon*) as Polyneices does when he speaks of his brother’s “clever medicine” of sophistry – literally, “medicine” that is added onto a sick or deficient *logos* or “argument.” Derrida uses the term “supplement” – a sign that “is added, occurs as a surplus”¹⁴ – to describe the function of the *pharmakon* in Plato’s dialogue. In the phonocentric view, writing – or other additions or “supplements” to the voice, such as the “clever medicine” of sophistry and rhetoric – initiates a “process of redoubling” that necessarily defers, distorts, and disperses meaning, presence, and truth.¹⁵ In Derridean terms, the play of linguistic substitutions “permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin” is called the “movement of *supplementarity*,” because “it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified.”¹⁶

If Polyneices’ “word of truth” evinces the “metaphysics of presence,” Eteocles’ denial of the possibility of a shared, transcendent meaning of “truth” or “justice” amounts to a critique of this metaphysics. For Eteocles, because language is merely conventional, it necessarily lacks any stable, authoritative center of meaning; the lack of such a center permits the proliferation of competing signs, resulting in an irresolvable “two-sided strife of debate.” Eteocles is in effect conducting a deconstruction of his brother’s “metaphysics of presence”: his denial of identity between signifier and signified, his insistence on linguistic instability, is closely related to the Derridean concept of “difference.”¹⁷ In Eteocles’ view, the potential of language to serve as

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961). The Greek text is Plato, *Opera*, vol. 2, ed. John Burnet. Rpt. 1941 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1901).

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 289.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, pp. 109–10.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 289.

¹⁷ For Derrida’s definition of the “metaphysics of presence” as the “exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire” for a “meaning . . . thinkable and possible outside of all signifiers,” see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 49, 73. Elsewhere, in *Writing and Difference*, p. 279, Derrida argues that this metaphysics involves “the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable

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a bridge for understanding, to provide identity (as a “like” or “equal” element), only emphasizes the inherent disjunction between signifier and signified. The different meanings of the words “beautiful” and “wise” that emerge in the brothers’ dialogue become emblematic of “difference” in this wider sense. According to Eteocles, the very use of language throws men into the realm, not of fixed, simple meaning, but of “shifting, intricate interpretations” and the “two-sided strife of debate.”

Whereas Polyneices offers a holistic view of the cosmos, one in which human beings are capable of deriving clear, univocal meanings and values from higher powers, Eteocles posits a dualistic world in which the divine (or the transcendent) and the human, subject and object, signifier and signified, are irremediably divided.¹⁸ The controversy between brothers is mirrored in Euripides’ contemporary society, riven as it was by a semiotic, intellectual, and political crisis – a crisis that amounted to ancient Athenian “culture wars.” Euripides boldly transforms the Mycenaean tale of the warring sons of Oedipus into the warring “schools” of thought of his own age: Polyneices represents the old world of myth and song (*muthos*), centering on gods and heroes, whereas Eteocles becomes a spokesman for the new human-centered world of logic, rhetoric, and analysis (*logos*). The challenge to the mythic worldview that arose in late-fifth-century Athens caused a controversy that reverberates throughout Euripidean drama.¹⁹

presence . . .” “Difference” as used by Derrida means the dispersal, deferral, and absence, which, as the necessary conditions of both meaning and presence, negate the possibility of any originary meaning or presence. For a fuller discussion of this broader concept of *différance*, versus Saussure’s “difference,” see *Of Grammatology*, pp. 62–5.

¹⁸ On the movement from mythical to early logical thought, see Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1996), pp. 125–6: “Man no longer lived in an ambivalent world in which ‘contraries’ were complementary and oppositions were ambiguous. He was now cast into a dualist world with clear-cut oppositions.” Although I think Detienne somewhat overstates the case for this historical shift, his analysis captures well the brothers’ diametrically opposed positions.

¹⁹ In “Die Sinnkrise bei Euripides,” in *Tradition und Geist: Gesammelte Essays zur Dichtung*, ed. Carl Becker (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1960), Karl Reinhardt argues that the crisis of meaning dramatized in Euripides reflects the sophistic revolution of his period.

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As Athens began to evolve from a “song culture” into a “book culture” and literacy became more widespread, skepticism grew about voices and signs whose veracity had been widely accepted because it was guaranteed by the gods.²⁰ The attacks on traditional wisdom made by the pre-Socratic philosophers and sophists heightened the growing skepticism in the fifth century B.C., as did the questioning of old aristocratic truths in the democratic *polis*. The Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) further eroded ethical and social norms formerly validated by the gods, prompting further redefinition or dismantling of old concepts of truth and justice, at least among the intellectual elite.

Yet there was no sharp break in ancient Athens between an illiterate “song culture” and a literate “book culture,” no radical dichotomy between a holistic world of myth and a dualistic world of logic and analysis. Euripides exaggerates the opposing positions taken by Polyneices and Eteocles for dramatic effect. Polyneices’ concept of a simple *logos* that conveys transcendent truth does not reflect the complexity and ambiguity of divine pronouncements and signs as they are generally represented in archaic Greek culture. Interpreting the will of the gods as it was expressed in oracles, omens, and other signs was typically a vexed and contentious matter, subject to both personal and political agendas, as many examples from Greek literature and history reveal.²¹

The transition from song to book, from myth to logic, occurred gradually: the growth of literacy, the rise of prose, and the flowering of philosophy in the late fifth and early fourth centuries in Athens did not result in widespread loss of belief in the old gods or the disappearance

²⁰ For this shift, see two books by Eric A. Havelock: *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) and *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963). I borrow the terms “song culture” and “book culture” from John Herington, *Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 3–4.

²¹ Two examples will suffice. In the *Iliad* Hector rebukes Poulydamas for interpreting a bird-sign as a warning to the Trojans not to press their attack against the Greek ships (12.231–50); Hector’s interpretation is later proven to be tragically wrong. In Herodotus’ *Histories*, the Athenians ask for a second oracular response from the Delphic priestess when the first seems to foretell doom for their city-state at the hands of the Persians. A controversy erupts over the proper interpretation of this second oracle (the famous “wooden wall” oracle). After a vigorous debate, Themistocles’ interpretation finally prevails (7.139–44).

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of their worship. Rather, an interpenetration of worldviews must have occurred, in a way analogous, perhaps, to the transition between the “book culture” and the information age that is currently developing (albeit much more rapidly) in Western society.²² The proliferating use of computers and the Internet in our own day has not yet produced the much-prophesied death of the book any more than the ascendant “book culture” produced the death of the “song culture” in ancient Greece.

Nevertheless, many Athenian citizens, including leading intellectuals, writers, and politicians, put growing faith in the power of new hermeneutic practices, such as political debate, philosophical dialectic, historical analysis, and the sophistic “double arguments.” The exponents of these new practices sought to attain the truth – if not absolute truth, at least truth in a relative or pragmatic sense – through deliberation and rational argumentation.²³ In the Funeral Oration, for example, Pericles voices great confidence in the ability of the Athenian democracy to strike a proper balance between deliberation and action: “We Athenians, in our own persons, take our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions, for we do not think there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly

²² Eric Havelock’s notion that a “literate revolution” occurred in fifth-century Greece, although provocative, has been criticized not only for relying too heavily on an oversimplified concept of literacy but also for creating a false dichotomy between orality and literacy. See Andrew Ford, “From Letters to Literature: Reading the ‘Song Culture’ in Classical Greece,” in Harvey Yunis, ed., *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 16, 21.

For a criticism of Havelock’s view, expressed in *The Literate Revolution in Greece*, that writing initiated a revolutionary advance in abstract or rational thought in fifth-century Athens, see Deborah Tarn Steiner, *The Tyrant’s Writ: Myths and Images of Writing in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Steiner argues that “writing is not a discovery that inevitably heralds in a new rational, skeptical, and objective approach,” asserting that in the earliest references to writing in the literary and archaeological record, it retains the enigmatic character and ritualistic powers of nonalphabetic signs (p. 5).

²³ Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, p. 285, sees an “undeniable” influence of Protagoras on the anonymous sophistic treatise called *Double Arguments* (or *Contrasting Arguments*). But he finds “truer repositories of his influence” in the debates dramatized in Euripides and reported in Thucydides (p. 285, n. 2). In “The First Humanists,” *Proceedings of the Classical Association* 65 (1988): 19, W. K. C. Guthrie asserts that Protagoras replaced the criterion of truth with “a pragmatic one of advantage and disadvantage.”