

CHAPTER 1

Greek tragedy and models of madness

Greek tragedy as practised by Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides was already a mature art form. The origins are lost but probably included theatrical enactments for religious purposes. The place of masquerades for religious purposes in contemporary African societies is probably as close as one will get to these early developments of theatre in the Western tradition. In these festivals, the masquerade was not merely *representing* the spirit or animal but *was* that spirit or animal. The re-enacted triumph of war, the dramatised recovery from illness or the play of hunter and hunted had not only representational power but also an authentic coalescence of symbol, myth and reality that had cathartic power and authority. The mask and costume transcended the symbolised object and merged with it. So, when the masquerade danced or sang, it was really the represented object dancing or singing. This aspect of theatre, the blurring of illusion and reality to make a magical world that was a transfigured real world was there in the Greek theatre and rendered theatre a more potent force. This feature still remains in our day too, but is significantly, severely diluted. Greek tragedy relied on this potency to accentuate its dramatic action and to evoke its emotional impact.

Aristotle (384–322 BC), in *On the Art of Poetry*, described tragedy as ‘a representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and of some amplitude; in language enriched by a variety of artistic devices appropriate to the several parts of the play; presented in the form of action, not narration; *by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotions*’ (my italics) (Aristotle, 1965 edition, pp. 38–39). This reference to ‘pity and fear’ and ‘the purgation of emotions’ signals at once the importance of psychological processes not only to the construction and enactment of tragedy, but also to the inner experience of the audience. For Aristotle, pity is ‘awakened by undeserved misfortune’ and fear ‘for someone like ourselves’ who suffers (p. 48). These feelings presuppose in the audience the capacity for empathic engagement with the characters and their situations, a capacity to imagine the world of the characters and experience it in oneself. This is proof of the role of tragedy in depicting,

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exploring, evoking and commenting on the emotional life of the audience. It was this aspect of tragedy that Freud understood and borrowed from in describing the Oedipus complex. Freud also borrowed from Aristotle's reference to the 'purgation of such emotions' in the audience. The capacity of the plays to impel and sublimate emotions must be understood in the context of the syncretism of symbol and object, and the power of this syncretic world to evoke a space that was immanent with significance, with danger, with urgency, and that was portentous. This is the transfigurative potential of the theatrical space.

In *Oedipus Rex*, an example of complex tragedy, Sophocles (496–406 BC) constructed and exemplified the markers of great tragic drama: individual transgression as the source of social pollution; undeserved reversal of social status; recognition and self-knowledge as determinants of tragic reversal of fortune; and finally, the semiotics of madness in tragedy. In this chapter as in the rest of this book, I will argue that these markers have continuing importance in contemporary society and that they point to aspects of social and intrapsychic life that underlie many of the disquieting circumstances that present to psychiatrists.

This exploration of Greek tragedy is not an attempt at archaeology; there is no intention to dig up what the plays may have meant to a Greek audience 2000 years ago or what the plays tell us about how Greeks understood madness. The force of my argument will be directed at the ever-present relevance of these plays in modern life and in particular to illuminating the recesses of inner life. Underlying this endeavour is an awareness of how texts reveal as much as they conceal, just exactly as words behave in the clinic – as Davies (1992) put it, 'words may hide feelings and intentions better than silences by serving as a smokescreen' (p. 63). Part of the craft of every psychiatrist is to sense what is below the surface dialogue, to apprehend that which is out of reach. Playwrights and psychiatrists alike share this skill of sensitive awareness to the complexity of dialogue. Again, Davies (1992) referred to this similarity between dramatic dialogue and psychiatric interviews when he wrote: 'much is left below the surface, and there is an iceberg of hidden meaning, just as there often is in conversations in the consulting room' (p. 62). There is an additional limitation inherent in language, namely that there are experiences, often emotional experiences, which are recalcitrant to description. In drama this gulf can be remedied by enactment of the imagined experience; here, the bodily replaces the verbal as a means of expression.

Individual transgression and social pollution

Oedipus Rex opens with the Priest saying (quoted from the Grene & Lattimore edn, 1968):

A blight is on the fruitful plants of the earth,
 A blight is on the cattle in the fields,

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a blight is on our women that no children
 are born to them; a God that carries fire,
 a deadly pestilence, is on our town

(lines 25–29)

The state of affairs described here is the result of individual transgression, the double infamy of unwitting murder of Laertes by his son Oedipus and Oedipus sleeping with his mother Jocasta and having children by her. This causal attribution of social malady to an individual's conduct and the special status of the killing of a blood relative and of mother incest as uniquely transgressive acts is at the centre of the play. What is unusual to the modern mind is the locus of causation. This is not merely the breeching of a taboo, an infraction against a social prohibition regulated by custom and inviting sanction. The adverse material and physical consequences described in *Oedipus Rex* are neither symbolic representations of social pollution, nor allegory for social corruption. Rather, it is that the material and moral worlds are co-extensive, that individual action influences the moral world and the material world simultaneously, that there is intimate correspondence between these worlds.

In our time natural disasters are no longer regarded as resulting from individual social transgression. No one asks why an earthquake or tsunami occurred expecting an answer that draws attention to the murder of a blood relative or mother incest. Disasters in the material world require technical explanations, not appeals to moral understanding of causation. However, this seeking for moral answers continues in vestigial form in clinics. It is still the case that patients ask the question 'Why me?' when diagnosed with an incurable illness, meaning 'What did I do to deserve this?'. The technical answer that explains the biology of the illness misses the point and leaves the patient dissatisfied because a technical answer will not do for a moral question. In psychiatric clinics, in individuals with depression the ideas or delusions of guilt can take the form of the person feeling responsible for adverse events in the natural world, so that personal acts that the individual considers shameful may be thought of as responsible for natural disasters or the deaths of others, sometimes happening thousands of miles away. These are vestiges of the core belief that sustains *Oedipus Rex*, namely that balance in society, the good of society requires adherence to normative values, that there is deep correspondence between individual acts, social order and the material world. Cleansing is accomplished by exile, a true expulsion of the corrupting influence in order to restore, to make reparation for the insult against the body politic.

A number of Greek tragedies have this conceptual framework, at least as a buttress if not the whole foundation. Aeschylus' *The Oresteian Trilogy* deals with the return of Agamemnon from Troy, his murder by his wife Clytemnestra, her murder by her son Orestes, and Orestes' subsequent trial. The murder of Clytemnestra by her son – the killing of a blood relative

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– required a sitting of an Athenian court and special pleading by Athena. It is perhaps in *The Oresteian Trilogy* that we get closest to a balancing of arguments to establish the relative merits of the murder of kin in contrast to the murder of others. In *The Choephori*, the second play in the trilogy, Orestes says (quoted here from the 1956 edition, transl. Vellacott):

It was no sin to kill my mother, who was herself
Marked with my father’s blood, unclean, abhorred by gods,
And, for the spells that nerved me to this dreadful act,
I offer, in full warrant, Apollo Loxias,
Who from his Pythian oracle revealed to me
That if I did this deed I should be clear of blame;
If I neglected it – I will not tell the penance.

(lines 1026–1032)

In counter-argument, his mother responded in the third play, *The Euminides* (in Vellacott, 1956):

I am held guilty and condemned; while, for the blow
My own son struck, no angry voice protests. See here,
This wound under my heart, and say whose was the sword!

(lines 100–102)

In *The Euminides*, the Chorus of the Furies, in a long passage, indicts Orestes for the murder of his mother:

This is his trail, I have it clear. Come, follow, where
The silent finger of pollution points the way.
Still by the scent we track him, as hounds track a deer
Wounded and bleeding. As a shepherd step by step
Searches a mountain, so we have searched every land,
Flown wingless over sea, swifter than sailing ships,
Always pursuing, till we gasp with weariness.
Now he is here, I know, crouched in some hiding-place.
The scent of mortal murder laughs in my nostrils –

.

No hope can rescue him.
A mother’s blood once spilt
None can restore again;
.

Mark this: not only you,
But every mortal soul
Whose pride has once transgressed
The law of reverence due
To parent, god, or guest,
Shall pay sin’s just, inexorable toll.

(lines 244–252, 260–262, 267–272)

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Euripides' *Medea* also draws on the same conceptual framework, for when Medea murders her two sons in order to spite Jason, she has to flee Corinth for Athens. The murders of Jason's betrothed and of her two sons are calculated and performed in cold blood. Medea says in preparation (quotes from Vellacott, 1963):

But in my plot to kill the princess they must help.
 I'll send them to the palace bearing gifts, a dress
 Of soft weave and a coronet of beaten gold,
 If she takes and puts on this finery, both she
 And all who touch her will expire in agony;
 With such a deadly poison I'll anoint my gifts.
 However, enough of that. What makes me cry with pain
 Is the next thing I have to do. I will kill my sons.
 No one shall take my sons from me. When I have made
 Jason's whole house a shambles, I will leave Corinth
 A murderess, flying from my darling children's blood.
 Yes, I can endure guilt, however horrible;
 The laughter of my enemies I will not endure.

(lines 785–797)

When Jason discovers her actions, he wails:

You abomination! Of all women detested
 By every god, by me, by the whole human race!
 You could endure – a mother! – to lift sword against
 Your own little ones; to leave me childless, my life wrecked.
 After such murder do you outface both Sun and Earth –
 Guilty of gross pollution?

(lines 1325–1330)

What these tragedies trade on is that these murders are especially abhorrent and leave the perpetrator unclean. In *Oedipus Rex* the socially polluting dimension is explored. This reading of *Oedipus Rex* emphasises the adverse power of the breaching of socially prohibited behaviour, even if as we see in the tragedy, the murder and incest are unwitting and not wilful. Freud's interpretation by contrast emphasises elements that are not even by implication in the play: 'The boy's Oedipus complex, in which he desires his mother, and wants to get rid of his father as a rival' (Freud, 1933: p. 166). For Freud, the destiny of King Oedipus 'moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our most murderous wish against our father' (Freud, 1997). Freud's assertions may be true but they are not exemplified in the Greek tragedy. The pity and fear that Aristotle refers to when examining the nature of tragedy arises from the undeserved reversal in fortune that in Oedipus' case derives from unwitting

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murder of his father and mother incest. Indeed, *Oedipus Rex* is different from *The Oresteian Trilogy* and *Medea* precisely because the prohibited acts were not wilful but yet resulted in reversal of fortune.

The degree to which the modern reader *cum* audience is distant from this conceptual framework is a measure of how far modern man is atomised and separated, emotionally and ideologically, from society, how disengaged he is from a sense of community as a cohesive and organic entity. But the distance is not as great as we may imagine. Social transgression might not be accorded cosmic significance, but the transgressor is still treated by social exclusion as if he remains polluting and society protects itself, secluding the individual who transgresses the body politic. We see this in the revulsion for child sexual abuse and the social condemnation and treatment of perpetrators, even in prison.

Reversal of fortune

Aristotle had a lot to say about the role of reversal of fortune in tragedy. He made the point that for reversal of fortune to work it must involve undeserved misfortune, because this arouses our pity and fear that it has happened to someone like ourselves. It is also important that this reversal is not from misery to prosperity but the reverse, from prosperity to misery. The reversal ought not to be due to depravity but to error. In tragedy, the reversal of fortune appears to emphasise the inherent instability of human life and puts the audience on notice for the possibility of radical change in their position. This point is not merely expressed in the action of the play but adumbrated at the end of the play. In *Oedipus Rex*, the Chorus says at the very end:

You that live in my ancestral Thebes, behold this Oedipus, –
 him who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful;
 not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot –
 see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him!
 Look upon the last day always. Count no mortal happy till
 he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.

(lines 1524–1530)

Euripides uses a formula of words at the end of many of his plays that echoes Sophocles' Chorus at the end of *Oedipus Rex* (this quote is from *Medea*):

Many matters the gods bring to surprising ends.
 The things we thought would happen do not happen;
 The unexpected God makes possible;
 And such is the conclusion of this story.

(lines 1416–1419)

This emphasis on the nature of endings underlines the often ignored importance of the ending as a source of interest. There is a natural curiosity about where the trajectory of a life might terminate. It is as if any of us can witness only a few life endings and we are instinctively curious about how things will turn out, possibly as a model of how to live, a moral compass to journey by. In tragedy the unexpected happens, predictable happy endings are rare and just desserts uncommon, serving to underscore the unpredictability of the course of life.

The character of the reversal of fortune varies, from blindness, exile and destitution in *Oedipus Rex* to death in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. In both Euripides' *Electra* and Aeschylus' *The Choephoroi* Orestes goes mad. Here we have madness as a disvalued state that symbolises a reversal of fortune. In other words, this is a state to provoke both our pity and our fear. This ending does not depend on the representation or depiction of madness for its effect; it traffics on an already established conduit, namely a collective repository of symbolic meaning and value. This accretion of value and feeling is extant in contemporary culture and is responsible for the pity, fear, shame, self-loathing and stigma of madness. But there is more. In tragedy, to quote Meisel, we are immune from the reversal, 'Our position as privileged witness has brought us into intimate contact with ... the worst thing that could possibly happen to a man: to kill one's father and sleep with one's mother, however inadvertently; with what it feels like to make the discovery, and to realize that one has brought it on oneself while trying to evade it. Oedipus has passed from summit of life and fortune to the deepest abyss; and we, however shaken, remain where we sit' (2007: p. 234). It is not always true that we are immune to the trauma. In most cases, as Meisel says, theatre is an opportunity to experience at arms' length the reversal in the fortune of another person and 'remain where we sit'. But, it can also be an occasion to witness the fall from grace of another person from the standpoint of someone in a similar station, to see in the mirror a reflection of one's own abyss, and to feel just that less isolated, taking comfort in Oedipus' situation.

This fascination with the reversal of fortune of others, a pleasure in the misfortune of others, or *Schadenfreude*, has a powerful force in human affairs. It motivates the contemporary preoccupation with the lives of so-called celebrities, particularly with the reversals in their fortunes, their falls from grace. Moral life, it seems, requires cautionary tales and these are served up in great theatre or in the trivia of gossip columns.

Discovery and recognition

In *Oedipus Rex*, discovery and recognition, in particular self-recognition, forms the gusset as well as the bodice of the play. Oedipus from the opening lines is set upon the course of discovering who he is, aided by the

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various personages who come on stage to reveal aspects of his story. In other tragedies where discovery and recognition feature, even where the plot turns on the nature of the discovered facts and on the recognition of one person by the other, in comparison to *Oedipus Rex*, these devices are hardly ever the very purposive drive of the play. There are discovery and recognition scenes in both Sophocles' and Euripides' versions of *Electra* and in Aeschylus' *The Choephori*. But it is in *Oedipus Rex* that discovery, recognition and reversal are so intertwined – the change from ignorance to knowledge and the revelation of identity lead to the reversal.

The Greek audience would already have known the story of Oedipus, so that the enactment including the commentaries of the Chorus was operating at several levels. When Oedipus proclaims 'who so among you knows the murderer | by whose hand Laius, son of Labdacus, | died – I command him to tell everything' (lines 225–228), the proclamation would have had an ironic tone to the audience, both exacerbating Oedipus' ignorance and accentuating the tragic momentum. He then declares: 'upon the murderer I invoke this curse – | whether he is one man and all unknown, | or one of many – may he wear out his life | in misery to misery doom' (lines 246–249). The dramatic irony in *Oedipus Rex* 'entails the unstated, or even misstated, but understood' (Meisel, 2007: p. 179), somehow implying a subtext that the audience are omniscient like the gods but unable to assist Oedipus, who has to make his own choices exactly as the audience have to in their ordinary day-to-day lives.

In *Oedipus Rex*, blindness, sight, insight and wisdom are played out in verbal exchanges as well as in conduct. Teiresias-the-seer is blind and Oedipus, who wisely solved the riddle of the sphinx and who has sight, is in ignorance of his own real identity. This set of circumstances allows ample room for irony, innuendo, and in the final accounting, exacerbates in the audiences' light Oedipus' lack of knowledge. Teiresias says pointedly:

Alas, how terrible is wisdom when
 it brings no profit to the man that's wise!
 This I knew well, but had forgotten it,
 else I would not have come here.

(lines 316–319)

In response to Oedipus' taunting regarding his blindness, Teiresias retorts: 'You have your eyes but see not where you are | in sin, nor where you live, nor whom you live with' (lines 414–415).

This interplay of sight and insight focuses on the importance of sight, of the eyes as a symbol of knowledge. Plato, in *The Republic*, uses the simile of the cave as a representation of the ascent of the mind from illusion to pure philosophy, which is a form of vision that distinguishes substance and shadow (Lee, 1955). The irony here is that Oedipus who has sight has no

knowledge but Teiresias who is blind is knowledgeable. Max Byrd (1974) has drawn attention to Pope and Swift's continuing use, in the Augustan period, of the symbolism of light and darkness as stand-ins for reason and evil. This tradition continued through to the 20th century and was notably exemplified in Jose Saramago's novel *Blindness*.

In parallel with this subtle exploration of the nature of knowledge, Sophocles also asks the question whether self-knowledge at all costs is fruitful or whether it carries risk. Oedipus' persistent questioning of his origins, the incessant seeking after self-knowledge, leads inexorably to grief. At one point Jocasta cries out, 'God keep you from knowledge of who you are!' (line 1069).

Oedipus Rex is essentially an uncovering of layers of misapprehension to reach down to an inner layer, a truth unknown to the self, but known to others who witness the gradual stepwise self-discovery that is itself the basis of reversal in fortune. As Nietzsche put it, 'Sophocles saw the most suffering character in the Greek stage, the unhappy Oedipus, as the noble man who is predestined for error and misery despite his wisdom, but who finally, through his terrible suffering, exerts a magical and beneficial power that continues to prevail after his death' (1993: p. 46).

In our time, through the influence of psychoanalysis, there is an expected or assumed association between self-knowledge and personal growth, and the latter is valorised – not merely valued but overvalued. What we encounter in *Oedipus Rex* is the tragic consequence of self-knowledge. In this schema self-knowledge is transformative and, again to draw from Meisel, 'inherent in the form of the drama is the possibility, indeed the expectation, of transformation; a transformation of the situation of the personages as we originally find them; a transformation of the state, in the audience no less than in the personages, from ignorance to knowledge, from innocence to experience, from desire to fulfillment and (or loss)' (Meisel, 2007: p. 18). However, the transformation in Oedipus is a fall from grace, a loss of sight, status and country. In the audience, transformation transpires through catharsis, a purification of the soiled space, a casting aside of the polluting subject and symbolically a purgation of fear, the horror and disgust at the effects of transgression. Oedipus' own positive transformation occurs later in *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Madness

In *Oedipus Rex* madness is the explanation for the repulsive action that takes place off-stage, namely Oedipus' blinding of himself. We never see Oedipus perform the act, we only learn from one of the Messengers that when Oedipus saw 'his wife hanging, the twisted rope round her neck', he tore the brooches fastening her robes and dashed them into his own eyeballs. When Oedipus already blinded comes back to the stage, the Chorus says:

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This is a terrible sight for men to see!
 I never found a worse!
 Poor wretch, what madness came upon you!
 What evil spirit leaped upon your life
 to your ill-luck – a leap beyond man's strength!
 Indeed I pity you, but I cannot
 look at you, though there's much I want to ask
 and much to learn and much to see.
 I shudder at the sight of you.

(lines 1298–1306)

We never see what it is like to act under the influence of madness but the message is clear: only madness can explain the extraordinary. The Chorus presses Oedipus for further explanation:

Doer of dreadful deeds, how did you dare
 so far to do despite to your own eyes?
 what spirit urged you to it?

(lines 1326–1328)

Oedipus responds that it was Apollo that brought 'this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion, | But the hand that struck me was none but my own' (lines 1329–1331). This is an interesting response that raises questions about the relationship between mad acts, consciousness, the will and responsibility, questions that remain with us still today.

Madness in drama is problematic for several reasons. At least in the public eye, madness is the obverse of reason, a territory outside the boundary of experience, and it symbolises through speech and action whatever lacks meaning. Yet, literature and drama have to be coherent, driven by an internal logic that must be comprehensible and made reasonable. Oedipus' action is already meaningful given the reversal of fortune, but the act of self-blinding is regarded as dreadful, even repulsive, and has therefore to be explained as only possible under the influence of madness. Oedipus' reply to the Chorus brings Apollo into the picture. This attribution of the motive force for actions to the gods in Greek culture has been discussed by Simon (1978): 'If a man acts irrationally, it is because a god is carrying out a carefully calculated plan to help one hero and hurt another. There is a method to human madness and human folly, but the method belongs to the mind of the gods' (p. 71). But, as we see in Oedipus' response, he takes responsibility for his actions – 'the hand that struck was none other than my own'. The god Apollo and 'madness' appear to be functioning at the same level, as explanations or a form of excuse. Furthermore, madness also seems to have arisen out of unbearable conflict: how is a man to act whose identity is other than he knew it to be and whose unwitting conduct has transgressed deep social prohibitions, in such a way as to retain dignity?

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Simon argues in this regard that ‘The heroes of tragedy who go mad (they are always *driven* mad) do so when their world is collapsing around them. Their madness is part of a frantic attempt to hold on to what they know and think right’ (p. 90).

There are other examples of madness wrought and enacted, but still away from the full gaze of the audience where the description allows us to more vividly imagine what it is to be mad and to act in the grip of madness. In Euripides’ *Heracles* madness is personified and he appears before us, describing what he will do to Heracles (quoted from *Euripides: Medea and Other Plays*):

... as I strike
 Heracles to the heart, shatter his house, rage through
 His rooms, killing his children first; he who is doomed
 To be their murderer shall not know they are the sons
 Of his own body, till my frenzy leaves him. Look!
 See him – head wildly tossing – at the starting-point,
 Silent, his rolling eyeballs full of maniac fire;
 Breathing convulsively, and with a terrible
 Deep bellow, like a bull about to charge, he shrieks.

(lines 862–870)

Although we do not witness Heracles’ mad behaviour directly, we have a good account from the messenger:

His face had changed; his eyeballs rolled unnaturally,
 Showing their roots all bloodshot; down his curling beard
 A white froth trickled. Then with a maniac laugh he cried

.

Then he pretended he had a chariot; leapt in,
 Gripped on the rail, and, like a man using a goad,
 Kept thrusting. All his servants looked at one another,
 Laughing yet terrified, saying, ‘Is this a joke
 Our master’s playing on us, or is he raving mad?’

.

Then he unpinned
 His cloak, stood naked, and began a wrestling-match
 With no one; then proclaimed to an invisible crowd
 Himself as victor.

(lines 931–933, 940–944, 958–961)

Heracles’ conduct culminates in the killing of his sons and wife. Eventually, he falls unconscious and then asleep. When he wakes to the devastation that he has caused, he says ‘I understand nothing that I should understand’ (line 1105), for he has amnesia for his actions. In *Heracles*, we have a semiotics of madness, signs that both the actors and

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audience can recognise as denoting madness. These include sudden onset of derangement that is not necessarily understandable in context, bodily gestures such as rolling eyeballs, maniacal laughter, pretend actions, violence resulting in uncharacteristic conduct, and recovery.

Even though these signs are still being developed and negotiated between audience and playwright, and not enacted to public gaze, they are recognisable to us today, for example in Charlotte Brontë's description of Mr Rochester's wife in *Jane Eyre*. In this sense madness in drama is symbolic, a motif, but as Feder says, 'something of the nature of madness itself as an incorporation of the very values and prohibitions it challenges' (1980: p. 4) continues to come through in literature. Inscribed into the descriptions of Heracles' mad conduct are the values, the boundaries that they breach: filial piety, the place of play in adult affairs, etc.

Often, a psychiatrist's preoccupation is with accuracy of description, by which is usually meant verisimilitude of the representation. Undoubtedly, the 'madman of literature is to some extent, modeled on the actual one, but his differences from such a model are at least as important as are his resemblances to it: he is rooted in mythical or literary tradition in which distortion is a generally accepted mode of expression; furthermore, the inherent aesthetic order by which his existence is limited also gives his madness intrinsic value and meaning (Feder, 1980: p. 9). But, it is also possible that the 'actual' madman takes his cue from the literary one. To announce one's madness is also to speak in the symbolic language of madness, the symbol that will be recognised for what it means.

In Sophocles' *Ajax* we have a study of madness, the resulting stigma and consequent suicide. Where in *Heracles* the madness results in violent deaths of his sons and wife, in *Ajax* madness leads to the slaughter of sheep and cattle as well as their drovers, but the social effects on Ajax's reputation are no less devastating. Ajax's madness arose in the context of Achilles' armour having been awarded to Odysseus. What ensued can be interpreted as a form of jealous anger. The goddess Athena said that she 'was there to goad and drive [Ajax] deeper into the pit of black delusion' (lines 59–61; quoted from the 1953 edn). In this account we have Ajax taking the beasts for human prisoners, roped up and marched to his tent where bound to a stake they were tortured. We hear from the Chorus how with the telling of Ajax's conduct, 'fun grows' and 'from mouth to mouth the mocking laughter rises' (lines 150–151). The references to the shame attendant on Ajax are expressed variously: 'Tis powerful tale they tell, and its offspring is shame on all of us' (lines 172–173); and, 'the story is loud in the mouths of the people, and grows on their powerful tongues to a mighty clamour. I fear what is coming to us. He is branded with shame and marked for death' (lines 223–228).

When he recovers and discovers his acts, Ajax cries in anguish and sits 'utterly dejected' (line 320). The Chorus chimes:

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Ajax, your champion, whom you sent away
 So valorous, lies here, a sorry sight,
 Brooding alone,
 Cribbed with a sickness of the mind
 Past human cure.

(lines 612–616)

The Chorus concludes:

It is better that death should take a man diseased
 And wandering in the maze
 Of madness ...

(lines 632–634)

Madness in *Oedipus Rex*, *Heracles* and finally in *Ajax* proceeds from mere explanation of an act that we do not witness (Oedipus' self-blinding), through to acts of gross violence that result in murder. In *Heracles* and *Ajax*, we hear about the visible manifestations of madness, how madness appears to our apprehension, how it renders the man unconscious of his actions and may be accompanied by amnesia, as in *Heracles*' example. Finally, the stigma of madness is at least part of the reason for *Ajax*'s suicide. In addition, in these plays madness is presented as occurring suddenly and ending equally abruptly. *Ajax*'s madness results from the disappointment that Achilles' armour was given to Odysseus and also because of Athena's displeasure at *Ajax*'s undue pride – *Ajax* had been dismissive of her assistance. And thus we have the beginnings of a theory of causation.

In Euripides' most complete tragedy, *The Bacchae*, a theory of causation is more fully developed. The plot is superficially simple: Pentheus rejects the Bacchic rites and has Dionysus arrested. Following this, he is persuaded to secretly watch the Bacchic rites whereupon his mother and other women, on discovering he is there, kill him. The underlying thesis is that to resist the lure of wine, to reject the basic and deep urges to dance and connect to primitive instinct will result in death (quoted from the 1973 edn, translated by Vellacott):

... After her came
 Dionysus, Semele's son; the blessing he procured
 And gave to men is counterpart to that of bread:
 The clear juice of the grape. When mortals drink their fill
 Of wine, the sufferings of our unhappy race
 Are banished, each day's troubles are forgotten in sleep.
 There is no other cure for sorrow. Dionysus,
 Himself a god, is thus poured out in offering
 To the gods, so that through him come blessings on mankind.

(lines 278–286)

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Pentheus' rejection of Dionysus is described by Teiresias as follows:

Foolhardy man! You do not know what you have said.
 Before, you were unbalanced; now you are insane.

(lines 366–367)

Dionysus renders Pentheus mad. The manifestations of madness are by now a well-established picture:

There I made a mockery of him. He thought he was binding me;
 But he neither held nor touched me, save in his deluded mind.
 Near the mangers where he meant to tie me up, he found a bull;
 And he tied this round the bull's knees and hooves, panting with rage,
 Dripping sweat, biting his lips; while I sat quietly by and watched.

(lines 623–627)

Dionysus, the god of wine in *The Bacchae*, is connected with prophecy, with release of the passions by use of wine. Wine cures sorrows, 'and without wine, neither love nor any other pleasure would be left for us' (lines 779–780). So to reject Dionysus is to turn one's back on love and pleasure. In another tragedy, *Hippolytus*, Euripides explored how the abstemious, chaste Hippolytus is destroyed because of his abhorrence of the bed of love and how unrequited and unconsummated sexual desire on the part of Phaedra leads unavoidably to the tragic outcome of the play. In *The Bacchae*, Dionysus uses his gifts to derange Pentheus and in so doing makes him a figure of fun:

Fill him with wild delusions, drive him out of his mind.
 While sane, he'll not consent to put woman's clothes;
 Once free from the curb of reason, he will put them on.
 I long to see Thebes laughing at him, as he walks
 In female garb through the streets; to humble him
 From the arrogance he showed when first he threatened me.

(lines 851–856)

Madness also assaults Agaue's (Pentheus' mother's) reason and in her distracted state along with the other female Bacchanals, she kills her son, tearing his arms off, stripping his ribs clean and carrying his head triumphant before her.

The madness evident in these tragedies is stereotyped, occurring suddenly and lasting only for the duration of actions that are outside the range of normal behaviour, and is accompanied by recovery and insight, if not memory of the actions themselves. The madness in these tragedies is not that of an alienated individual revolting against the strictures of social norms, it is a madness that makes possible the breaching of social

boundaries, as part of a process of reversal, in which madness is itself the undeserved and tragic outcome or is fundamental to self-knowledge and transformation in the drama. We never witness the mad acts; these are revealed to us in language. There is no mad spectacle; the focus is on language and audition, emphasising the primacy of language and speech quite in contrast to modern cinema, for instance, where the visual is everything. It is also significant that we have no subjective account of the experience, only witness accounts of behaviour that rely on observation and inference. Observable signs of madness, semiotics, rather than self-reports of impairment or abnormal experience, determine what madness is. The range of behaviours, at least the form of mad behaviours, in these tragedies is limited: unusual eye movements, maniacal cries, misidentification of beasts for humans (illusions), and false beliefs such as miming a fight in the mistaken belief that one is fighting an adversary (delusion). In *The Choephori* and *The Eumenides* visual and auditory hallucinations are described as The Furies. It is not simply that madness is a symbol or a device in the tragedies, more that there is teleology to the madness and that it serves a purpose in the drama. Actual madness, of course, need have no moral or meaningful causation. It may have a technical cause, such as abnormal neurochemistry, aberrant neuronal circuitry which operates outside of causal meaning, what Jaspers (1913) referred to as ‘genetic understanding’.

In *The Bacchae*, there is a communal dimension to the dramatic action – the female-only Bacchanal rite, acting as a group, wreaks the tragic action by killing Pentheus. This is the opposite pole from *Oedipus Rex* whereby individual action brings about social pollution and disease, and the exile of that individual results in restitution. In *The Bacchae*, the community takes restorative action, and it is a violent action meted out by women with a view to defending the importance of Dionysus, the primeval and instinctual, in the ordering of social life. This signifies the inextricable link between individual and social action: the tragedies are enacted in public space, with the Chorus as citizens witnessing and commenting on the action as it progresses, expressing on behalf of the audience thoughts and opinions that reflect the collaboration of the audience in determining what is expected or seemly. Some of the power of the tragedies lies in the augmentation of the audiences’ feelings by amplification in the Chorus who mirrors the audience.

Yet, the symbolism of madness, the desire for the madness to *mean* something, for it to speak something that is comprehensible even though the overt language that the mad character utters is confused, even incomprehensible, is still present in our own world. Patients and their relatives seek meaning in madness, much as the dramatists leverage the madness in plays for symbolic effect. Hence, the delusional content of speech is carefully searched for meaning and the noise of formal thought disorder is scanned for a comprehensible signal. But, perhaps more

importantly, the transgressive source of the affliction is sought. Parents feel guilt for the illness of their children, continually seeking the moral origins of this terrible affliction. The logic of narrative coherence demands that events in the social world have a morally comprehensible origin. Greek tragedy operates at this level of reasoning, as does all literature.

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