CHAPTER 1

Introduction

τίς δῆτ' ἰατρός ἐστι νῦν ἐν τῇ πόλει;
Who is the doctor now in the city?

Aristophanes, *Wealth* 407

τῆς δὲ πόλεως <κακῶς > βουλευσαμένης ἰατρὸς ἂν γενέσθαι
You would become a doctor for this badly counseled city.

Thucydides 6.14 (Nicias on the debate over the Sicilian expedition)

If this road, before it opens into the grove of the Muses, leads us over by the temple of Asclepius, so is this for acquaintances of Aristotle only further proof that we are moving in the right footsteps.

Jacob Bernays[1]

This study, an examination of the effect of the great plague of Athens on the Athenian imagination, will try to show that Jacob Bernays, the first great proponent of the medical interpretation of Aristotelian *katharsis* (and the uncle of Dr. Sigmund Freud's wife), himself stepped closer to a truth about Athenian tragedy than he had realized, because the Muses indeed sit quite close to the temple of Asclepius on the south slope of the Acropolis in Athens. For, assuming Aristotle did visit the Theater of Dionysus in Athens to witness dramatic performances, an activity he subordinated to reading them as texts, a few steps, even a brief glance over his shoulder, would have taken him into the Athenian City Asklepieion, the shrine of the Greek god of healing (see Figure 1). The Athenians had placed this temple at the upper western edge of their great theater dedicated to Dionysus in the last quarter-century of their finest era of tragic drama, a few years after a devastating plague had killed from a quarter to a third of their city's population. One wonders what, if anything, Aristotle made of this congruence, since his

[1] "Führt uns dieser Weg, ehe er in den Hain der Musen mündet, am Tempel des Aesculap vorüber, so ist dies für Kenner des Stagiriten nur ein Beweis mehr, daß wir in den richtigen Spuren gehen." Bernays 1880: 14. I have provided my own translation instead of the one by Barnes, as my more literal translation preserves more of Bernays' sense that he was following Aristotle's medical footsteps.

own concerns with drama were primarily formal and secondarily ethical; Dionysus has "nothing to do" (to play on the ancient proverb on the dramas themselves) with the philosopher's theory, and Aristotle's work on drama seems to go out of its way to minimize Athenian tragedy's very relationship with the *polis* of Athens.[2] However, since I am not focusing on Aristotle's *Poetics* here, I shall postpone the consideration of its concerns for a while to concentrate on a triangular relationship between *polis*, healing and theater. Dionysus aside, what does Asclepius have to do with Athenian drama? After all, Asclepius is only mentioned in a handful of the extent dramas that were produced in Athens. However, the adjacency of the Asklepieion to the Theater of Dionysus was an important part of their performative environment after 420 and the construction of the Asklepieion itself was part of the Athenian reaction to the plague.

Over the last two decades scholars have increasingly paid attention to a more historically rigorous situating of Greek drama in its context of performance; such studies have examined, for example, how drama concerns itself with certain social tensions and their resolution in the democracy of Athens, and here I pursue a line of inquiry that builds on this preceding discussion, with a focus on the relationship between the plague that struck Athens during the first part of the 420s BCE and the dramas that were produced then and during the next fifteen years.[3] Simon Goldhill (Goldhill 2000: 35) sums up much of the work on Athenian drama at the turn of the millennium: "That the event of the fifth-century drama festival in Athens is political (on the broadest understanding of that term) and that its specific rituals and language are integrally democratic is a starting point of much recent writing on tragedy."[4] This will be my starting point as well. The following study investigates the effect of the great plague of Athens on the imagination of its literary artists and the social imagination of the city as a whole. This work thus involves the complex interplay among the theme of mortality and the imagery of disease in drama, along with the development of the cult of the healing hero/god Asclepius in fifth-century Athens, during a period of war and increasing civic strife. The *History of the Peloponnesian*

[2] The modern import of the proverb is considered in the Introduction by Winkler and Zeitlin to *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?* On the absence of the *polis* in the *Poetics* see Hall 1996.

[3] See in particular the work, following the lead of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, of Foley, Goldhill and Seaford. Against this movement, Jasper Griffin 1998 has argued for a return to more esthetic appreciation of Greek drama, albeit from a more rigorously historical viewpoint than Heath 1987. Against Griffin see Seaford 2000 and Goldhill 2000.

[4] The relationship between democracy and City Dionysia is further elaborated in Seaford 1994 and Connor 1989, 1996. See also Raaflaub 1989: 49–54. The cautions by Rhodes 2003 against the overemphasis on democracy, as opposed to the ideology of the *polis*, in studies of Athenian drama, are salutary.

War of Thucydides will also be a recurring concern, both as a source for this period and as an example of the effect of the plague on the Athenian imagination. Imagery and themes of illness, once situated in the contexts of the new cult and the social turmoils in Athens, take on resonances far beyond the health of the diseased character in a particular play. Athenian drama produced after the plague of the 420s and next to the Asklepieion will come to be seen as part of the discussion of the political health of Athens. I use the term "political" in a more literal sense than normal; that is, as Goldhill observes, "political" connotes matters pertaining to the order of the *polis*, including its religious life.

My argument will have three threads that will work their way throughout the succeeding chapters, but they will be stressed in the order I now list them. First, I shall show how the imagery and language of disease becomes a living, not dead, metaphor after 430 (if, in fact, it had ever died); second, that the construction of the Athenian Asklepieion next to the Theater of Dionysus starting around 420 was a result of the Greek belief in the healing powers of song and then the shrine itself had an effect on a number of dramas composed after its construction; and, third, that the specific metaphor of the sick city, which appears several times before 430, becomes particularly potent during the plague and then newly powerful as the political unity of Athens begins to fail during the subsequent decade. It is necessary to make Asclepius a central, though not necessarily *the* central, component in all three areas because of the timing of the construction and the placement of the Asklepieion.

In brief, I argue that, because of traditional associations between song and healing in Greek culture, tragedy becomes a form of therapy for the diseased *polis* that is projected on to the space of the Theater, a space overlooked, after 420, by Asclepius, a hero/god of healing. I use the ambivalent designation hero/god for Asclepius because of the different statuses this figure held in cultic practice and myth; in the former he functions as a divinity to whom a worshipper sacrifices and prays, while in the latter he heroically defies the gods by trying to reverse death, a rebellion for which he pays with his own life. This ambivalence suggests Heracles' analogous duality, and we shall return to this comparison later when discussing Euripides' *Heracles* and Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes*, for there are telling correspondences between Heracles and Asclepius. However, it is clear that Asclepius was worshipped from a fairly early time as a hero. Thus, Bruno Currie observes (Currie 2005: 355), "it seems likely that Pindar and his audience would have known Asklepios as a figure of cult, whether as hero or god." In the texts of tragic drama, Asclepius generally functions as a mortal hero, though in the

context of the Athenian Theater of Dionysus his cult is more important. The language of disease in tragedy, I shall show over the next two chapters, sharpens in intensity and multiplies in frequency after the great plague of Athens that began in 430 and then again after the construction of the shrine to Asclepius next to the Theatre of Dionysus around 420, and it broadens in import because of political instability in Athens during the same era, which is imagined first in drama and then in the philosophical works of Plato as a type of disease.

However, I do not wish my interest in context to overwhelm the vital, complex texts of the dramas themselves, since I find impoverished both the excessive concentration on history that denies much of Greek drama's richness and the rigid formalism of the New Criticism.[5] All critical movements generate their own excesses, and it certainly was instructive, during the last stretch of the twentieth century, to watch proponents of the New Historicism and Cultural Studies increasingly resemble traditional philologists in their dismissal or lack of interest in the realm of the imagination. It is even more instructive to observe Stephen Greenblatt, the founding father of New Historicism in Renaissance studies, more recently lament how "phobic" such scholars of Renaissance literature have become about the power of imaginative literature.[6] The Greeks themselves knew the power of poetry and song,[7] and a scholarly, even mildly historicist, account of Greek drama neglecting this power leads to the strange irony of its own form of ahistoricism. I thus, once I enter the specific chapters on the dramas of Euripides and Sophocles, shall be working from inside the texts outwards, using context as a complement to, not a substitute for, formalism, in a method I shall dub "contextual formalism." In other words, context will be used to answer the questions raised by the close attention to form that form itself cannot answer.

In general, this examination shall serve as a study of how Greek tragedy, just as Shakespearean theater does 2,000 years later, absorbs and deploys certain structures taken from its culture, but extrinsic to itself as poetry, and transforms them into an essential, intrinsic part of its activity as art. I assume here an operative homology between different segments of Athenian

[5] I have found that the blankly dismissive, even openly hostile, attitude to "formalism" in Seaford 1994 detracts from a work I otherwise admire. Fully forty years before Seaford's book, Ehrenberg 1954 (who does not appear in Seaford's bibliography) lamented the tyranny of the cult of literary genius in the study of Greek tragedy.

[6] Greenblatt 2001: 4. One wonders how much the pendulum will swing, since, despite the frequently polemically historicist stance of Goldhill's work on Greek drama, words such as "emotions" and "pleasure" are seen creeping into Goldhill 2000 (albeit on his own terms).

[7] Walsh 1984.

culture in the mid- to late fifth century along the lines of Michel Foucault's conception of *épistèmes*, "regimes of truth," which encompass all of a given age's cultural activities.[8] I am thus pursuing an "archaeology of knowledge" (Foucault 1972), which examines the vertical linkages among drama, medicine, politics and ritual. I am not so much concerned with whether the tragic poets read the Hippocratic corpus, which particular disease from the Hippocratic texts a stage character might have, or how much, in one particular passage, a given medical writer influenced Euripides, since the distinction between "literary foreground" and "social background," to borrow and transform Stephen Greenblatt's terms (Greenblatt 1988: 6), seems particularly permeable here; I see the relationship between texts and contexts as dialectical. Further helpful for us is W. R. Connor's appropriation of Benedict Anderson's concept of the "social imagination," which, Connor argues, "is a highly metaphorical activity, in which specific practices from one realm are envisioned as operating in another realm" (Connor 1996: 223).[9] Last, in addition to not engaging in source study as an end in itself, neither is my argument genetic, positing a special origin for tragedy or a foundational relationship between Greek drama and healing.

Rather, my goal here is to discuss how a specific set of historical circumstances and cultural practices produced a theater deeply preoccupied with social illnesses and their cures; the actual great plague of Athens that accompanied the upheavals of the onset of the Peloponnesian War reenergized tragedy's concern with social conflict and stability through a particular system of metaphors. The dynamics of post-plague tragedy thus are transformed and we see this most clearly in Euripidean drama, though Sophoclean drama, once one sorts through the more relatively oblique signs it gives, also engages these dynamics, particularly in the *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes*. Now, part of this higher visibility rests on the vagaries of manuscript survival which left us with roughly one dozen more dramas by Euripides than by Sophocles, but Euripides' greater open involvement with the specific intellectual, political and moral questions of his time has been recognized at least since the first performance of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, though, I shall suggest in my chapters on Sophoclean drama, the increasingly contested notion of Sophocles' Olympian detachment needs to be further reconsidered, if not retired.[10]

[8] For a quick, insightful overview of Foucault's work by a classicist, along with relevant bibliography, see Morris 1994: 10–12. The approach of Lloyd 1979 is comparable here.

[9] Connor contends, persuasively to me, that elements of the Dionysian cult were transferred "from the sacral sphere into the realm where day-to-day decisions about the polis were located." Connor here builds on his 1989 article.

[10] On Euripides and Athenian life see Gregory 1991.

So, despite the traditional association of Sophocles with the cult of Asclepius, I find that Euripides seems particularly concerned with developing a tragic pharmacology in which often the *pharmakon* (cure) for the *polis* is to purge the *pharmakos* (scapegoat).[11] Sophoclean drama, I shall argue, is more concerned with cures that rebalance social systems which have become unstable, whether through the transformation of the problematic element (Heracles in the *Trachiniae*) or the new incorporation of a diseased, expelled, individual (Philoctetes). I shall thus link early theories of medicine, tragic plots involving the destruction of "ill" heroes, and ritualized expulsion. Yet *pharmakos* myths and rituals were not the only structures in Greece that predicated the safety of the community on the removal of a particular individual. Conceptually similar to scapegoating in its equation of one for the many, ostracism furnished the Athenian *polis* with a means of preserving political stability through the expulsion of an individual, and tragic drama, I shall argue later in this study, forms part of the discourse of symbolic ostracism in "reminding aristocrats of the power of the *demos*" (Forsdyke 2000: 233).[12] Sophocles maintains an active interest in the dramatic implications of disease, yet seems reluctant to extend these implications as openly as Euripides to the realm of the metaphorical; in some ways Sophocles simply makes us work harder for that knowledge. However, recognizing the importance of these interrelationships in Euripidean drama may allow us to see Sophocles' interest in disease, and thus in the problems of Athens, in a new way. In this light, I shall also provide a more complex, and more historically secure, synthesis of the "Girardean scenario" that I have discussed elsewhere,[13] in an attempt to explore "the poetics of culture" (Greenblatt 1988: 6) in post-plague Athens. This interpretive process also requires that we pay more attention to the critical blindnesses generated by the lack of awareness of scholars to their own position in history. After establishing the discursive structures operative at this moment in Athenian history, I shall return to a more rigorously textual approach to show how these structures permeate and are transformed in Athenian tragic drama, moving through

[11] Craik 2001 suggests that, among the tragedians, Euripides was especially interested in medical ideas. Bremmer 1983 remains the starting point for any discussion of scapegoat rituals in ancient Greece, along with Parker 1983: 258–80. See also Seaford 1994: 311–18 and Mitchell 1991, with further bibliography.

[12] Forsdyke 2000 does not mention tragic drama at all, yet her theory of symbolic ostracism seems, to me, powerfully suggestive in the light of the work in Seaford 1994 on the political importance of the depiction of the destruction of royal households in Athenian tragedy. Seaford 1994: 312–13 also examines the two ends of the spectrum when Greek mythical thinking sees the expulsion of the one as the cure for the ills of the many.

[13] Mitchell 1991 and Mitchell-Boyask 1993, 1996.

close readings of a group of tragedies in the order in which I believe they were produced.

I shall further suggest that it was the earlier associations among poetry, healing and immortality that contributed to the installation of Asclepius' shrine above the Theater of Dionysus. Therefore, I shall need to move through a number of diverse and complex issues: the cult of Asclepius, the direct evocations of Asclepius in dramatic texts, the relationship of Apollo and Dionysus in cult, shrine locations, the Mysteries, the City Dionysia, the genre of the paean song, *katharsis*, the great plague, and the imagery of illness in the works of the tragedians. The *Hippolytus*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Trachiniae*, *Heracles*, *Phoenissae* and *Philoctetes* will be of particular concern. And a study of plague and the Athenian imagination requires, of course, considerable attention to the writing of Thucydides. The primary focus will be on networks of conceptual associations, some easily recognizable, some latent, and thus for the latter especially I ask my reader to withhold judgment until all the ballots are counted, including those from the outlying districts.

I shall try to demonstrate that, while the plague changed the nature and effect of disease language in the theater, there were two main waves of transformation: the attacks of the plague itself and then the construction of the Asklepieion roughly a decade later. I thus introduce two series of studies of individual dramas with two chapters, "Materials," the first on the language of disease in tragic drama and the second on the cult of Asclepius. Chapter 3, the discussion of nosological discourse, covers the sweep of the fifth century, and after that the chapters are arranged in a historical sequence. That said, the sequence that moves from the *Hippolytus* to the *Oedipus Tyrannus* to the *Trachiniae* does not imply my conclusion that that was their order of production. I do, in fact, believe that the *Hippolytus* was produced first, but the relative order of the three is inconsequential to my broader concerns. All that really matters, taking the three together, is that they were composed and produced during the plague years.

CHAPTER 2

Death, myth and drama before the plague

I begin with broad and general (and, probably to some, overly simplistic) thoughts about the poetics of mortality in Greek thought and their pertinence to discussing subsequently the response of the Athenian imagination to the plague. This foundation is a necessary prelude to the consideration of both disease language in Chapters 3–6 and the relationship between healing, poetry and theater in Chapters 7–9. From its beginnings in Homer's *Iliad*, Greek poetry broadly concerns itself with man's attempts to grapple emotionally and intellectually with the basic reality of his own mortality. As Sheila B. Murnaghan observes (Murnaghan 1992: 242), early Greek epic is "preoccupied with defining human life by exploring the line that separates men and gods." In archaic epic, the heroic code posits that the hero receives "immortal glory" (*kleos aphthiton*) in return for risking an even earlier death than the normal men whose name dies with them, although they do live longer (Redfield 1975; Nagy 1979). The heroes live on through the songs of the poets. Near the beginning of the most important era of Greek drama, Pindar, in poems such as *Pythian* 3, promises to preserve the *kleos* of mortals through song and urges his listeners not to hope for more than their mortal lot. Athenian tragic drama itself, which draws its plots from the epics of the heroic age, thus by necessity continues the concern with the inevitability of death. Because its plot revolves around the problem of murderous revenge, mortality forms an important theme in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the trilogy that also features the first reference in extant Greek drama to the myth of Asclepius.[1] In its closing drama, the *Eumenides*, Apollo, in his role of defender of Orestes against the Furies, explains the magnitude of Agamemnon's murder by emphasizing the irreversibility of death (647–51):

[1] The myth of Asclepius appears earlier in narrative and lyric poetry: Hes. Fr. 125, Pi. *P.* 3. On allusions to Asclepius in Homer's *Iliad*, and links between Achilles and Asclepius that suggest in turn a larger role for Asclepius in Greek myth and literature than is apparent and thus normally recognized, see Mackie 1997 and 1998.

ἀνδρὸς δ' ἐπειδὰν αἷμ' ἀναspάσῃ κόνις
ἅπαξ θανόντος, οὔτις ἔστ' ἀνάστασις.
τούτων ἐπῳδὰς οὐκ ἐποίησεν πατὴρ
οὑμός, τὰ δ' ἄλλα πάντ' ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω
στρέφων τίθησιν οὐδὲν ἀσθμαίνων μένει.

But whenever the dust drinks the blood of a man once he's dead,
there's no getting up again.
My father did not make charm songs for these things,
although he can turn everything else up and down,
not even breathing hard with effort.

About to launch his now infamous defense of matricide, that the father alone is the true parent, Apollo especially stresses the tragedy of the dead male (*andros)*, and he indicates that the preferred method of raising the dead hero would be (if it ever could be preferred) songs with magical powers (*epôidas*). But, despite Zeus' omnipotence, men, no matter how beloved by the gods, will not be resurrected, for the barrier between mortal and immortal is final and must not be crossed. Apollo here recalls similar sentiments in the *Agamemnon*, the first play of Aeschylus' trilogy, as the Chorus sings shortly before the Cassandra scene (1019–24):

τὸ δ' ἐπὶ γᾶν πεσὸν ἅπαξ θανάσιμον
πρόπαρ ἀνδρὸς μέλαν αἷμα τίς ἂν
πάλιν ἀγκαλέσαιτ' ἐπαείδων;
οὐδὲ τὸν ὀρθοδαῆ
τῶν φθιμένων ἀνάγειν
Ζεὺς ἀπέπαυσεν ἐπ' ἀβλαβείᾳ;

How might one call back by singing incantations
the dark mortal blood of a man
once it has fallen to the earth?
Not even the one who knew how
to bring back men from the dead did
Zeus restrain in a harmless way.

The Chorus thus sets the stage for Apollo's later plea, as it recalls the story of Apollo's son Asclepius, whom Zeus destroyed for raising the dead; the Chorus might even weaken slightly Apollo's later rhetoric by allowing that resurrection, while strongly discouraged, seems possible under the Olympian order. In the *parodos* of the *Agamemnon*, the Chorus already evokes, as the potential savior of Iphigenia, Apollo Paean, "Apollo the Healer," the cult title given elsewhere to Asclepius, and it further laments the paeans (songs of victory or healing) Iphigenia sang at her father's feasts (245–47). Cassandra herself, who so strikingly and multiplicitly recalls Iphigenia,

denies the possibility of paeans for her own situation (1248 ἀλλ᾽οὔτι παιὼν τῷδ᾽ ἐπιστατεῖ λόγῳ); a paean can neither heal her nor return her from the death that Cassandra knows is inevitable and imminent. The text here thus links the death of the paean-singing Iphigenia with Cassandra's fate, and Aeschylus plays with one overlap between Apollo and his son and another between paean song of victory and paean song of healing, two relationships I shall explore later. It is further noteworthy that in both passages songs or magical incantations (the Greek terms overlap) are the possible means cited to return the dead to life. In any case, these hints cast Asclepius' entrance into Greek drama as a means of focusing on the tension between heroic action and death, and on the relationship of both to poetry.

The line between mortal and immortal is one of the most important conceptual demarcations for the ancient Greek, beginning with Homer's heroes, whose inevitable deaths give their life meaning, and reaching through the protagonists of Athenian drama and beyond, as I shall now sketch very briefly, though with the awareness that oversimplification here can misrepresent reality. The Archaic sense of death, as represented most completely in Homer' *Iliad*, represented death as a finality that even the greatest of heroes cannot surmount, though Hesiod's *Works and Days* (170–73) preserves an early strand of belief that heroes move on to the Isles of the Blessed after death, a concept also glimpsed briefly in Book 4 of the *Odyssey* when Proteus prophesies that Menelaus and Helen will live there and not in Hades.[2] Confronting the living Odysseus in Hades, the Homeric Achilles laments that death's endless emptiness utterly negates the value of heroic existence (*Od.* 11.487–91). With its depiction of the ambiguous status of the Dioscouroi (11.301–04) and of Heracles (11.601–05), the *Odyssey* certainly opens the door to a less strict division between mortality and immortality, but the lament of Achilles in Hades and the decision of Odysseus to reject Calypso's offer of immortality indicate that the Iliadic vision remains active and interested in not letting that door open too much.[3]

During the fifth century, however, the continued growth of Pythagoreanism and its belief in the immortality of the soul, as well as the increasing importance of the Eleusinian Mysteries, weakened the Greeks' sense of futility before their seemingly inevitable demise. Increasingly, poets such as

[2] On these issues see Griffin 1977, 1980 and Rutherford 1982. But Nagy 1979 argues that the presence of Homeric heroes in Hades is transitional, not eschatological.

[3] Johnston 1999: 12–13 argues against using epic passages that admit to alternative lots after death to establish that at the time of Homeric epic people already believed in a range of possible afterlives: "these passages concern extraordinary individuals." Johnston locates the first tangible signs of a shift in Pindar.