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GREEK GODS IN BALTIMORE: GREEK TRAGEDY AND *THE WIRE*

Chris Love

> *The gods will not save you.*
>
> —*Ervin H. Burrell,* The Wire[1]

> *[I]t's the Postmodern institutions that are the gods. And they are gods. And no one is bigger.*
>
> —*David Simon, "Behind* The Wire*"*[2]

Although a television series about drug dealers and police investigators in Baltimore might seem an unlikely candidate for a modern adaptation of ancient Greek tragedy, David Simon has made repeated claims for just such a dramatic pedigree. Simon has often and publicly stated that he intended his show as a "Greek tragedy" for our contemporary era. In a representative interview with the *New Yorker,* Simon outlines his ambition:

> [We've] ripped off the Greeks: Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides. Not funny boy—not Aristophanes. We've basically taken the idea of Greek tragedy, and applied it to the modern city-state. [. . .] What we were trying to do was take the notion of Greek tragedy, of fated and doomed people, and instead of these Olympian gods, indifferent, venal, selfish, hurling lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no good reason—instead of those guys whipping it on Oedipus or Achilles, it's the postmodern institutions . . . those are the indifferent gods.[3]

During the entire filming of *The Wire*'s first two seasons, and as he wrote the remaining three, Simon read through the entire canon of ancient Greek tragedy, starting with Aeschylus and continuing on through Sophocles and Euripides.[4] Simon's notion of a "rigged game" echoes the

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articulated concerns and observations of the show's characters, who comprehend the fact, if not the implication, of its deistic fatalism.

But their understanding of this "game" is demonstrably complicated by their own desires, emotions, quirks, and choices. Simon has also claimed that he distinguishes his "Greek" tragedy from the Shakespearean and Chekhovian works, which he claims are dominated by individualized personalities and free will. Through all five seasons of *The Wire,* we witness an all-powerful, all-pervasive free market that enervates and corrupts governmental and media institutions. Political aspirants receive cash contributions from drug organizations. Excluded from the mainstream marketplace, adolescents join these drug organizations. Crushed by Reaganite antilabor policies, the stevedores union is forced to support itself through smuggling. Sabotaged by the No Child Left Behind Act, the middle schools fail the children in their charge. Barraged by corporate buyouts and media consolidation, the fourth estate can no longer provide its salutary check on abuses of power. In analogizing these pernicious market forces with the Olympian deities, Simon makes a number of subsidiary claims. Arguing outright that capitalism enjoys a power similar to that of Zeus,[5] Simon asserts that *The Wire*'s protagonists are as tethered to their fates as Antigone and Medea;[6] that postmodern institutions such as the police department and school bureaucracy constitute contemporary iterations of the Olympian pantheon;[7] that these gods and institutions are equally powerful and equally indifferent to the mortals whose lives they sway;[8] that the "fundamentals of Greek tragedy" are replicated in capitalism's triumph over labor;[9] and that *The Wire* also shares structural similarities with tragic novels such as *Moby-Dick*.[10] Of all these many claims, Simon draws structural or formal comparison only when he discusses the nineteenth-century novel.[11] When he likens his show to Greek tragedy, Simon alludes almost exclusively to fate, gods, and characters, as though his purpose were to cleave out such content from ancient drama and inject it into the genre of the novel.

Episodic television creates a different tragic spectator.[12] In form and practice, a television audience member might engage the screen in ways similar to both a novel's reader or a play's spectators. Sitting at home alone or with a few friends, a television spectator might view a particular drama as a partially atomized and private experience, and yet share the experience with thousands if not millions of other viewers. Nicole Loraux, in her study of fifth-century Athenian theater, describes "the specifically theatrical experience of being a spectator, understanding the singular definite article 'a' not as the designation of a singularity but as the expression of a neutral identity."[13] Cable television combines the plural "a" of ancient

Greek tragedy with the singular "the" of bourgeois reading. *The Wire* was seen by nearly two million viewers,[14] many of whom comment on blogs and other online forums for discussion.[15]

The Wire speaks to its viewers in ways that are simultaneously literary and cinematographic. The prominent echoing of epigraphs and identical lines of dialogue within episodes and throughout the five seasons is, along with the complex interplay of characters, a profoundly literary mode of manipulating time and of multiplying perspectives. *The Wire*'s portmanteau composition of literary and cinematographic modes conveys its particular vision of the tragic through a literal and metaphorical cable. *The Wire* embeds the form and practice of spectatorship within its fiction and thus makes its audience conscious of its role in both the on-screen tragedy and within the scope of a tragic reality to which the show ultimately points.

Neither of *The Wire*'s creators has specified a particular ancient Greek play or playwright as a dominant influence. David Simon alludes to a generalized ancient Greek tragedy whose common attribute he defines as the irrevocability of fate. We could easily apply Aristotelian criteria to *The Wire* either to corroborate or contradict the show's claims to tragic pedigree. But there is no single play in the ancient Greek canon whose thematic content would suffice as a definitive point of comparison or contrast. Each of Aeschylus's, Sophocles's, and Euripides's plays contains elements of plot, character, or theme that might have some bearing on *The Wire*. But I am arguing that *The Wire* assumes the nature of the tragic by virtue of formal structures, and it is in consideration of these structures that *The Wire* finds its most apposite tragic antecedent in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*.

The primary structural elements that define the tragic correspondence between *The Wire* and its audience—the epigraphs drawn from a character's utterance later on in the show; the repeated lines of dialogue; the shifting, multiplied perspectives on single events—all require us to assimilate and reconcile heterogeneous but interrelated interpretations across time or, to be precise, across time as represented in the show.

We find a similar alignment of interpretations and ideas in *The Oresteia*. A powerful network of clustered symbols—of light, darkness, eagles, nets, snakes, etc.—reconciles varying and even apparently antithetical concepts, linking them across the three plays of Aeschylus's trilogy.[16] In the beginning of *Agamemnon,* a watchman espies light emerging from a dark void whose meaning we will eventually understand even if he does not at that time. Only at the end of the trilogy, at the close of *The Eumenides,* do we grasp the meaning of scenes throughout *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*. By reconciling the proleptic significance of individual

symbols with a retrospective understanding of the plays' reticulated meanings, we are able to grasp the nature of the tragedy. Each symbol, inhering past and future meaning, complicates the apparent progression of light toward dark, and thus of the Furies' progression from agents of vengeance to kindly protectors of the city.

We see a similar cyclical structure in *The Wire*. In watching the show, we read the epigraphs that open each episode with a partial and contingent understanding that the contextual information provided by its dialogic source will either supplement or alter. We are continually tempted to remember back to our partial understanding of the epigraph and thus share in the blindness of *The Wire*'s protagonist who, in uttering the line, remains unaware of its generalized, abstracted meaning. The epigraphs in *The Wire* communicate a state that vacillates between incomprehension and knowledge, turning dramatic irony on its head, a function that subtly echoes the network of symbols in *The Oresteia*.

These instabilities of knowledge and meaning are what finally blur the perceived divide between fact and fiction and, therefore, between tragedy and the tragic. As we grow more aware of ourselves as spectators, we can no longer assume the distance provided by the omniscience of dramatic irony or the neat segregation of fiction and reality. Only when finally conscious of tragedy's artifice do we grow aware of the realities of the tragic. To better understand the ways in which the dramatic irony is attenuated in both *The Wire* and *The Oresteia,* I want to spend a bit more time analyzing the epigraphs and repetitions of dialogue I have mentioned already.

THE DIALOGUE SPEAKS BACK: EPIGRAPHS AND REPETITIONS

Each episode of *The Wire* begins the same way. After an often thematically evocative scene, the opening sequence rolls, accompanied each season by a different version of Tom Waits's "Way Down in the Hole" (1987). Immediately after this opening sequence, the screen fades to black, revealing an isolated, attributed epigraph, nearly always extracted from a piece of upcoming dialogue. Divested of a context with which it will soon be supplied, each epigraph serves as an elliptical but suggestive commentary on incidents, developing themes, episodes, seasons, and even the entire series.[17]

The epigraph to the ninth episode of season 1—"Maybe we won"—is illustrative of the ways in which *The Wire* makes general and specific meanings congruent and mutually reflective.[18] This line is spoken by Officer Thomas "Herc" Hauk, who shows up at a project courtyard that

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normally serves as a hub for drug sales. Herc turns to his partner Sergeant Ellis Carver and comments, "Maybe the whole thing's over and nobody bothered to tell us. Maybe we won."[19] The drug dealers have all taken a day off to watch a yearly basketball game pitting East Baltimore against West Baltimore, a game of which the audience, but not Herc, is already aware. Within the greater context of the episode and the series, though, his misinterpretation operates on many levels. The irony of Herc's misunderstanding will resound throughout the entirety of *The Wire*. Herc's relationship to the meaning of what he has just uttered parallels ours to the epigraph for which it serves as a source. The lag separating any utterance from our reception of its occluded meaning produces its own independent significance. Stripped of specificity and context, an episode's epigraph necessarily elicits a misreading that will, in turn, skew our reading of the epigraph's source. On hearing the epigraph uttered at some point within the course of the episode, we reconcile the accrued, time-lapsed misreadings into an interpretation that establishes both distance and familiarity. We feel the gap that separates the fictional Baltimore on screen from our own lives; but we also feel a heightened sense of empathy with the characters. The meaning of each epigraph, because generalized and approximate, touches on our own understanding of life.

The temporal dynamics that drive *The Wire*'s epigraphs help us understand how this process works. First, after the opening sequence, we read the epigraph, stripped of its particular context—of character, setting, and story—which we encounter at some later point in the episode. The "original" version of this quotation could either be the preliminary epigraph or the subsequent quotation from which it was drawn. We carry an abstract interpretation of the epigraph forward into the narrative of the show, and then, the moment we come across the epigraph's now fully contextualized source, we reconcile two readings, each operating in a different temporal mode. We amalgamate the epigraph's abstracted, remembered message with the dialogic version's particular contextual information, and this process, in turn, alters both source points of the "original" utterance, the epigraph, and the dialogue. Gérard Genette's definition of a *paratext* as a literary work's threshold between "text" and "off-text" is useful in helping us clarify the function of *The Wire*'s epigraphs. For Genette, a text's paratext—the titles, epigraphs, forwards, prefaces, notes, interviews, and other elements that hover in the netherland within and without a book—helps inflect the history and nature of its reception. Paratexts form a threshold that we must cross in order to enter and thus understand a text. The epigraphs in *The Wire* form a similarly liminal space—one in which meanings within and without the show meet.[20] This encounter of internal and

external meanings—an encounter between viewer and text—reminds us that the fictional elements of the show—be they dialogic, cinematographic, or dramatic—translate readily to broader scopes of meaning, which in turn redound to future and past elements of the show. The process by which we recollect forward and backward performs a metonymic function, broadening our perspectives and layering our readings of *The Wire*. The individual instances of dialogue, characterization, and action redound to Baltimore, implicating the city itself in the tragedies suffered by its citizens and "noncitizens" alike.[21]

This reconciliation of misreadings finds a parallel function and structure in the prologue to *Agamemnon*. A watchman stands alone, on the roof of King Agamemnon's palace, speaking to no one but the audience. In his monologue, the Watchman obliquely conveys information pertaining to the dramatic context of the play. Rare in ancient Greek theater, he is a lower-class character who speaks in the language of Aeschylus's lyric tragedy—a language in which the meaning and dramatic action are suffused into a network of symbolic reference. Like the characters in *The Wire* who pronounce but fail to understand their lines of epigraphic dialogue, the Watchman's speech is full of symbols whose thwarted meanings drive the thematic movement of the play. The Watchman finishes his prelude with a gnomic line that itself serves as a Delphic gloss on *The Oresteia* as a whole:

> . . . willingly I
> speak to those who understand; if they do not understand,
> I forget everything.
>
> (*Agamemnon,* lines 38–39, my translation)

The epigraphs of *The Wire* imply these same two categories of knowledge and incomprehension into which its protagonists and audience must necessarily fall. In a sense, they both—the Watchman's speech and *The Wire*'s epigraphs—call attention to meaning and to our interpretive responsibility as meaning makers.

Throughout *The Wire* there are moments in which we both participate in and monitor the misreadings, false interpretations, and ironic pronouncements that undermine the show's protagonists. According to Terry Eagleton, the Greek tragedians understood that we do not construe meaning subjectively, but within the confines of the symbolic order, which necessarily produces a "dislocation between impact and intention which the Greeks know as peripeteia, suggesting not simply a reversal but a kind of irony, double-effect or boomeranging, aiming for one thing but accom-

plishing another."[22] Although Eagleton defines these three manifestations of peripeteia as exclusive to one another, they work in concert in *The Wire,* rendering dramatic irony, echoic doubling, and reversals mutually constitutive.

We can experience this triple effect when, later in the show, we come across an epigraph as part of the dialogue, as we do, for example, toward the end of season 2, in the episode "Collateral Damage." When Jimmy McNulty's partners, Detective Bunk Moreland and Detective Lester Freamon, force him to quaff fourteen shots of Jameson Irish Whisky as punishment for foisting them with additional murder cases, McNulty, downing his final shot, slurs his way through the episode's epigraph: "Fuck it. They can chew you up, but they gotta spit you back out."[23]

This is a partial truth, whose ultimate meaning (or nonmeaning) the audience will not understand until the series has run its course. The "they" to which McNulty refers is the Baltimore police hierarchy, which, in the show, often as not stymies investigative creativity and success. This hierarchy's most representative figure is the Deputy Commissioner for Operations, William A. Rawls, who has pledged to end McNulty's career as soon as possible. Throughout the series, McNulty habitually achieves brilliant but Pyrrhic victories against the stultifying hierarchy of the police department. Due to his wayward hubris and fragmentary self-awareness, McNulty's triumphs often undermine the lives of family, friends, and even the investigations to which he had contributed his talents. His successes provoke disaster, and his disasters success, culminating in an illegal investigation in which McNulty falsifies crime in order to reroute official police resources toward an illegal wiretap case. An unlikely candidate for tragic grandeur, McNulty suffers and benefits from the pressing desire to know, from the same instincts for relentless investigative efforts that propel Oedipus to his recognition, fall, and blindness. Of all characters in *The Wire,* it is McNulty whose ingrained pertinacity most consistently and disastrously challenges the force majeure of institutional fate. It is his machinations beyond official channels that prompt the investigations that drive every season except the fourth. And it is he, with faults as flagrant as his curiosity and investigative aptitude, whom the institution's agents target most often for gratuitous retaliation.

McNulty's nemesis Russell "Stringer" Bell, the de facto chief financial officer of the Barksdale organization, serves as McNulty's tragic antithesis through the series. For the majority of the first three seasons, McNulty sacrifices everything but his life in order to investigate Bell, who continually avoids prosecution and capture. At the moment that McNulty is finally on the verge of tracing the city's drug money to Bell, the drug

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lieutenant is undone by fractures within his own organization. Sold out to independent agents seeking revenge, Bell is shot down in the same condo development that was to serve as his springboard to legitimacy. For McNulty, Bell's death forestalled the moment of triumph when the brilliant investigator would catch his brilliant quarry and when the world would recognize this brilliance. Although he has been chewed up and spit out by the police department, his efforts are checked by an antagonist who is eventually consumed by the violence endemic to the illicit economy as much as by the graft and corruption of the supposedly legal political and business spheres. This is a representative instance in which an epigraph assumes its full meaning only after the audience understands contextual information to which a protagonist is not privy. After all, we first read the epigraph, "They can chew you up, but they gotta spit you back out," in the beginning of the second season, over twenty episodes before Bell is murdered.

The dialogic repetitions can reinforce our sense that the series' protagonists, despite their charisma and vivacity, are, in relation to the institutional universe in which they operate, undifferentiated, even nugatory. More importantly, a repeated phrase can serve to gloss a previous iteration with accrued history and context, revealing two key modes of blindness, the first experienced by the characters and the second by ourselves. If we have remembered the previous iterations of dialogue, we can undergo a similar process of retrospective enlightenment, a process similar to Freud's notion of the uncanny, in which a person experiences "an unintended recurrence of the same situation," which in turn makes her feel "something fateful and inescapable when otherwise [she] should have spoken only of 'chance.'"[24] Each repeated utterance will then provide us with an uncanny brand of dramatic irony. We read the show's concatenated fragments of repeated dialogue against the characters' understanding of their own words. The unfamiliar contexts and familiar content of these fragments force on us a temporally retrograde mode of understanding similar to that produced by the symbolic network of *The Oresteia*. Although Eagleton claims that "We live forward tragically, but think back comically," I worry that he has not taken into account the ways that tragedy lives forward through the onstage drama, and having reached the point where the dramatic ironies invert to itself, can only think back—which is to say, "live back"—tragically.[25]

One example of such an uncanny dramatic irony occurs in the final season. When McNulty, for no apparent reason, peremptorily responds to a murder case, his once friend and partner Moreland mutters, almost to himself, "There you go again. Givin' a fuck when it ain't your turn to give

a fuck."[26] This is a nearly direct inversion of an ironic quip that McNulty directed at Moreland during the first episode of the entire series. In this case, it is Moreland who reluctantly accepts responsibility for a murder he did not need to investigate, and McNulty retorts, "That will teach you to give a fuck when it ain't your turn to give a fuck."[27]

There is no indication that either detective remembers McNulty's original remark; and that is the point. McNulty's form of ignorance stands in contrast to the knowledge with which we can belatedly understand Moreland's original rendering of "when it's not your turn," the epigraph, in fact, for the first episode of the first season.

McNulty's unintentional echoes of earlier lines of dialogue often highlight tensions between forms of naive idealism and lucidly observed realism that drive the show as a whole. When McNulty, after his severe disappointment at the failures of his department to protect Bodie or investigate Marlo, grouses, "Marlo's an asshole. He doesn't get to win. We get to win,"[28] the audience is well aware that victory is in no way the exclusive preserve of the just and lawful. The drug runners and drug lords will mostly elude the grasp of "good police" and the law. In appealing to a principle of justice, the protagonists appeal to a *deus otiosus,* indulging an irony borne as much of frustration as of earnest expectation.

The Wire also establishes thematic correlations by way of wisecracks and offhand remarks. In season 2, for example, Bunk, disgruntled about a Jane Doe case with which McNulty stuck homicide, informs his partner that the department assigned the impossible case to another detective: Ray Cole. McNulty quips, "That's collateral damage."[29] The phrase, which also serves as the title of the episode, centripetally draws attention to a wider range of meaning. The infamous military euphemism applies, first, to the thirteen trafficked women whose murder serves as the focal point of season 2's homicide investigation, and secondly to the unintended and therefore tragic consequences that plague the protagonists of *The Wire*. In a similar scene, FBI special agent Terrance Fitzhugh informs McNulty that the Department of Homeland Security has requested that the FBI shift its resources and focus to the "war against terrorism."[30] Grimacing, McNulty responds, "What, we don't have love enough for two wars? I guess the joke's on us."[31] This aesthetic mode, in which dramatic irony and epigraphic ambiguity conspire to yoke local and global significance—just as the symbolic network of *The Oresteia* does—reveals how *The Wire* uses formal strategies to thread its tragic vision through the lives of individuals and nation-states alike.

Although the episode's title, "Collateral Damage," surely disparages American domestic and foreign policy, it also points to a deeper, more

pervasive ideological dereliction: neoliberal capitalism. The money and other federal resources rerouted to fight enemies abroad also contributes to domestic conditions that create enemies within. These enemies constitute yet another undesired and unintended repercussion of the actions and ideologies portrayed in *The Wire.* The characters of *The Wire,* by both suffering and epitomizing modernity's gap between advertised intention and unavoidable consequence, collapse dramatic irony into the tragic irony that is the show's ultimate object of mimesis. As Eagleton writes,

> Modernity is both political democracy and global warfare, the possibility of feminism and the reality of women's degradation, the fact of imperialism and the value of human commerce across frontiers. In a move scandalous to the *ancien régimes,* it claims that freedom and respect are rights from which no one should be excluded; it also forces its own definitions of these values on humanity at large. Everything in such a state, as Marx comments, seems pregnant with its opposite, so that irony, oxymoron, chiasmus, ambivalence, aporia, seem the only suitable figures for capturing its logic.[32]

This is the logic that *The Wire* captures by mimetically reflecting the tragic ironies of postmodern America back to the audience. It is precisely in the spirit of this reconciliation of intentional and unintentional ironies, and of dramatic and tragic ironies, that *The Oresteia* and *The Wire* are confederate.

We remember the Watchman's words at the beginning of *The Oresteia:* "... willingly I / speak to those who understand; if they do not understand, I forget everything" (*Agamemnon,* lines 38–39). The Watchman will remain oblivious to his own meanings until his audience—Aeschylus's audience—"remembers back" to the source of the three plays' linguistic ambiguities and contradictions; which is to say, until the audience understands that the headwaters to the Watchman's Lethe are formed by a too ready belief in the forward progress of meaning.

To gain an awareness of our own tragic status, we must continually be reminded of the past that haunts each protagonist in *The Wire.* Without such mnemonic aids, we cannot share in the characters' tragic recognitions. For this reason, *The Wire* continually incorporates internal reminders of episodes past, signaling the historical forces that farcically and tragically converge on the show's protagonists. In a season devoted to the theme of politics and reform, we are given a signal example of these mne-

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monic visual aids. The third season introduces the character Dennis "Cutty" Wise, a recently released convict who attempts to sever ties with the drug organization to which he owes his allegiance and livelihood. Though Cutty successfully breaks from the violence and moral degradation of his past, he still funds his boxing gym with money from the Barksdale organization. Skipping ahead, to the beginning of season 4, we are given our first glimpse of Cutty's new gym for local youth. The camera slowly sweeps past an enlarged photo of the much younger Golden Gloves fighter Avon Barksdale.[33] The audience remembers that in the first season Freamon discovered this same photo, which provided the investigation with its first substantial lead.[34] As season 4 progresses, and the audience watches retaliatory killings ruin the lives of children, the photograph of Avon serves as a reminder of the provenance, history, and inevitability of violence. This history also reminds us of the irony that pervades Cutty's efforts to provide the neighborhood's children with a sanctuary and an alternative source of pride. Drug money finances a gym intended as a redoubt against corruption by drug money.[35] In all of these cases, we are invited to read the protagonists' attempts to author their own futures against the histories that we have accrued in our memories and that the show signals through mnemonic images, such as that of the Avon Barksdale photograph. We also see that that these same protagonists' inability to comprehend the shaping force of the past condemns them to repeat the histories of their tragic errors.

These internal acts of remembrance also mirror *The Wire*'s stated attempt to look back on ancient Greek tragedy itself. I will argue that *The Wire* and its creators establish resonances between the show and ancient tragedy by analogizing gods and institutions. Throughout five seasons, *The Wire* occasionally allows its characters to draw this analogy directly. Some of these moments are fleeting, offhand, and comical, such as when silver-tongued State Senator Clay Davis arrives at court while brandishing a copy of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*.[36] Often, though, the series establishes the analogy between postmodern power structures and ancient gods through the character of Howard "Bunny" Colvin, the police major who conspicuously rebels against the dictates of his institution. Finally fed up with indulging dishonest bureaucratic tactics, Colvin decides to present his district's crime statistics honestly, refusing to "massage the numbers." Having divulged unembellished murder and drug offense statistics at a COMSTAT[37] meeting, Colvin finds himself denounced by Major Rawls, who asks why felonies have risen 2 percent in Major Colvin's Western District. Colvin responds calmly, "Sometimes the gods are uncooperative."[38]

This, of course, fails to please the police hierarchy. Rawls's superior, Police Commissioner Ervin Burrell, offers an epigraphic quotation of his own: "The gods are fucking you, you find a way to fuck them back. It's Baltimore gentleman. The gods will not save you."[39]

Burrell speaks with the authority of experience. A Baltimore demigod himself, the police commissioner understands his own superiors' Olympian indifference toward Baltimore and its citizens. After heaving himself up the police department's chain of command, Burrell ends up serving the grasping self-interest of one mayor after another. However, the gods whom Burrell references in this passage are not precisely consonant with the conception of the gods as we view them from the more kaleidoscopic perspective of *The Wire* as a whole. On the most obvious level, Burrell is merely informing Colvin that when murders, robberies, and assaults escalate in Baltimore, a politically savvy officer responds in one of two ways, either by making more arrests or by manipulating statistics until they conform not to reality but to political interests.

One crucial irony of Burrell's apothegmatic censure is that, for this consummate bureaucrat, the verb "to fuck," as he uses it here, must be interpreted in the language of his own bureaucratic experience. In essence, he is saying, "If the reality of urban crime [the gods] does not tally with your need to conform with your institution [fucking you], you must alter the numerical representation of this reality [you fuck them back]. The reality of Baltimore's drug trade and consequent murders will never change [it's Baltimore gentlemen]. Therefore do not expect rewards for any attempt at reform [the gods will not save you]."[40]

This construal of Burrell's COMSTAT directive contains another irony. The man to whom Burrell addresses these words—Colvin—will eventually interpret and apply them in a starkly different sense. In ensuing episodes, Colvin will covertly decriminalize drugs in restricted areas, thus endangering not only Burrell's career but the mayor's, as well. From Colvin's jaded perspective, the "gods" can only signify Burrell and Rawls. "Fucked" by these particular gods, Colvin certainly, if only temporarily, "fucks" them back. And yet, following the third dictate of Burrell's reproof, it is just as true that the gods do not save Colvin. After the drug legalization scheme is uncovered, Burrell forces Colvin into early retirement, while the bad press related to Hamsterdam[41] stymies Colvin's alternative job prospects. Once again, reading meaning by reconciling multiple characters' perspectives back and forth through time, we are often made aware of the fictions that separate multiple truths; and it is this awareness that subtly insinuates us into the schemata of causation described by *The Wire*.

THE TRAGIC STAGING IN AND OF *THE WIRE*

The Wire also reminds of us our status as spectators and of the show's layered fictions not only through the concordance of epigraphs and dialogue, but through the show's repeated gestures toward the genre and medium through which it articulates its tragic vision. Although *The Wire* clearly subverts the purpose and clichés of the televised police procedural, it also exploits the genre. Through the detectives' wiretap, viewers of the show traverse physical, cultural, political, and institutional barriers that the show's protagonists rarely breach. To view the detectives operating the wiretap investigation as they listen in on the targets of their investigation is to participate in a similar form of sanctioned voyeurism. After all, it is a kind of wire through which each premium cable viewer gains ingress into David Simon's fictional Baltimore. As the drug dealers, murderers, money launderers, stickup artists, sex workers, and corrupt politicians of Baltimore remain the targets of the police department's investigation, so too do the various fictional constructions of *The Wire* remain the objects of our own spectatorial scrutiny. This is why the institutional dynamics of the Baltimore police department hold such special—which is not to say superior—significance to ourselves. Just as the police investigators operate invisibly behind the camera lens or the wiretap, so do we, HBO's voyeurs, linger behind the veil of the screen.

It is also through the characters themselves that the audience vicariously scrutinizes the institutional forces arrayed against them. Although Simon, Burns, and other scriptwriters for *The Wire* have declared their intent to subsume the trajectory of their characters' lives to the dictates of plot and realism, there are characters such as Wallace, Bodie, and D'Angelo—low-level or middle-level members of the drug organizations—who taper our perspective such that we ourselves fail to see past the horizon of dilapidated, violent projects in which the characters have lived their entire lives. Although the detectives have, through their wiretap, a limited view of the drug dealers' world, their inability to interpret the forces at work among the higher echelons of the police department allow us to see how the putative clarity with which one character views another social group replicates our presumed omniscience.

There are also instances when a character in *The Wire* provides the audience special vantage on the realities that lie behind the show's fictional ambit, mostly by both articulating and representing more global, comprehensive concepts. The police department's Detective Lester Freamon assumes such a role throughout the series. Although he is not the only

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character through whom the audience gains broader perspectives on *The Wire* and the reality to which it points, Freamon most consistently and prominently performs this function. Freamon so intensely evinces wisdom that we might forget his shrewd negotiations of police department politics were partially gleaned from a chastening thirteen years in punitive limbo. Although we never learn the precise details of the transgression for which he was demoted, the series, over the entirety of its run, provides perspectives on his character that allow us to surmise just how great a danger his investigative acumen posed the corrupt institutions of yesteryear. In the beginning of the first season, on his first case since his release from the Pawnshop Unit, Freamon remains reticent and distant, only gradually revealing his capabilities. Unlike McNulty, he clearly understands the full extent of his hierarchy's power to punish enterprising detective work that contravenes political realities. This is why Freamon shares the audience's partially omniscient vantage on McNulty's obtuse and often frustrated attempts to supersede institutional impediments.

But it is not until the final season that the audience understands how much Freamon's words and viewpoints function much as the show's epigraphs do, communicating the particular and the general both at once. Finally subpoenaing State Senator Davis, Freamon's mission to follow the drug money to the top of the city and state's political hierarchy is nearly realized. When his partner, Detective Leander Sydnor, expresses frustration with the bureaucratic complexities of the Davis case, Freamon admonishes him: "A case like this, where you show who gets paid behind all the tragedy and the fraud, where you show how all the money routes itself, how all of us are vested, all of us complicit."[42]

Notwithstanding the explicit reference to "tragedy," and the zeal with which he will scrutinize the fundamental causal forces, Freamon's gentle reproach also points to a transition in the portrayal of Baltimore. Until season 5, *The Wire* typically characterized the power structures of Baltimore and the federal government in spatial terms. Characters and forces fell along some point in a vertical gradation of power, always moving up or down parallel chains of command. In the final season, however, *The Wire* implicates us, taking us to task for failing to pay sufficient attention to America's inner-city problems and for failing to locate our own complicity in America's network of power relations. We in the audience no longer fall along the vertical axis described and disparaged in the previous four seasons. Instead, we—an imagined collective—exist within and beyond this axis, enmeshed in a system of exchange in which our choices as consumers, producers, and voters impact lives in inner-city Baltimore as much as in the factories of Shenyang. Although Freamon, using the third-

person plural, inculpates himself as a progenitor of the tragedy that the protagonists of *The Wire* suffer, the ultimate "we"—the we in the audience—is well aware that Freamon must be counted among these protagonists, and thus the audience understands that it is the "all of us" "vested" and "complicit" in real tragedy that *The Wire* merely stages and represents. Through the rest of the fifth season, Freamon will serve as a constant reminder that the show presents itself as a surrogate for reality. The show's purported realism does not derive from mimetic accuracy but from embedded reminders of *The Wire*'s art of representation. The more we grow aware of ourselves as a reality in relation to the show, the more we perceive the actual tragic lives behind the veil of fiction. In poet Wallace Stevens's words, the audience sees the "As it is, in the intricate evasions of the as" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," 1950). We understand, belatedly, why Freamon pairs "tragedy" with "fraud" in describing the forces behind the veil that separate the powerful from the powerless.

In light of this pairing, it is surprising, one season later, to discover Freamon's complicity in McNulty's fraudulent scheme to falsify homeless deaths as murder cases. Until this point in the series, Freamon serves as the moral conscience of his cohorts, explicitly framing and rearticulating their choices, often shepherding the benighted through the labyrinth of political and bureaucratic intrigues. Once complicit in McNulty's prodigious deception, though, Freamon implicitly impugns our own dereliction, our own ethical credulity and indifference. We see that *The Wire* has, all along, described two modes of fiction with divergent relations to reality. One fiction—within *The Wire*—serves as a surrogate for a reality too long ignored and too long misrepresented by the media, while the other fiction, at the top strata of America's institutional hierarchies, assumes the nature of fraud, deceitfully manipulating truth in the service of power. Once Freamon crosses the line separating fictional truth from fraud, we are led to understand our complicity not merely as members of American society but as spectators comfortable with their remove from the realities represented by *The Wire*. But we do not arrive at this realization until the final season. And it is during this final season that we are inspired to review (re-view) previous episodes, actively retracing our collusion in events from which we had once blindly distanced ourselves. Only with the retrospective dissolution of dramatic irony do we understand the dynamic pairing of fraudulent reality and true fiction that drives *The Wire*.

Although Freamon plays an exceptional role within *The Wire,* catalyzing the audience's ironic collusion with the tragedies that would normally remain safely boxed within the confines of cable television, it is important to note that *The Wire* also implicates us through the careful exposition and

structuring of individual scenes. Although these tragic set pieces are scattered throughout the five seasons, two scenes merit special attention: an offhand comment on a football game; and a union leader's corpse discovered in a harbor. As diverse in tone and substance as these two scenes might be, they both perform literary functions that contribute to our ultimate transformation into tragic spectators.

In the first scene, Roland "Prez" Pryzbylewski, the newly hired math teacher at Tilghman Middle School, sits at home crafting a speech he feels he must give his class in response to an incident in which one student switchblade-slashed the face of a fellow student. Prez's wife comes into the room and sees that a football game is playing on television, a game to which her husband is clearly indifferent. She glances at the set and asks her husband who is winning. Prez looks up and answers, "No one wins. One side just loses more slowly."[43]

With this quick, nearly unthinking reply, Prez articulates one of *The Wire*'s central tragic conflicts, between the value of human aspiration and its near certain dissolution in the face of political, economic, and institutional nemeses. His offhand gloss on the sport, serving, not incidentally, as the episode's epigraph, reminds the audience that the motive for profit will almost always trump individual commitment to nonutilitarian values. Prez's dialogue-as-epigraph is apt commentary on the fate of the fourth season's central protagonists, the four middle-school-age children whose lives, with one exception, will be devastated by the corruption, incompetence, and indifference of educational, law enforcement, and national institutions. From the parallax view provided by the spectatorship of tragedy, isolated moments of intention and consequence are collapsed into a form of limited tragic omniscience.

One scene precisely enacts and thus inverts the staging of tragic spectatorship.[44] The final episode of season 2 opens with a long, mostly dialogue free sequence in which Nick Sobotka and the IBS (International Brotherhood of Stevedores) union members, gathered together on the dock, watch as their leader Frank Sobotka's water-bloated corpse is lowered onto the ground.[45] The camera pulls back behind the corpse, from which vantage we see that Nick and the dockworkers have formed a semicircle around Sobotka's corpse. The physical formation neatly parallels the structure of the ancient Greek performing space, but from the perspective of a spectator looking down on the structure from a nearby hillside. The stretcher bearing Sobotka's body takes the position of the *skene,* the section of the wooden stage on which the actors performed. The union members fan out from Sobotka's body as the Greek spectators in the theatron would from the circular orchestra and skene.

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That this scene evoked, in its thematic and visual scope, ancient Greek theatrical dynamics would not surprise the episode's director, Joe Chappelle, who remarked,

> It's an interesting dynamic, an interesting tension that comes out in terms of how the scenes come together, so it's not totally raw, but it shouldn't be slick. Which is true about the writing, too, because in some ways, it's very street, very real, but at other times, *it's operatic . . . it's just fascinating to watch and listen to. You know it's a street drama but also has the elements of a Greek tragedy*.[46] (my emphasis)

In focusing on the building blocks of tragic spectatorship, Chappelle describes the porosity of borders that purportedly separate tragedy from genres other than theater. He also suggests, though, that *The Wire*'s visual templates find roots in the stage. *The Wire* accesses the "real" through the formal structures of "Greek tragedy," "drama," and the "operatic."

These formal concerns are highly evident in the conscious "staging" of Sobotka's corpse. Assuming our dual role as spectator and fellow bystander, we are invited to gaze down on the stevedores, who serve as our surrogates. We are forced, therefore, to regard the stevedores as both "players" and victims. They are players both in their roles as actors in a fictional televised drama and as actors—human beings with agency—who live and operate within the universe of the fictionalized Baltimore created for them. They are also victims, to whose suffering and struggles we have borne witness throughout the entirety of season 2. Yet their status as victims is also complicated by the fact that Sobotka sacrificed his life and family for their sake. Shifting back one observational level, the audience realizes that, to some extent, the stevedores themselves—as laborers in Marxist terms—have sacrificed their lives for the sake of the spectators. The self-conscious theatricality of the scene evokes the tragic realities in which the spectators thus find themselves implicated.[47] And this self-conscious theatricality—this staging of the stage, so to speak—performs forward to reality and backward to the ancient Greek tragedy behind the curtain of cable television. The staging of Sobotka's impromptu requiem speaks to the realities of postindustrial capitalism as much as it does to the artifice of ancient theater. In this sense, the theatricality of these scenes constitutes the syllogistic common term between form and content, the juncture of which generates the process of modern adaptation that this essay has sought to explore.

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NOTES

1. "Dead Soldiers," *The Wire,* episode 28, directed by Rob Bailey and written by Dennis Lehane, first aired by HBO, 3 October 2004. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from *The Wire: The Complete Series* (New York: HBO Video, 2008), DVD.
2. David Simon, "Behind *The Wire:* David Simon on Where the Show Goes Next," interview by Meghan O'Rourke, *Slate,* 1 December 2006, www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagenum/all/ (accessed 2 February 2011).
3. Margaret Talbot, "Stealing Life: The Crusader behind 'The Wire,'" Profiles, *New Yorker,* 22 October 2007, 150–63, www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot (accessed 2 February 2011). In this quotation, the ellipsis in brackets represents omitted material, whereas the suspension points near the end indicate a pause.
4. David Simon, personal interview by the author, Cambridge, MA, 4 April 2008.
5. Eric Ducker, "The Left Behind: Inside *The Wire*'s World of Alienation and Asshole Gods," Listening In: Part IV, *Fader,* 8 December 2006, www.thefader.com/articles/2006/12/08/listening-in-part-iv (accessed 2 February 2011).
6. Chris Barton, "'The Wire': David Simon Schools USC," Showtracker: What You're Watching, *Los Angeles Times,* 4 March 2008, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2008/03/the-wire-david.html (accessed 3 October 2010).
7. David Simon, interview by Nick Hornby, *Believer,* August 2007, www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview_simon (accessed 2 February 2011).
8. Talbot, "Stealing Life," 2007.
9. David Simon, "'The Wire': David Simon Reflects on His Modern Greek Tragedy," interview by Cynthia Littleton, On the Air, *Variety,* 7 March 2008, http://weblogs.variety.com/on_the_air/2008/03/the-wire-david.html (accessed 2 February 2011).
10. "The Target," *The Wire,* episode 1, directed and written by Clark Johnson, first aired by HBO, 2 June 2002.
11. Terry Eagleton has argued that the novel, as a genre, can be seen as a bridge between antiquated and postmodern modes. In comparing Stendhal's portrayal of society's "superstructure" and Balzac's of its "base," Eagleton asserts,

    > If everyday life can be heroic in the latter case but not the former, it is because Stendhal's bailiwick is the institutions of the court, church and state, of political machinations in high places, all of which in post-revolutionary society are now incorrigibly squalid and self-interested; whereas Balzac writes not just of bourgeois society but of capitalist society. (*Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2003], 185)

    The Wire, in effect, combines the Balzacian and Stendhalian modes. In portraying the cannibalistic relationship between capitalist society and the "superstructure" institutions, *The Wire* is able to shift its focus up and down the societal strata of Baltimore.

12. Throughout this essay, I sometimes refer to "spectators" and "the audience" as such; and sometimes I will refer to a collective "we." These are extraordinarily problematic terms of reference for a collective in which I participate but for which I can in no way speak with assurance. In generalizing the experiences and perceptions of individuals, these terms can serve heuristic purposes, allowing me to make conclusions about these imagined constructs based on the internal evidence of the texts themselves, whether ancient Greek tragedies or contemporary episodic television.
13. Nicole Loraux, *The Mourning Voice: An Essay on Greek Tragedy,* Cornell Studies in Classical Philology (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 89.
14. David Zurawik, "Final Ratings Report on HBO's 'The Wire,'" Critical Mass, *Baltimore Sun,* 11 March 2008.
15. Gary Edgerton, *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005).
16. *The Oresteia,* a trilogy, is composed of, first, *Agamemnon;* second, *The Libation Bearers;* and third, *The Eumenides.* The trilogy, tracing the curse of the house of Atreus, details the rise of civic justice from its atavistic roots in *lex talionis.* In *Agamemnon,* the titular hero returns from the Trojan War only to be slaughtered by his wife, Clytemnestra, who wishes to revenge the murder of her daughter Iphigenia. In *The Libation Bearers,* Agamemnon's children, Electra and Orestes, seek retribution, and murder their mother. In the final play, *The Eumenides,* also known as *The Furies,* pursue the next cycle of revenge, which Athena and Apollo finally break by way of a prototypical trial and jury.
17. The epigraphs often pertain to themes threaded throughout the entire series, such as the inevitability of fate. For example, see the following epigraphs (followed by season and episode numbers):

    "When it's not your turn."—McNulty (1.1)

    "The king stay the king."—D'Angelo (1.3)

    "all in the game . . ."—Traditional West Baltimore (1.13)

    "Ain't never gonna be what it was."—Little Big Roy (2.1)

    "It don't matter that some fool say he different."—D'Angelo (2.6)

    "How come they don't fly away?"—Ziggy (2.8)

    "Don't matter how many times you get burnt, you just keep doin' the same."—Bodie (3.1)

    "Why you got to go and fuck with the program?"—Fruit (3.4)

    "Lambs to the slaughter here."—Marcia Donnelly (4.1)

    "No one wins. One side just loses more slowly."—Prez (4.4)

    "The world goin' one way, people another."—Poot (4.10)
18. "Game Day," *The Wire,* episode 9, directed by Milčo Mančevski and written by David H. Melnick and Shamit Choksey, first aired by HBO, 4 August 2002.
19. Ibid.
20. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation,* Literature, Culture, Theory series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
21. In *The Wire,* those outside the illegal drug trade are commonly referred to as *citizens,* whereas the term *noncitizens,* by implication, indicates anyone lingering within the extralegal sphere of the drug trade.

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22. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence,* 328.
23. "Collateral Damage," *The Wire,* episode 15, directed by Ed Bianchi and written by David Simon, first aired by HBO, 8 June 2003.
24. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVII: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1955), 237.
25. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence,* 42.
26. "Unconfirmed Reports," *The Wire,* episode 52, directed by Ernest Dickerson and written by William F. Zorzi, first aired by HBO, 13 January 2008.
27. "The Target."
28. "Not for Attribution," *The Wire,* episode 53, directed by Scott and Joy Kecken and written by Chris Collins, first aired by HBO, 20 January 2008.
29. "Collateral Damage."
30. "The Target."
31. Simon offered the following remarks on this scene:

    > This is predictive on our part. We're filming this pilot two months after 9/11, and although the FBI hadn't announced it yet, it was apparent from the manpower we knew they had and the priorities they had that they'd be giving short shrift to any antidrug mission they had, and any priority they had in the drug war was going right out the window. (1.1, Commentary)

32. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence,* 242.
33. "Boys of Summer," *The Wire,* episode 38, directed by Joe Chappelle and written by David Simon, first aired by HBO, 10 September 2006.
34. "The Buys," *The Wire,* episode 3, directed by Peter Medak and written by David Simon, first aired by HBO, 16 June 2002.
35. "Middle Ground," *The Wire,* episode 36, directed by Joe Chappelle and written by George Pelecanos, first aired by HBO, 12 December 2004.
36. "Took," *The Wire,* episode 57, directed by Dominic West and written by Richard Price, first aired by HBO, 17 February 2008.
37. In this context, COMSTAT can mean "command status" or "computer statistics."
38. "Dead Soldiers."
39. Ibid.
40. In *The Wire,* the verb "fuck," especially when used in the passive voice, often signifies the individual's recognition of the institution's power over her life and future. We see this, for example, when Ziggy Sobotka, in prison on charges of murder, explains that his circumstances now trump the value of his familial identity:

    > Frank: That ain't you Zig.
    >
    > Ziggy: It ain't? Cause the same blood don't flow for us, pop. I mean I wish it did, but it don't.
    >
    > Frank: You're more like me than you know. You're a Sobotka.
    >
    > Ziggy: I'm fucked is what I am. (2.8)

41. "Hamsterdam" refers to an area in the city in which illicit activities such as drug dealing or prostitution are ignored by the police. The reference is to the Dutch city Amsterdam, where such activities are legal.

42. "Unconfirmed Reports."

43. "Refugees," *The Wire,* episode 41, directed by Jim McKay and written by Dennis Lehane, first aired by HBO, 1 October 2006.

44. "Port in a Storm," *The Wire,* episode 25, directed by Robert F. Colesberry and written by David Simon, first aired by HBO, 24 August 2003.

45. Karen Thorson commentary, *The Wire*, episode 25, directed by Robert F. Colesberry and written by David Simon, first aired by HBO, 24 August 2003. On this scene, Thorson, *The Wire*'s producer, commented,

> This is an interesting scene, because *it's a tragic unveiling of their leader,* and Nick's uncle and Bob asked them to restrain the kind of melodramatic action that you think somebody's going to have, the weeping and the mayhem. They're in shock of understanding what's really come down here on this relatively placid day, in their life. (2.12, Commentary, my emphasis)

46. "Middle Ground." The suspension points represent a pause.

47. David Simon commentary, *The Wire,* episode 1, directed by Clark Johnson, first aired by HBO, 2 June 2002. Simon explained in the commentary accompanying the first episode of the first season that the metaphor of the wiretap and surveillance cameras was intended to implicate the audience's indifference toward the social problems the show portrayed:

> We tried to layer in these sort of innocuous shots of surveillance throughout the first season to give you a sense of a world that is increasingly watched, even watched with a certain indifference. And we trying to create a world not where there is [*sic*] little nuggets of information. . . . [W]e trying to create a world where there was almost too much information being thrown at the detectives and it was their job to sift. (1.1, Commentary)