Ritual Irony

Foley, Helene P.

Published by Cornell University Press

Foley, Helene P.

Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides.


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68530

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2414212
Drama and Sacrifice

Euripidean scholarship has been grappling for centuries with the supposed structural imperfections of his dramas, the supposed irrelevance of his choral odes, and the supposed rationality, not to say irreverence, of Euripides himself. Aristotle complains that Euripides' inadequate plots ignore the necessary and the probable and require the intervention of a deus ex machina to straighten them out. He hints that Euripides' choruses had begun to approach the decorative interludes that they became in later tragedy. The poet's characters are inconsistent, changing their minds for no apparent reason, and his stylized debates seem more rhetorical than true to character. Sophocles reportedly said that he made men as they ought to be, Euripides as they are. Aristophanes implies that Euripides undermined the dignity of tragedy and contributed to the moral decline of Athens. The poet's sophistic and iconoclastic attacks on the anthropomorphic gods of Homer and his soul-destroying irony won him few first prizes even in his own time. According to the philosopher Nietzsche, Euripides destroyed tragedy.

The plot of the Heracles, for example, veers so abruptly and unexpectedly that the initial scenes seem to lose organic relation to what follows. Similarly, the mad Heracles of the peripety little resembles the pious father who rescues his family from the tyrant Lycus and a corrupt Thebes in the opening suppliant action. Neither Heracles matches the superhuman culture hero celebrated in
the choral odes. In the final scenes the hero’s rejection of suicidal despair implicitly denies the repellent and vengeful anthropomorphic Olympians that the audience has just witnessed onstage in the peripety. The play thus concludes by turning directly against its own mythical tradition.

Yet the puzzling discontinuities that characterize Euripidean tragedy should be seen not as the result of inconsistency or as mere polemics, but as a serious and thoughtful response to poetic, social, and intellectual tensions within Attic culture. On the one hand, the poet confronts the corrupting effects of continual war between Athens and Sparta, the excesses of contemporary democracy, and the collapse of traditional social and religious values. On the other hand, he faces the disparity between the myths on which he bases his plots and the values of the society to which he adapts them. A poetic tradition peopled by self-assertive and often explosive kings, queens, and aristocratic warriors hardly suits the ideology of an egalitarian democracy in which the state circumscribes and subordinates the interests of the family and the extraordinary individual. The apparent opposition between “rational” prose argument and the “irrationalities” of myth, poetry, and ritual posed difficulties for all Attic tragedians. Yet the gap is wider for Euripides than it was for Aeschylus, and he brings the dialectic between the unpredictability of events and the pattern asserted by myth and ritual closer to the surface of his work. At the same time, Euripides presents drama at a religious festival honoring the god Dionysus, and he is sharply conscious that the performance of tragedy is itself a kind of ritual. Hence he must in some sense remain true to this ritual setting for his own art in the face of the sophistic reaction to myth and to the arbitrary, vengeful, petty, and even comic Olympians inherited from the epic tradition.

This book will explore the questions raised by Athens and Dionysus for Euripides’ poetics and theater through a critical study of four problematic late plays: the Iphigenia in Aulis, the Phoenissae, the Heracles, and the Bacchae. By concentrating largely on the overt theology of the plays, critics of Euripides have often made a sim-

---

1 My approach to the complex dialogue between past myths and the Attic democracy in tragedy has been influenced by Vernant 1970 and Vernant in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981: 1–27.
plastic equation between the religious views of Euripides and those of the contemporary Sophists. As a result, current interpretations of Euripides’ plays tend to the bleakly ironic. By emphasizing the ways in which the plays are built on or around ritual and confirm religious practice (if not traditional Olympian theology), the book offers a modified view of Euripidean irony. Furthermore, the lyric and ritual aspects of Euripides’ late dramas operate in close harmony and more strategically than earlier interpreters have thought. The odes of each of these plays, far from being merely decorative and nonfunctional, form a continuous song cycle that gains significance precisely from its studied contrast with or disconcerting relation to the action. Ritual, by serving in these plays to link odes and action, the mythical and the secular, past and present, ultimately enables the poet to claim for drama and its archaic poetic tradition a continuing relevance to a democratic society.

Typically, Euripides’ characters and the world of the action of his plays seem resistant to the higher realities and irrationalities of myth and ritual. Euripidean prologues, for example, are apt to include the protagonist’s questioning of his own myths. Helen doubts that she was born from an egg (*Helen* 17–21). In such plays as the *Orestes* the plot threatens to depart its myth altogether, requiring the intervention of a god on the machine to reassert tradition. The Euripidean chorus persists in drawing on tradition, celebrating gods and myths in a manner reminiscent of the poet’s epic and lyric predecessors. Yet these typical remarks made by the chorus of the *Electra* succinctly express their difficulty in upholding this role; myths, they argue, even if mere fictions, are nevertheless necessary for men (737–46):

*So it is said. But I have little belief in the tale that the golden sun left its hot quarter and, to chastise mortals, changed its course for a man’s misfortune. Terrible myths are a gain for men and for the worship of the gods. Forgetting these things, you, the sister of noble brothers, kill your husband.*

Some characters, such as Iphigenia in the *Iphigenia in Aulis* or Menoeceus in the *Phoenissae*, make a voluntary choice to act in conformity with divine oracles and a poetic ideal expressed in the
Ritual Irony

choral odes and thus to return a wavering action to its myth. Such actions are invariably undertaken through ritual and through sacrifice.

From Xenophanes to Aristotle, Greeks began to see their view of the gods, at least as expressed in epic, as a projection of their own human forms and social needs:

For this reason all men say that the gods are governed by a king, for men themselves are either still ruled by a king, or were so in ancient times. And just as men represent the appearance of the gods as similar to their own, so also they imagine that the lives of the gods are like their own. (Politics 1252b)

Does man, then, disguise in his worship of the gods a worship of himself and his own need for order? So the poets seem to imply in many dramas in which the city itself becomes a source of salvation alternative to the gods (see, for example, Euripides’ Suppliants, Heracleidae, or Heracles). Danaus in Aeschylus’ Suppliants says to his daughters (980–83):

My children, we must pray to the Argives, sacrifice and pour libations to them as to gods Olympian, since they unhesitatingly preserved us.

Although Euripides never fully dismisses the Olympians, he apparently comes to see them in his later plays as beings indifferent to men or representative of a force equivalent to tuchē (chance; sign of divine intervention in human affairs) that may on occasion, especially when human effort plays an important subsidiary role, produce beneficial results, as in the Iphigenia in Tauris and the Helen. More frequently, however, these remote and impersonal divine forces create what appears from the human perspective to be inexplicable disorder:

Which mortal could say that, after searching to the farthest limit known to man, he has discovered what is god, what is not god, and what is in between—when he observes the dispensations of the gods rapidly leaping hither and thither and back again in ambivalent and incalculable incidents? (Helen 1137–43)
In the *Helen*, the prophetess and priestess Theonoe, avoiding the dilemmas posed by an unpredictable or amoral divinity, burns purifying sulphur to commune with a *pneuma* (breath of air) from the heavens, a supra-Olympian realm of purity that informs her decidedly human wisdom and piety (*Helen* 865–72). She relies for moral judgment on her own *gnōmē* (wisdom and judgment) and on a shrine of justice in her nature (1002–3).

Yet in the very plays in which Euripides’ characters reject the fickle and immoral Olympians, religious rituals (prayer, supplicancy, ritual offerings, and festival) and especially sacrifice continue to play a central and often surprisingly positive role. In contrast to earlier choral lyric, deaths in Attic tragedy are frequently undertaken or metaphorized as sacrifice: that is, they occur in a sacrificial setting and/or are described in the text as a form of *thusia* or *sphagia*. The action of several of Euripides’ plays turns on a sacrificial death: the *Alcestis*, the *Medea*, the *Heracles*, the *Electra*, the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the *Phoenissae*, the *Bacchae*, the *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and the fragmentary *Erechtheus*. Other plays include a sacrificial death as an important element in a more complex plot: the *Heracleidae*, the *Hecuba*, the *Andromache*, and the fragmentary *Phrixus* and *Cresphontes*. The perverted human sacrifices of the *Heracles* and the *Bacchae* serve to define a larger social and religious crisis and ultimately to reflect the poet’s ability to reconstruct through violence a new if fragile link between myth and society. But in the *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the *Phoenissae*, in which an idealistic youth sacrifices herself or himself to resolve a cultural crisis, Euripides allows the gesture to resolve the plot and to offer a putative cure for an otherwise hopeless politics of self-interest and desire.

The poet also habitually closes his dramas with the establishment of new rituals for which the plays themselves become an aetiology. The *Iphigenia in Tauris*, for example, concludes with

---

2 On this point, see Burkert 1966a: 116. On possible sacrificial elements in epic deaths, see, for example, Lowenstam 1981 on the death of Patroclus.

3 This definition excludes the death of Evadne in the *Suppliants*.

4 On these cult references at the close of Euripides’ plays, see esp. Kamerbeek 1958 and Whitman 1974, esp. 118–19. In contrast to Whitman, I view these aetiological conclusions as central to the structure and meaning of the play, not as a last-minute act of desperation.
the establishment of a cult of Artemis at Halae, now purified of the human sacrifice that tainted it among the Taurians. Once again Euripides seems to find in ritual processes a transcendent though ironized value. The hero cult and sacrifices offered to Heracles at the close of the *Heracles* and the cult offered to Hippolytus at the close of the *Hippolytus* hardly succeed in assuaging the suffering of the heroes. Yet the offer of a cult to Heracles gives him an opportunity to choose survival despite unbearable disaster and to become a hero meaningful to a modern *polis* (see Chapter 4). Hippolytus’ tragic resistance to sexuality and Phaedra’s near adultery, permanently commemorated in a ritual special to unmarried girls, will, however ironically for Euripides’ characters, come to assist brides in their complex and potentially painful transition to marriage and womanhood. Medea’s violent “sacrifice” of her sons becomes rationalized in the harmless repetition of the children’s cult at Corinth. Ritual may be used to recall the past for the purpose of reordering and even predetermining the future. In the sacrificial deaths of tragedy Euripides seems to be drawing on ritual largely as metaphor and symbol while his own ambiguous art liberates itself from subordination to actual practice. But in these closing references to cult Euripides seems to wish to establish links for his art with ritual as an effective and precisely repeated performance enacted by the community rather than observed by it as audience to a tragic performance.

As the intellectual revolution transformed Greek theology, popular and deeply rooted ritual practices apparently remained relatively unchanged. And Euripides is not alone in insisting on the preservation of ritual performance while debunking theological superstructure. Plato, too, although his views of the Greek gods are both elusive and clearly not traditional, in the *Laws* expresses no doubt about the need for ritual and for specific ritual practices. Euripides apparently ignores possible contradictions between the maintenance of ritual and a modified view of Olympian deities. And in practice, if not in literary tradition, Greek gods may often have come close to embodying “the incalculable non-human element in phenomena” that they seem repeatedly to represent in late Euripides.⁵ Ritual practice does not seem to have depended on

⁵On this point see esp. Nock 1972: 260. Kirk 1981, esp. 78–80, has recently argued that a similar deincarnation of the Olympians was occurring during the
Drama and Sacrifice
certain knowledge of who the divine recipient would be; Greeks often sacrificed, especially in times of crisis, to unnamed or vaguely named gods (theos, theoi). In his understanding of men's motives for making ritual offerings to the gods, Euripides seems to approach the views expressed by early sociologists of religion such as Durkheim (here interpreted by Beidelman):

... gods are manifested through things which in themselves are subject to flux. Men then make offerings because of the instability of the external world, both physical and social (for society too manifests itself physically through persons and things). The gods then are as unstable as men. The stability of either realm is reasserted through symbolic acts, and because this is an illusion, an existential act not really inherent to the nature of things, it must be repeated again and again. ... Religious rites become the repeated efforts by social men to reassert an illusion by endowing it with the palpability of a physical and group experience.

The repeated celebration of cult and festival in which Athens continually came to terms through song, ritual, and drama with its own complex social crises, its everyday transitions, and its violent mythical and theological traditions seems to embody for Euripides that same effort "by social men to reassert an illusion by endowing it with the palpability of a physical and group experience."

Modern readers, of course, have particular difficulty with the sacrificial deaths of tragedy since blood sacrifice figures little in our own religious practice. Furthermore, the relation between Greek theology and Greek ritual practice is mysterious at best, for a shifting and contradictory theological speculation was the province of poets and philosophers, not of priests and a religious hierarchy. Ritual practices, on the other hand, though performed under the

---

Homeric period but was arrested by the later development of the fine arts, which emphasized the anthropomorphic aspects of Greek deities.

6See the discussion of sacrifice to unknown gods in the recent study of voluntary human sacrifice by Versnel 1981: 171–79.

7Beidelman 1974: 60. Beidelman is here discussing Durkheim's reaction to Robertson Smith. Unlike Smith, Durkheim insists on the fundamental importance of oblation in sacrifice. While turning to his own ends Smith's view that ritual and sacrifice reinforce community, Durkheim argues that mortals, in offering gods food and, even more important, thought, keep gods alive (1965: 388).
influence of certain beliefs (usually unknown to us), are difficult to comprehend and, in most cases, to reconstruct in detail. Of these religious practices, which include many forms of prayer, festival, and ritual, the central and primary religious activity in the fifth-century Greek *polis* was sacrifice, the offering of fruits and vegetables or the killing of domestic animals in honor of an enormous pantheon of gods, demigods, heroes, and dead spirits. Although we cannot recreate fully the nature, function, and meaning of this ritual in ancient culture, we can clarify Euripides’ experience of and possible assumptions about sacrifice.

Despite major obstacles to interpretation, anthropologists and scholars of Greek religion have made some progress in reconstructing and analyzing sacrifice both cross-culturally and in ancient Greek society, and literary critics have begun to use these insights to offer new interpretations of the sacrificial metaphor in drama. Since this book is concerned primarily with the literary rather than historical representation of ritual, and especially of *human* sacrifice, the discussion here focuses on conclusions that articulate with and illuminate the role of sacrifice in drama. The discussion begins with a summary of relevant views of ancient writers on the function of sacrifice and with a reconstruction of a typical classical *thusia*. The next section summarizes sociological and specifically structuralist definitions of the place and significance of sacrifice and sacrificial procedures in the Greek religious system and in the Greek culture of the classical period. From this perspective sacrifice is a symbolic system, like a language, whose gestures must be decoded both in relation to each other and in the overall social context of classical Athens. This part of the discussion draws heavily on the work of Rudhardt, Vernant, Detienne, and Durand. The third section examines evolutionist interpretations of sacrifice, which stress the origins and historical development of sacrificial ritual and its possible relation to the emergence of tragedy. Scholars adopting this approach have usually been par-

---

8For important works that treat the sacrificial motif in Greek tragedy, see Zeitlin 1965, 1966, 1970a, 1970b; Lebeck 1971; Vidal-Naquet 1981a; Wolff 1963; Vickers 1973; Pucci 1980; and Girard 1977. For a general critical article on ritual and literature, see Hardin 1983.

Drama and Sacrifice

ticularly concerned with the nature of sacrificial violence and its psychological effects on the participants in the ritual. In this group the work of Meuli, Bataille, Burkert, Girard, and Guépin are the most directly relevant for Greek drama.\textsuperscript{10} The second and third sections close by presenting examples of the relevance of each of these two major analytical approaches for the interpretation of tragic texts. The reader thoroughly familiar with past scholarship in this area may wish to turn directly to the final section of the chapter ("Poetry and Sacrifice"), which clarifies the relation between earlier work and the approach to ritual adopted in the rest of this book.

The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theorists on sacrifice tended to combine, in ways that at times seem confusing and contradictory, evolutionary, psychological, sociological, or functionalist approaches in cross-cultural theories of ritual.\textsuperscript{11} The structuralists reject the cross-cultural approach in favor of culture-specific analysis and respectfully take issue with a range of earlier views, including those of their closest predecessors in the \textit{Année Sociologique} school. The evolutionists, acknowledging their debt to a wide range of sources, including Durkheim, Freud, and ethnologists such as Lorenz, draw more directly and sometimes less critically on earlier theories of ritual and base their conclusions on cross-cultural material. This theoretical eclecticism has been the source of considerable controversy with the structuralists.\textsuperscript{12} Considerations of space, suitability for literary analysis, and methodological clarity made it necessary to restrict discussion to the most recent and fully drawn theories of Greek sacrifice and to avoid attempting to resolve major controversies. Indeed, despite the many acknowledged differences in the emphasis, methodology, and conclusions of the two approaches considered here, they can be used in a complementary fashion in the study of the


\textsuperscript{11}For useful methodological discussions on theories of sacrifice, see esp. Evans-Pritchard 1965; Vernant 1976, 1981; Detienne 1979b; Burkert 1981; and Kirk 1981.

\textsuperscript{12}While subscribing to many of the reservations of the structuralists about cross-cultural theories of sacrifice, I have found the cross-cultural analyses of, for example, Douglas 1966 and Turner 1969 to be compatible with the views of the structuralists and valuable for a study of Greek tragedy.
Ritual Irony

highly eclectic and sometimes contradictory treatment of ritual in drama. Finally, because this book is concerned with the role of ritual in drama, the summaries of various theoretical points are confined as much as possible to literary examples.

Greek Evidence for Greek Sacrifice

The relation between Greek gods and men was predicated on sacrifice, which established communication between divine and human realms through offerings from men to gods. The tragic "sacrifices" with which we are concerned are blood sacrifices; hence this discussion examines only the ritual killing of animals (and, by extension, humans). The etymology of the word thuein, "to burn so as to provide smoke," is to some extent misleading for the classical period. Certainly fire transformed the offering of an animal into the fatty smoke that the gods preferred from man and turned its meat into edible food for men. But by the classical period thusia and thuein referred primarily to blood sacrifice, in which the victim was eaten, in opposition to sphagia, sphazein, and enagizein, in which the victim was not consumed.

Archaeological and literary evidence establishes that sacrifice served a wide variety of purposes, and ancient testimony about contemporary sacrificial practices gives various explanations for the ritual. First, sacrifice was a form of timē (honor) or dōron (gift) presented to the gods on the analogy of gift-giving practices within the hierarchies of human society. (For sacrifice as timē, charis, and chreia tōn agathōn, see Porphyry De abstinentia 2.24; for sacrifice as an exchange of gifts between god and men—do ut des—see Hesiod Works and Days 336–41.) The vestiges of this sacrificial function persisted, for example, in the details of the distribution of sacrificial meat. Epic gods and heroes insisted on their prescribed due, and into the classical period the cuts of sacrificial meat continued to confirm hierarchy for priests and other officials. In Odys-

14See Casabona 1966: 84. The term is most frequently used in this way, although thusia can refer to a wide range of offerings other than animal victims and is not always consumed.
Hermes remarks deprecatingly that Calypso’s island is remote from the source of sacrifices: “Nor is there nearby any city of mortals who offer to the gods sacrifices and choice hecatombs.” Similarly, Demeter’s angry destruction of the crops in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* must be stopped because she is depriving the gods of their expected sacrifices (310–13):

And now she would have utterly destroyed the race of men with cruel famine and have deprived those who dwell on Olympus of their glorious honor [τοιμή] of gifts and sacrifices, had not Zeus taken note and pondered it in his mind.

In Argonautic legend Hera’s wrath at Pelias derived from his having slighted her at sacrifice; in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* the gods destroyed the men of the Silver Age for their failure to sacrifice (135–39). On the human level, Oedipus cursed his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, because, in one version of the myth, they gave him an inappropriate share of the sacrificial meat (*Thebaid* frag. 3 Kinkel; Schol. Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 1375).

This gift to the gods created a limited reciprocity between gods and men (based loosely on the model of human xenia or hospitality) and served various functions: to provide thanks and recognition to divinities (*charis*), often for benefits already received; to request future benefits, fertility, or good fortune (*chreía tōn agathōn*); to propitiate deities whose anger can be deduced from a social crisis; or to prevent divine jealousy of or hostility to enterprises about to be undertaken. In these last two areas the sacrificial gift can be understood as a form of compensation. Nestor at *Odyssey* 3.178–79 thanks Poseidon for his safe return to Pylos; at *Odyssey* 3.159–60 the Greeks offer a prayer for a favorable voyage, and at *Odyssey* 3.143–47 a sacrifice is offered to appease the wrath of Athena. Aristophanes’ plays mark the recovery of fertility and peace with a celebratory sacrifice (although the irony of sacrificing an animal to Peace is not lost on the poet; see *Peace* 1019–25 and also 924–34). The *Oedipus Rex* opens with a group of suppliants performing sacrifices to propitiate the gods and cure the plague that has gripped

15For sacrifice as compensation, see the recent argument of Versnel 1981.
the city. The chorus and characters in Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers* supplicate Agamemnon’s ghost with a promise of gifts in exchange for his aid to Orestes in the performance of his matricide (483–85). The king of Argos in Aeschylus’ *Suppliant* hopes to avoid the bloodshed of kin by sacrifices (449–51):

In order that consanguine blood remain unshed, we must sacrifice many cattle to many gods, a cure for grief.

By interpreting various signs during the ritual and by examining the inner parts of the victim, men might receive messages from gods concerning divine acceptance of a sacrificial plea and the chances for the success of an enterprise. As Theseus in Euripides’ *Suppliant* optimistically asserts (211–13):

What we cannot know, the seers disclose for us as they scrutinize sacrificial flames, the flight of birds, and the convoluted entrails of victims.

These major explicit functions of sacrifice are often summarized as acts of supplication, thanks, divination, and propitiation (apotropaic ritual, the attempt to turn aside evil, is a subset of this last function). As Plato says, sacrifice is primarily a gift of man to god for man’s own benefit: *to thuein doreisthai esti tois theois* (*Euthyphro* 14c). It is a gift man makes to recognize past services of the gods to himself, to request future ones, or to avoid divine disfavor toward human enterprises. But these openly acknowledged functions for sacrifice only begin to explain its complex place in Greek religion and culture. For sacrifice is an act of ritual *killing* by men and for gods preliminary to a *meal*. Ancient writers had their own views concerning sacrifice as a form of killing and as a kind of

---

16 See Rudhardt 1958: 249ff., for a good summary of the purposes of sacrifice and the contradictions between or blurring of the lines between the various functions (e.g., gift and thanks) and recipients of sacrifice (gods, heroes, the dead). He stresses the impossibility of giving one explanation for all parts of the ritual from the preliminary rites to distribution of the meat (see esp. 250ff.) and emphasizes the middle value of *thuesthai* except in rituals of thanks (267).
shared meal. We shall return to some of these after a summary of the procedures involved in a typical classical *thusia.*

The ritual normally consisted of three important stages: the consecration and killing of the victim, the extraction and ritual use of certain parts, and the separate butchery and distribution of the remaining parts. The celebrants had to be pure (not criminals, women who had just given birth, adulterers, or the like) and clean, and the victim (a domestic animal) had to have special qualities suitable to the occasion. In animal sacrifice the celebrants and the victim were garlanded for the sacrificial procession; sometimes the horns of the animal were gilded. A vessel containing water and a covered basket containing whole grain brought by a virgin were carried around the altar. The participants began by purifying themselves (washing their hands) and sprinkling the victim with water. A torch was plunged into water. The victim was made to nod its head in consent to its sacrifice. The sacrificial knife, hidden beneath the barley in the basket, was then uncovered. The participants threw whole grain (or occasionally leaves or stones) at the victim and the altar. Following a moment of silence and a prayer, the priest cut a few hairs from the victim’s forehead and threw them into the fire. The animal, now fully dedicated to death, had its throat cut with its neck turned toward the sky; the women screamed (*ololuzein*), marking the moment of religious intensity at which the animal’s life departed its body (*Odyssey* 3.449–55). The *aulos* (Greek pipe) was played and the blood was caught in a vessel and poured on the altar. Chosen participants flayed the animal, cut out the thighbones, wrapped them in fat, and burned them with incense on the altar for the gods. Sometimes the tail, gall bladder, or small pieces of meat from the entire animal were included. Wine was poured over the flames. All full participants toasted on spits.

---

17 The version of *thusia* given here is a synthesis drawn from literary and archaeological sources that accounts neither for the variation in actual practice nor for our uncertainty concerning the order of the procedures. For excellent recent summaries of sacrificial procedure, see esp. Burkert 1972: 10–14 and 1966a: 106–8 or Rudhardt 1958: 258ff. Stengel 1910 is a classic earlier work. For further bibliography, see Burkert 1972: 9 n. 2.

18 The emphasis on three stages is that of Rudhardt 1958: 290.
Ritual Irony

and immediately ate the splangchna (heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, or the parts containing the blood and vital principle of the animal). The rest of the animal was butchered in accordance with precise procedures and distributed in different ways determined by the context. The meat was either boiled on the premises or carried elsewhere to be eaten. The skulls of bulls and rams and the horns of goats could be preserved in a sacred place, and the skin sold for the benefit of the cult.

In contrast to sphazein and enagizein, thuein tends to be used for sacrifices made on a high altar in which the victim is consumed. The term sphazein refers specifically to the cutting of a victim’s throat to produce a libation of blood, not a burnt offering or a meal. It is often made in extraordinary circumstances requiring a form of propitiation: at the beginning of a battle, at the crossing of a body of water, to appease the winds. Enagizein generally refers to a sacrifice made on a low altar to heroes and the dead. The application of these three terms for sacrifice (there are a number of other terms and variant procedures) and the distinctions among them do not hold consistently in every case. Thuein and related words can be used for almost any kind of sacrificial offering, including vegetable offerings. The following discussion concentrates on the form of thusia outlined above, both for the sake of clarity and because, as Casabona has argued,\(^\text{19}\) thuein always retains its technical ritual meaning in classical literature, whereas sphazein, for example, is used both outside and within ritual contexts.

The Sociology of Greek Sacrifice: The Structuralist Approach

Structuralist analysis stresses the way sacrificial procedures turn the killing of an animal into a legitimate act that renders the meat of domestic animals acceptable for men and defines in specific ways the relation between god and man and among men in a Greek polis. Greek sacrificial procedures deny, neutralize, and ex-

\(^{19}\)Casabona 1966 has the most comprehensive discussion of Greek sacrificial terminology.
Drama and Sacrifice

clude the violence involved in the killing of the victim. As the Hesiodic myth of the first sacrifice emphasizes, sacrifice concerns principally the distribution of sacrificial meat. The Promethean myth passes over in silence the question of animal slaughter. Men kill to eat, and the participants in sacrifice must not experience their act as a crime.20 The preliminary rites insist on the purity of all participants.21 Up to a certain point sacrificers and victim are identified with each other, since both are garlanded and purified. The mass pelting of the victim implicates all participants in the killing and perhaps, since human scapegoats (often actual criminals) were similarly pelted, symbolically condemns or partially separates the victim from the community. The animal, liberated from its domestic subservience, moves freely to the altar. The beast’s shiver, when sprinkled, indicates its purity (Plutarch De defectu oraculorum 437b), and its nod of consent denies the potential illegitimacy of the killing. (See especially Plutarch Quaestiones convivales 729F or Prophyry De abstinentia 2.9. Similarly, in the law courts the victim of a crime and/or his relatives could voluntarily free the criminal from prosecution.22) The actual killing is sudden and surprising, as if to contain a potential spread of violence. The sacrificial knife is concealed in the basket of grain, and other weaponry is excluded from the sacrificial precinct.

Attic myths about the origin of civic sacrifices also repeatedly legitimize the killing of sacrificial animals, although they occasionally hint at other, darker motives, such as famine, anger, or fear. The first swine was unintentionally slaughtered by a woman named Clymene. Her terrified husband consulted the Delphic oracle; since the god did not condemn the practice, swine were routinely sacrificed thereafter. An oracle permitted an inspector of sacred rites to sacrifice a sheep if he washed his hands and allowed the sheep to die a voluntary death. A goat was first sacrificed in Icarus, a mountain district of Attica, because it had cropped a vine. (For all three stories see Porphyry De abst. 2.9–10.) The Attic Bouphonia apparently symbolically reenacts a “history” of the first sacrifice of a plow ox. In this ritual, which takes place at the

21See Rudhardt 1958: 258 and 299.
22MacDowell 1963: 8 and 148–49.
opening of the threshing season, the slayer of a sacrificial bullock, abandoning his ax, takes flight after killing a bull that has previously been let loose to eat offerings at the altar of Zeus Polieus. The remaining participants, called into the Prytaneion, throw blame on each other. A knife is finally condemned and thrown into the sea, the sacrificer purified, and the bull flayed, stuffed with straw, and harnessed to the plough in an act of resurrection. In Theophrastus' account of the myth in explanation of the ritual (Porphyry De abst. 2.10, 29–30), the plow ox, the domestic animal closest to man (and highest on the scale of what were to become sacrificial victims), fell victim to human anger because it ate and trampled on some vegetable offerings. The setting is prepolitical, and the slayer a foreigner. Since at this time the killing of domestic animals was criminal, the ox was buried as if it were a human being, and its slayer departed for exile. Subsequent oracular instructions promised benefits to all if the exile expiated his crime, the murderer was punished, and an effigy of the slain animal was raised where it fell. The exile returned and responded to the oracle by inventing what was to become the familiar sacrificial rite. To make himself a member of the community and deflect blame from himself, he involved the entire citizen body in the killing of another ox. Women brought water, one man struck the ox with the knife, another cut its throat with a knife. The stuffing and harnessing of the ox to the plow and the judicial process followed. Civic sacrifice and the tribunal of justice thus emerge together from the first murder of an ox and establish a new set of boundaries between the human and animal realms. The ox no longer eats food set out for the gods but is filled with its own appropriate nurture, fodder; men can eat meat.23

The butchery and consumption of the animal occurred in two stages. First, the gods received their share of the victim and showed divine signs of favor or disfavor to the participants. In Greek sacrifice, in contrast to practice in the Near East, the group, not a priest, made the offering to the gods. The sharing of the

23For a recent discussion of the Bouphonia, including sources and a summary of controversies surrounding the rite, see Parke 1977: 162–67 and nn. 211–17. For a structuralist interpretation, see Durand 1973 and Vernant 1981.

[32]
Drama and Sacrifice

roasted innards (the most sacred and vital parts) by all full participants in the rite (usually male citizens) marked the egalitarian and symbolically more primitive essence of the rite. The Greeks treated roasting as a more primitive method of cooking, since the dried and burnt meat might still be partially raw. This phase of the ritual completed the communication between god and man.

The butchery that followed was of a more varied and secular nature. At this point the distribution of the meat could reflect the hierarchies of the community or reemphasize the equality of the participants. Male citizens, for example, always received a larger share than their wives and children, who were not full members of the political community. Women were thus generally auxiliary rather than full participants in the ritual.

Unlike the sacrificial procedures of other cultures, Greek sacrifice apparently had no rites of exit to reestablish a boundary between the sacred and the profane. Even the preliminary procedures concentrated special powers in the victim without setting it apart from the secular world; garlands, worn in both political and religious contexts, established a link between sacrificial and secular contexts. The participants, because of the mediating role of the animal victim, symbolically never departed the profane realm; the ritual made the victim edible for man and incorporated the benefits of the sacrifice directly into the community as a whole. As evidenced in the mantic signs offered by gods to men through the beast, communication with the divine was established in sacrifice through the immolation of the victim, through prayer, and through the sacrificial smoke created by the burning of the portions set aside for the gods.

24 See Detienne 1979a: 76–78.
26 Rudhardt 1958, esp. 296, arguing against Hubert and Mauss 1964 (1898), esp. 19–51 and 95. Rudhardt’s views have been adopted by Vernant, Kirk, and others, whereas Burkert 1972 continues to accept Hubert and Mauss.
28 Here the structuralists take issue with earlier cross-cultural theories of sacrifice. Hubert and Mauss 1964 (1898): 11, 52, 55, and 97–99 emphasize rites of entrance and exit and argue that these rites permit a safe approach to the dangerous
Ritual Irony

As Rudhardt in particular has argued, sacrificial procedures thus mark the incorporation of the individual into a particular social group. Virtually no political activity was performed without sacrifice. Only members of a particular social group could share in a particular sacrifice or receive its benefits. Through sacrifice man gave up something for a gain, but in so doing he submitted himself to the group and to the religious rules of the group. The individual never fully controlled the benefits of his sacrifice. When he performed sacrifice for divination, for example, the gods offered positive mantic signs only if his planned action accorded in some mysterious way with the religious order. No amount of pious ritual activity could assuage or persuade an unfavorable divinity. Hence sacrifice benefited the individual, yet it always remained a collective act in that it was performed according to certain procedures determined by the group and was effective only if the larger context was propitious. At the same time, Greek authors often failed to mention to which gods a sacrifice was made; hence emphasis fell on the human side, as sacrifice reaffirmed the continuity of family or civic life. The Greek gods were powers that, through ritual, served to integrate man into the social order and social hierarchies, into nature, and into a sacred order. They justified human culture yet kept it within strict limits, so that the power that men received through sacrifice was precisely the power that gave cohesion to the community. For this reason, perhaps, sacrifice could be used to enforce oaths or remove pollution from a criminal and permit his reentry to society.

divine realm through the death of the victim and a substitution of the victim for the sacrificer. For a comparable ancient view, see Sallustius: Concerning the Gods and the Universe (ed. Nock 1926: lxxxxiii–iv), secs. 15–16. Arguing that sacrifice serves the interest of mortals only (the gods need nothing from them), Sallustius sees the victim as an intermediary who brings god and human together in the offering of a third life.

---

29Rudhardt 1958, esp. 257ff. and 294ff.
31Rudhardt 1958: 289, 294, 297.
32Vernant 1980: 109. Vernant 1976: 37 emphasizes that individualism is regularly expressed in Greek culture and religion through the group.
33Rudhardt 1958: 293.
Drama and Sacrifice

Those who chose to dissent from the community regularly formulated deviant patterns of eating and sacrificing, as Detienne and Sabbatucci have argued.\textsuperscript{34} Whereas sacrificial procedures normally served to legitimate the killing and eating of animals and incorporated the individual into the \textit{polis}, Pythagoreans and Orphics withdrew in various ways from the community and refused meat and sacrificial killing, or, in the case of Pythagoreans who were not vegetarians, refused certain meats (oxen, as opposed to pigs or goats). This group was implicitly refusing the violence inflicted on a member of the community (the domestic animal) on which sacrifice was predicated and was treating it as murder or cannibalism. Dionysiac cult (in myth if not in reality; within the \textit{polis} Dionysus was worshiped with the same sacrifices as other gods) and the Cynics, on the other hand, resisted traditional culture by a symbolic return to savagery and the eating of raw meat. The Pythagoreans and Orphics denied the cultural delineation made between men and gods and, by returning to the imagined practices of a Golden Age, sought direct communion with the gods. The second group of deviants denied the separation between man and nature by a return to the ways of beasts.

Structuralist analysis draws several important general conclusions from its examination of sacrificial procedure and the literary treatment of sacrifice.\textsuperscript{35} First, along with marriage and agriculture, sacrifice comes to be understood in the symbolic system of Greek thought as a way of marking out the special precinct of the human, of setting men apart from both the immortal gods with their imperishable food (nectar and ambrosia) and from beasts who eat raw food. Whereas beasts kill each other with impunity, man imposes taboos on the killing of fellow humans and eats no meat of domestic animals without previously sacrificing and cooking it. By delineating sharply the boundaries and differences between god and man, sacrifice, like Greek popular wisdom, serves to keep its participants strictly within the limits of the human.

\textsuperscript{34}Detienne 1979a and Sabbatucci 1965. These deviant attitudes and procedures indirectly confirm the structuralist view that normal sacrifice legitimized sacrificial killing and served to separate mortals, gods, and beasts.

\textsuperscript{35}For a good summary of these views, see Vernant 1976: 31–32 and 1980: 134–38.
Ritual Irony

Structuralist analysis shows that sacrifice operates in analogous ways to other ritual performances in the community, and that the religious system of the polis functions with a remarkable consistency. Sacrifice, marriage, and funeral rites, for example, share similar procedures: purification with water, garlanding, the cutting and dedication of hair, music, and a feast. In marriage rites the couple is pelted with flowers and other objects, and perfume rather than incense plays a central role. All three rites help to effect a transition for the central participants, from domestic animal to edible meat, from unmarried (and wild) status to married (and cultured), from life to death. Marriage, like sacrifice, serves to distinguish man from beasts (promiscuous) and gods (incestuous) and incorporates individuals into a (new) social group. Marriage rites include sacrifice as part of the proceedings. Sacrifice, which could be performed both publicly and in the household, provides a link between public rituals, which are aimed at creating social unity on a large scale, and rituals oriented toward individuals such as marriage, funerals, and initiation rites, which emphasize social transition and learning, often through a confrontation with pain or death.

In the public rather than the private realm, sacrifice, agon (contest), and festival, the most important civic rites in Greek life, ritualize potential violence within a community and delineate the relations between gods and men. Thus athletic agon(es) such as those in Patroclus’ funeral games in Iliad 23 represent in a controlled and peaceful form the destructive antagonism of war. The games contrast with Hector’s terrible race for life on the battlefield at 22.159–61. Such contests are the only form of physical violence acceptable within a society. In the Odyssey the Phaeacians, a society without war and foreign policy, still have games to bring the aggressive competition of their young men into equilibrium.

[36]

Initiation rites also include some similar procedures. On initiation rites for women see Chapter 2, and for men Chapters 4 and 5. On marriage and funeral ritual see Chapter 2. See Burkert 1972: 68 on the overlap between rites and myths of sacrifice, funeral, and initiation.

Rudhardt 1958 analyzes festival, dance, agon, and burial in terms comparable to those he applies to sacrifice. See Chapters 4 and 5 for further discussion and bibliography.
Sophocles (Oedipus Rex 879–81) emphasizes the positive force of good competition in a polis, whereas Demosthenes (20.108) stresses the centrality of the agonistic spirit in a democracy. The victor in an athletic contest may momentarily reach a godlike status, but epinician poetry reminds him that he must compete in submission to the rules of his society and for its benefit and glory as well as for his own.

Festivals in honor of the gods included both sacrifice and many kinds of agones (musical and theatrical among them). Frequently the whole society, not just male citizens, participated. These festivals also served, in ways discussed in more detail in the chapter on the Bacchae, to incorporate the whole community into the social system and to define its relation to the gods.

The testimony from tragic and epic passages cited earlier shows that sacrifice creates a reciprocal relation between god and community through gift and a shared meal. The Pythagoreans were not alone in their critical response to this practice. Comic writers mock the divine “need” for sacrifice. In Aristophanes’ Birds, for example, the characters plot to dethrone Zeus and the Olympians by depriving them of the smoke from their sacrificial meat. Pindar (Olympian 1.46–53) responds to the awkward implications of divine cannibalism in the Tantalus myth by offering a different, whitewashed version. On a more abstract level, Euripides’ characters, adapting the views of pre-Socratic thinkers such as Xenophanes (frags. 1, 11, 12, 23, and 24 DK), often seem repelled by the notion of a divinity who needs or is directly involved with men (see especially Heracles 1345–46 or Hecuba 799–801) and suggest that divine anthropomorphism is an invention of men.

Unlike Near Eastern myths, Greek myths do not baldly acknowledge that man was created to feed and labor for the gods. But Greek poets do note the apparent disparity between divine and human portions in the sacrifice. How can one rationalize human sacrifice, when men receive and use the edible parts of this gift whereas the gods receive only the smoke from the unusable parts such as the thighbones, fat, gall bladder, and tail? Hesiod’s story of Prometheus raises the issue of sacrificial distribution. In a series of

38See Chapter 5 for further discussion and bibliography on festival.
articles Vernant has clearly shown the important, if implicit, point about this story of the first sacrifice.39 The introduction of sacrifice is a deceptive advantage for men, who previously shared meals with the gods but are now condemned to a separation from divinity and to mortality. The immortals eat imperishable food, symbolized by the smoke, incense, and spices they receive from men, whereas mortals eat food made only marginally less perishable by cooking. Sacrifice thus becomes a part of the definition of the human in Greek culture.

Sacrifice denies by its procedures its own violence, and legitimizes the killing and eating of domestic animals. Greek vases and literary texts reflect this denial in their refusal to depict the animal’s moment of death. Human sacrifice, however, is depicted on vases.40 Similarly, tragedy, though it is reticent about displaying sacrificial death onstage, can dwell on the moment of slaughter in verbal descriptions. Human sacrifice in tragedy, however, perverts actual sacrificial practice, which normally prohibits the slaughter of men, and thus logically becomes a part of the social disruption and crisis typical of the tragic plot.

While ancient historians offer putative examples of either actual human sacrifice or the threat of it before military expeditions, such victims were rare and probably nonexistent.41 Themistocles, for example, was advised to sacrifice three captured Persians to Dionysus before the battle of Salamis (Phainias of Eresus, frag. 25 Wehrli = Plut. Them. 13.2). Pelopidas was warned to sacrifice a virgin at Aulis before the battle of Leuctra (Plut. Pelop. 21). Phy­larchus makes the unlikely claim that it was common for Greeks to slaughter human victims before battle (Phylarchus ad Porphyry De abst. 2.56). Although archaeological evidence now suggests that human sacrifice may have been practiced in Minoan and dark-age Greece, all later examples of human sacrifice in Greece are generally agreed to be modeled on myth. Nevertheless, Greek mythical

41For an important discussion, see Henrichs 1981 and Burkert 1966a: 112–13.
For discussion of the actual practices involved in sacrifice before battle, see esp.
1979: 1–10 on the ritualized nature of Greek battle.
Dr ama and Sacrifice

tradition offers many examples of festivals and cults that preserved the uncomfortable “memory” of human sacrifice at their origins. In the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, for example, Euripides presents the substitution of an animal for a human victim in the cult of Artemis as a historical transformation of the ritual from barbarian to Greek. But, as a drop of blood is taken from a human throat, the origin of the Greek rite is recalled each time an animal victim is sacrificed (1458–61).

In sum, sacrificial procedure offers to the poet a kind of grammar of procedural terms by which to articulate in a compressed and symbolic form the nature of the relations of men in the community and of men to the larger world of animals and gods around them. Participation in sacrifice binds the worshiper to his community, organizes his place in that community, and implicitly obtains his consent to the violence upon which this organization is in part predicated. Through ritual a kind of equilibrium or justice is reached between man and his larger environment. Douglas, in discussing the range of ritual as metaphor in *Purity and Danger*, makes an amusing but apt comparison between money and ritual as two varieties of social currency:

The metaphor of money admirably sums up what we want to assert of ritual. Money provides a fixed, external, recognizable sign for what would be confused, contradictable operations: ritual makes visible external signs of internal states. Money mediates transactions; ritual mediates experience, including social experience. Money provides a standard for measuring worth; ritual standardizes situations, and so helps to evaluate them. Money makes a link between present and future, so does ritual. The more we reflect on the richness of the metaphor, the more it becomes clear that this is no metaphor. Money is only an extreme and specialized type of ritual.42

A correctly performed ritual, then, offers a standard by which to measure the health of a community. The healthy community, as in sacrifice, formally expels violence from within itself, distributes its goods in an orderly and just manner, eats according to specific rules, makes social transitions in a ritualized manner, and limits

42Douglas 1966: 85–86.
Ritual Irony

itself to what its religious and social practices define as human. The proper performance of sacrifice thus becomes a sign of civilization, of a recognition that life cannot be led without a communal order and shared standards of behavior. The voluntary sacrifices of vir­gins in tragedy mimic proper sacrificial procedures. The victim is pure and goes willingly to death in propitious silence. By substituting themselves for the community, these heroic victims can, at a drastic cost, symbolically unite and rescue a fragmented society.

Ritual can suffer a number of improprieties with regard to its phases and their order, the choice of victim, the role of the sacrificer, the purity of the participants, the method of killing and butchery, and the suppression of the victim's consent. These improprieties can become a sign of uncontrolled violence and social disorder, psychological and social alienation from the community, or a collapse of communication between the divine and human realms. Hence Thucydides saw the breakdown of ritual, especially burial ritual, during the plague at Athens as symptomatic of a more general social disintegration (2.51–53). Corrupt sacrifices in tragedy are murders thinly disguised as sacrifice and symptomatic of a social environment in which violence is proliferating uncontrollably and cultural distinctions are collapsing. Proper procedures are violated, animal sacrifices become human, man aspires to become god, sacrificial gifts become unjust bribes, men eat their children.

The central role of sacrifice in society thus makes it a useful and multidimensional symbol for the exploration of social crisis that forms the basis of so many tragic plots. The sacrificial metaphor in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is a much-studied example. The crime that opens the trilogy, the slaying of Iphigenia, is a ritual tainted by the victim’s lack of consent to her death. In contrast, her Euripidean counterpart willingly submits to sacrifice for Greece. The death of Iphigenia resonates through the language of sacrifice with the “preliminary sacrifices” made by the Greek army at Troy, with Agamemnon’s desecration of the temples of the gods at Troy, and with the “sacrificial” deaths of himself and Cassandra (Ag. 65, 1118, 1293, 1310; see also Homer *Od*. 4.535 and 11.411, which compares the death of Agamemnon to that of an ox in his stall).
Drama and Sacrifice

Clytemnestra calls her murder of Agamemnon in retribution for her daughter a sacrifice and blasphemously pours out his blood, instead of wine, as a third libation to Zeus, savior of the dead (Ag. 1385–87). Here she perverts the propitious libation poured to Zeus Soter at banquets. Clytemnestra sacrifices Agamemnon as he bathes in a lebēs, a word normally used to describe a kettle or container for water at a sacrifice, and never elsewhere for a bathtub.43 In the Agamemnon the series of sacrificial victims, connected by a chain of revenge or “justice,” is human, and the feasting on the flesh of the victims becomes cannibalism (Thyestes’ children and Orestes, whose blood the Erinyes threaten to suck in the Eumenides). The imagery, as in the omen of the eagles (Ag. 109–20), suggests a confusion of boundaries between sacrificer and victim, man and beast. As Zeitlin has argued, the characters who make these sacrifices deceive themselves as to the justice and correctness of their acts by calling their crimes performed with tainted motives “sacrifices.”44 The result is a collapse of the political order into a tyranny dominated by a woman, and a sense of theological crisis, in which the divine order seems to become increasingly remote and unreadable for man, while the line between the “violent grace” of Zeus and secular violence becomes indistinguishable.

Order and piety begin to be restored only when Orestes refuses to deceive himself as to the nature of his matricide and correct ritual procedure begins to reemerge (although it still serves to promote murder) in the tomb ritual of the Libation Bearers. Now the gods not only send their oracles to man but in the end literally appear onstage in the Eumenides to reestablish ritual and the control of internal social violence through rites of purification, cult, and a system of secular justice. The Eumenides close the trilogy by accepting a cult in Athens and marriage sacrifices. The olougmos, the ritual cry of women at the sacrifice, regains its proper function, and Zeus once more receives his proper epithet “Savior.”45 The

restoration of ritual marks and confirms the restoration of the social order.

Structuralist analysis of ritual illuminates what the sacrificial metaphor expresses about the larger social context. This approach makes it clear why the destruction of Helen’s marriage to Menelaus is logically connected to the “preliminary sacrifices” made by the Greek army at Troy, how the failed marriage of Clytemnestra results in her “sacrifice” of Agamemnon, and why marriage, sacrifice, and agriculture are simultaneously restored in the cult of the Eumenides that closes the trilogy. Such analysis explains why the violation of sacrificial procedure in the death of Iphigenia can express simultaneously both psychological corruption in the individual and an inversion of the entire social order; for in Greek thought, as in Plato’s *Republic* 8, the structure of the individual psyche and of society often reflect each other. As in the myth about the Attic Bouphonia, sacrifice and the problem of justice are related, since sacrifice is organized to control the relation of men and beasts and of citizens to each other and to bring benefit out of violence. Hence the ability to understand divine justice, lost in the corrupt world of the *Agamemnon* and regained in the *Eumenides*, can be expressed through the performance of the ritual act by which communication takes place between the two spheres, and by which god and man are both united and divided. Structural analysis provides a way of reading the language with which sacrifice speaks to the audience, and a method of decoding the function of the sacrificial metaphor in the whole world of a play. In short, to call murder sacrifice is to put an act of human violence into a social and religious context whose larger implications the spectator can begin to understand.

Furthermore, the sacrificial ritual, as an institution that retains its form throughout the historical period represented in the trilogy (the society formed at the close of the trilogy is basically that of Aeschylus’ audience), provides a crucial symbolic link between past and present, between myth and contemporary life, and between Athens and other cities (Argos). Whereas political systems and the relations between the sexes shift through time, ritual remains to bridge the gap between the sexes and between public and private life. For, like the Erinyes, women remain public actors for
the society in cult even when they are barred (unlike Clytemnestra) from the political arena in democratic Athens.

In the *Electra* of Euripides the characters actually perform the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra on ritual occasions, the first at a festival of the nymphs, the second at a ritual for the birth of Electra’s fictional child by the farmer to whom she has been unwillingly married. The play as a whole is set on the day of the Argive festival of Hera, to which the chorus are en route in festal dress. As Zeitlin has shown, the festival of Hera stands in the play as an “examplar of ritual regularity” or normal cult activity against which we can measure the life and actions of the house of Atreus.\(^{46}\) Electra is strongly characterized by her social alienation: neither married nor unmarried, neither princess nor farmer’s wife, she preserves a perpetual mourning for her father that will not allow her to join the women of the chorus in the festivities. She lives banned from the palace in an isolated rural setting. Orestes, too, has lived so separately from the land of his birth and his noble position that he can achieve a full recognition with his sister only at great length (the Aeschylean recognition scene between brother and sister is parodied as impossible in this play) and through the mediation of others; he laments in a long speech the impossibility of distinguishing true nobility (367–400). The chorus (743–46) defends the value of mythical stories as *paradeigmata* that, whether they are true or false, lead men to refrain from evil; but the message of the heroic past is lost on the protagonists. Electra romanticizes her solitude and her lost brother to the point that she, too, has great difficulty discovering the presence of the savior for whom she has longed. She also fails to recognize the messenger who returns with the news of Orestes’ success (765–66).

In contrast to Aeschylus’ version, the hurried appeal of the siblings to their father’s ghost is abruptly cut off (684) and initiates a series of ritual distortions in which Electra imagines the return of Orestes with Aegisthus’ head as the triumphal entrance of an athletic or military victor.\(^{47}\) Orestes participates in the sacrifice for the

---

\(^{46}\) Zeitlin 1970b: 669; my discussion of the role of ritual in the *Electra* combines my own views with insights from Zeitlin’s article.

\(^{47}\) See lines 590–91, 614, 686, 694–95, 751, 761–62, 776, 824–25, 864–65, 872, 880, 888–89, 954–56, 987, 1174 for agonistic imagery in the play. For brief discus-
Ritual Irony

nymphs falsely, pretending that he has already performed the proper ablutions (793–94) and accepting Aegisthus’ invitation to show his skills as a foreign expert at butchery. He then kills Aegisthus from behind with an ax as Aegisthus concentrates on the unfavorable entrails. The murder becomes an extension of this sacrificial butchery, which is described in horrifying clinical detail. The vague and terrifying sacrificial deaths of Aeschylus’ trilogy are replaced by gross specificity, as the agent of Apollo’s will turns butchery—the division of a legitimately killed animal according to rules that reflect the structure of authority in the community—into murder and a claim for his lost throne.

Electra, too, turns a ritual for birth into a murder, destroying her mother and turning her back on Hera, goddess of marriage; the command by the Dioscuri that Electra marry Pylades can hardly transform this “unmarried one,” as her name specifies, into a promising bride. In the Electra ritual fails to become, as it does in Aeschylus, a source of form or integration. The characters are too alienated by their distorted fantasies and unheroic lives to find a place in the normal processes of religious life and society. If Apollo’s command to Orestes was appropriate, it cannot be interpreted as such when performed by the protagonists of this play, as the Dioscuri apparently imply at 1244: “She [Clytemnestra] has met with justice, but you have not done justly.” In the final scenes Orestes and Electra seem to be aware of the true nature of their crime and the hollowness of the future promised them by the gods, but the play deserts them at the threshold of exile.

In this play Euripides, like Aeschylus, uses ritual (sacrifice, ἀγῶν, rituals for birth, and festival) as a method of measuring and exploring the problems of justice and the social control of violence. But the world created by the two poets is radically different. In Euripides’ play the secular world is not reformed or apparently reformable. The political context in Argos remains obscure; secular justice is provided offstage and in a remote context (1258–75). The gods speak cryptically, and doubt is cast on their words and ac-

sion, see also Adams 1935 and O’Brien 1964. Armed soldiers discovered at Olympia were impounded and held for ransom, a policy that confirmed the separation of war and athletic ἄγονες.
Drama and Sacrifice

tions (1245–46, 1302). The patterns of ritual and myth are held up before the protagonists like maps that they are able only to misread as they turn sacrifice into butchery, butchery into glorious victory, Apollo’s oracle into a travesty of justice, and marriage and birth into an occasion for falsehood and death. Electra’s fictions seek authority in ritual but reflect instead her own alienation and self-delusion. The world of Euripides almost never provides the uplifting convergence of political and religious life, of domestic and public interests, to be found in Aeschylus. Yet ritual and the patterns it offers for alleviating suffering, for integrating the individual into social life, for coping with violence, do not always, as in the Electra, fall on deaf ears. As we shall see in the plays examined in the following chapters, because sacrifice contains in itself an implicit definition of a civilized community, the ritual often provides Euripides with a solution of the last resort in a world in which public life, political corruption, and social alienation remain the dominant aspects of a disintegrating environment.

Nevertheless, Greek tragedy goes beyond using ritual and sacrifice as a complex standard by which to measure social unity or disorder and as a means of defining the cultural system in terms of relations among gods, humans, and beasts. Myths, ritual procedures, and divine authority all render the killing of domestic animals legitimate. At the same time there is something intrinsically repellent about a divine/human relationship in which communication so often occurs in terms of violence, whether through sacrifice, rape, plague, or revenge. Whereas epinician poets such as Pindar were at pains to explain away illegitimate divine violence and to transform myths that denigrated the gods, Greek tragic poets deliberately exploited the violence that lay at the heart of the sacrificial ritual, of communication between gods and humans, and of the myths upon which they based their plays. As we have seen, Greek poets and philosophers had begun self-consciously to examine and question their religion as a collective system of ideas, symbols, and ritual practices that reflected and reinforced social structures. Thus, in Aeschylus’ Oresteia divine justice becomes comprehensible only through the establishment of a human institution, trial by jury, in the context of Athenian society. The triology assumes that theology depends on and changes with polit-
Ritual Irony

ical systems: monarchy, tyranny, or democracy. The emerging recognition that social relations form a model for religious conceptions articulated with a growing concern about the origins and psychological effects of religion and ritual. Although Hesiod’s cosmology presented an original divine violence as ultimately rationalized by the rule of Zeus, eventually the anthropomorphic gods came to seem false and inadequate projections of the human spirit, perhaps invented especially to justify human vices or to control an unruly human society with fear of divine retribution. Euripides’ sophistic characters often explain their surrender to violence and immorality by alluding to divine precedents. In their aetiological explanations of ritual and cults, poets frequently assumed an origin in human sacrifice for the tamer practices of their own day. Since, however, this uneasy search for origins and concern with divine and human violence is so often made in Greek literature through myth and allusion to ritual practices about which little is known, the speculations of modern theorists can again be helpful in illuminating the assumptions implicit in such complex poetic representations.

Sacrificial Violence and the Question of Origins

Whereas structuralist analysis concerns itself with the way that sacrifice functioned both as a system and within the cultural context of classical Greece, evolutionist theories are specifically concerned with the emergence and survival in human culture of sacrifice as a mode of ritualized killing. Meuli and Burkert, who expanded upon Meuli’s work, argue that prehistoric sacrificial ritual was organized primarily as an atonement for the destruction of life, an appeasement of violence. Meuli, developing the work of earlier scholars, saw the origin of sacrifice in the rites of Paleolithic hunters. The hunter, closely identified with the animal he killed, regretted killing it and feared its vengeance. Wishing to save the animal from complete destruction and to regenerate symbolically

48See note 10 above. I have selected from a large body of evolutionist theory the representative ideas of three historians of religion, Meuli, Burkert and Guépin, and of two nonclassical philosophers of culture, Bataille and Girard.
his future source of food, the hunter removed and treated its internal organs in special ways and buried or preserved certain of its bones, often reconstituting them in a particular pattern that, supplemented by the addition of small pieces of meat from other limbs, suggested the regeneration of the whole beast. Neolithic pastoral and agricultural peoples transformed this procedure, wrapping animal thighbones (which contain, as it were, the marrow of existence) in fat for the gods.⁴⁹ These hunting rituals also explain the special treatment of the *splanchna* or internal organs in Greek sacrifice, and the Homeric practice of *omothetein*, the placement of small pieces of meat from other parts of the animal on the bones. (Primitive hunting practices also suggest origins for the *chemibes*, the sprinkling of the animal with water, and possibly for the *ololugmos*). The Greek sacrificial ritual was, then, a kind of “comedy of innocence” or “drama of escape from guilt” (*Unschuldskomödie*). The ritual retained its essential elements from Paleolithic times because man, the only being that needed ritual to come to terms with his own death, continued to want to assuage the guilt incurred from killing animals for his own benefit.

Burkert, building on the work of Freud and ethologists such as Lorenz, departs from Meuli’s emphasis on the “comedy of innocence,” which obscured sacrificial violence, and argues that ritual, and sacrifice in particular, works also to control impulses of human aggression. Whereas powerful animals control their competitive impulse to kill, man has no such instinctive control of his competitive drives. Man’s deeply aggressive nature and his attempts to control it through ritual are reflected in myths of early man such as the biblical tale of Cain and Abel, which combines intrafamilial murder and sacrifice.⁵⁰ For Burkert the threat of regression to human sacrifice stands behind every performance of the ritual, and it is precisely the ability of the ritual to dramatize the moment of killing that ensures and perpetuates its success as a form of collective therapy.⁵¹ Hence sacrifice is structured as “prep-

⁴⁹ Guépin 1968: 100 argues against Meuli 1946: 231–32 that the dedication of the thighbones is a *pars pro toto* offering, not an attempt to regenerate the animal symbolically, and thereby assuage guilt.
Ritual Irony

aration, terrorizing center, and restitution.”\textsuperscript{52} The \textit{ololugmos}, the ritual cry of the women, dramatizes the emotions evoked at the moment of the animal’s death. The shock and guilt precipitated by sacrifice united agricultural peoples even more powerfully than the earlier hunters and gatherers to the extent that killing had become less familiar in the procurement of food.\textsuperscript{53} Hence sacrifices and related rituals, the expulsion of members of a community in scapegoat rituals or human sacrifices, could be used to overcome social crises.\textsuperscript{54}

Bataille, who also locates the origin of animal sacrifice among the early hunters, sees sacrifice as one part of an important system of taboos created to protect and organize the world of work and social reproduction and to set this world apart from the world of nature, which operates on a different basis. Man wished to deny his own violence and death and to control sexuality, thereby preventing the recognition that only death guarantees life. This denial was, of course, impossible. Hence his social life was built around ritualized transgressions of taboos against intracommunal violence and promiscuity, transgressions that organized violence and sexuality for the benefit of the community: war, sacrifice, and marriage. Through his relation to the sacred world in ritual, man effected a controlled confrontation with the persistence of nature insofar as it could not be ordered by the world of work. For the early hunter, animals were beings like himself, but beings not subject to the taboos concerning intestine violence and promiscuity, and therefore more sacred and godlike (early gods were frequently represented in animal form); hence the killing of animals appeared as sacrilege. For the early hunter “animal nature formed a cathedral, as it were, within which human violence could be centered and condensed.”\textsuperscript{55} Through animal sacrifice man came

\textsuperscript{52}See Burkert 1972: 97. For ancient evidence on sacrifice as primarily a ritual killing see, e.g., Sallustius 16.1, \textit{zoës de dia thusiôn aparchometha} or the assumption in \textit{De abst}. 2.27 that sacrifice arose out of cannibalism. Meuli follows Hubert and Mauss 1964 (1898), esp. 33, 58, in emphasizing that sacrifice is in essence a crime.

\textsuperscript{53}Burkert 1972: 53–58.

\textsuperscript{54}Burkert 1966a: 111.

\textsuperscript{55}Bataille 1962: 85. For the other arguments by Bataille presented here, see esp. 42–59, 63–64, 67–68, 73–74, 81–84.
face to face with the limitless continuity of nature and its insistence on reproduction through death, a continuity denied by the organized world of work. Whereas Burkert views sacrifice as man’s way of confronting his own aggression, Bataille views it as a way for man to confront his own nature as if it were something separate from human culture, and hence to some extent separate from himself; the ritual system serves simultaneously to obscure and yet to confirm man’s part in the uncontrollable world of nature. This notion that sacrifice both confronts and conceals human nature and the possibility of an uncontrolled proliferation of human violence is shared in a different form by Girard.

Girard’s theory, upon which the work of Bataille had some influence, grows out of the work of the French sociologists of religion who, following Durkheim, locate the origin and reality of religious phenomena within the social process. Such analysts of religion try to strip away the symbolic forms of religious representations to find the ultimate social referents beneath: to discover, for example, how sacrifice engenders god. For Girard the earliest social life is characterized by a dangerous lack of cultural distinctions. Reciprocal violence between men originates in a process of ever-escalating “mimetic desire” in which each self desires what another desires simply because the other desires it, and as a result comes into violent competition for a series of desired objects. This process is without limit unless the aggressions released in mimetic rivalry can be deflected onto an arbitrarily selected victim who is defined as marginal to the group, a cause of ills and a repository of violence. The community unites and transforms itself by a collective act of unanimous violence against this scapegoat or “surrogate victim.” This original (and historical) act of violence founds religion and human culture. The violence of the community, expelled by this original act of unanimity, is now defined as sacred and beneficial, a power outside itself. In short, god is the massive violence expelled by this original act of unanimity. Once this violence is mystified as deity, it becomes a source of order and control.

56 On this point see also Hubert and Mauss 1964 (1898): 77 and 91. Girard 1977: 89–92 differs from Hubert and Mauss in that he posits a real historical moment for the origin of sacrifice.

of reciprocal violence within the community, which fears to confront it. The ambivalence of the sacred as a source of both danger and benefit arises from its origins in a violence that becomes a source of cultural order and remains a source of order as long as these origins remain concealed.

In Girard's theory, the community prohibits strife by reenacting the experiences that originally brought an end to it. "Ritual is nothing more than the regular exercise of 'good' violence." Religious rituals and festivals and scapegoat myths refer to and commemorate the generative act of victimage and mimetic competition, while simultaneously effacing or distorting the true nature of the act and thus perpetuating the delusion that sacred violence resides outside the boundaries of the human. The sacrificial victim must be as similar to the surrogate victim as possible, yet it cannot be, like the original victim, a full member of the community, whose death would promote violence and demand revenge, but a domesticated animal or, in the case of human sacrifice, a marginal person—a criminal, king, or virgin. The arbitrary selection of the original victim is preserved only in the element of chance that may accompany the sacrifice.

These theories of the origin of sacrifice share the view that sacrifice is structured to allow its participants to confront violence. In contrast to the structuralists, who de-emphasize the moment of death, the ritual killing of the animal is the centerpiece and essence of the rite. But Burkert, Bataille, and Girard differ in their emphasis on what truth about human nature or human social existence man receives at the moment of the animal's death. Burkert posits that man effects a dramatic and therapeutic confrontation with his own fundamental aggressiveness; Bataille stresses that sacrifice is part of man's attempt to define culture against nature and its uncontrolled violence. Girard sees human violence as a product of social conflict; sacrifice becomes part of a system of religious mystification that controls social violence by projecting it away from man and onto a divinity. Although no one would deny the impor-

58See esp. ibid., 24, 258–73, and 310.
59Ibid., 37.
60See esp. ibid., 13, 101, 269–73.
61See ibid., 311 and 314.
Drama and Sacrifice

tance of violence to ritual and in human culture generally, recent studies have questioned the fundamentally aggressive nature of man and his ape ancestors, and ethological theories that generalize about human culture on the basis of animal behavior have in any case won only limited support. Some consider Girard’s work to be distorted by an eagerness to link primitive religious practice with the sacrifice of Christ in a gigantic theory of culture that defies the boundaries of time and place. And indeed, just as it is difficult to say precisely what sexual drive means in a universal sense, given the enormous variety of mating and marriage patterns that exist in various cultures, it is equally difficult to generalize about what aggression or violence means outside a specific cultural context. The structuralists stress that religious phenomena cannot be studied separately from social and material life; sacrificial violence may mean something fundamentally different to a classical Greek than to a Paleolithic hunter or a Neolithic farmer.

Unlike the structuralists’ theories, the views of the evolutionaryists have not been and probably cannot be sufficiently documented by a study of Greek theory and practice. Archaeological evidence confirms Meuli’s views on the practices of prehistoric hunters. But there is no such historical evidence either for the origin or evolution of sacrificial ritual. Indeed, in a recent examination of Homeric practices Kirk argues that epic sacrifice in fact placed less emphasis on the moment of death than did the classical ritual: there is no mention of the victim’s nod of assent, the arrangement of bones in specific patterns, or the concealing of the knife in a basket. In addition, archaeological evidence from the Bronze Age suggests that most sacrifices from this early period were vegetable rather than animal. The historicity of the evolu-

62As Burkert himself is aware (1972: 8 n. 1), many recent studies have questioned both the innate aggression of primates and the application of animal studies to human behavior.

63For critical discussions of Girard, see esp. Detienne 1979b: 35 n. 1; Nelson 1976; and the whole of Berkshire Review 14 (1979) or Diacritics 8 (March 1978). Detienne 1979b: 25–35 discusses the biases produced by the Christian sacrifice of god and Christian communion on all discussions of sacrifice from Robertson Smith and Durkheim to Cassirer and finally Girard.

64On this point see Vernant 1976: 29 and Rudhardt 1958: 295 and passim.

Ritual Irony

tionists’ views on sacrificial ritual and its origins is essentially irrele­
vant to the present study, however. Here we are exclusively con­
cerned with the value of their theoretical constructs for a reading of
Greek tragedy. Do Greek tragedians use sacrifice and the sacrificial
metaphor to describe the purging of guilt, or to confront directly
and dramatize human aggression and the moment of death? Do
they use the ritual to confront but simultaneously mystify and
transform sacrificial violence by making it something foreign (bes­
tial or divine) to men? Does the Greek poet, like Bataille, funda­
mentally associate erōs with violence in the ritual context? We shall
return to these and similar important questions after discussing
Burkert’s, Guépin’s, and Girard’s theories about the relation be­
tween sacrifice and tragedy.

For Burkert, tragedy in essence reproduces the sacrificial sce­
nario in dramatic form by bringing its audience into a therapeutic
confrontation with a sacrificial death. Translating *tragōidia* as “a
song at the sacrifice of a goat,” Burkert finds the origins of tragedy
in a group of masked, and therefore anonymous and guiltless, men
who form a chorus to confront and lament death at a sacrifice. Just
as the killing of the sacrificial animal included the *ololugmos* and the
accompanying music of the *aulos*, so the tragic chorus went on to
lament the tragic hero to the music of the *aulos*.

66 Although “trag­
ōidia emancipated itself from the *tragos* . . . the essence of the sacri­
fice still pervades tragedy even in its maturity.”

67 The *Agamemnon*;
the *Trachiniae* of Sophocles, in which Heracles concludes the play
by sacrificing himself on a pyre on Mount Oeta; and the *Medea* of
Euripides, in which Medea “sacrifices” her children and then es­
establishes for them a cult at Corinth in which restitution is made for
their deaths, preserve prominent traces of the origins of the genre
in song at a sacrifice.

Guépin’s study, which owes a good deal to the earlier specula­
tions of Harrison, Murray, and the Cambridge school, asserts
that the tragedies performed in honor of Dionysus grew out of

66Burkert 1966a: 114.
67Burkert 1966a: 116. Burkert’s subsequently influential discussion of the sacri­
ficial metaphor in tragedy wisely divorces itself from too specific a relationship to
his theory of origins, which is far more speculative and controversial.
68See esp. Murray 1927.
Drama and Sacrifice

Dionysiac myth and cult. The sacrificial deaths of tragedy were intimately connected with the sacrifice of the bull at the altar of Dionysus, an altar located at the center of the theatrical orchestra, and with myths about a god who was sacrificed and reborn. The tragic hero repeatedly dies like a sacrificial animal, a victim of crime, amid choral dances around an altar.

For Guépin, tragedy is a sacrificial ritual, and the tragic hero is in essence a sacrificial victim or scapegoat, both criminal and holy, who is killed or banished to produce benefit out of crime and a chain of proliferating guilt and social violence (as in the case of Oedipus). He argues further that tragic plots frequently assimilate earlier myths to a Dionysiac pattern. The deaths reenact an original preharvest sacrifice performed at the harvest of grapes or grain (threshing was done on a circular floor like that of the orchestra). Orphic theology had made the sacrificial rending of Dionysus a crime, thereby preparing for the assimilation of Dionysiac myth into tragedy. Tragic plots often include the motif of resistance to the divine typical of Dionysiac myth. Similarly, Dionysiac madness, like the fear created by tragic plots or the tragic protagonist’s own criminal delusions, takes the participant out of himself.

For Girard drama, like almost all culture, originates in violence: “All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual.” Order in ritual cultures depends on social differentiation and distinction. In a period of “sacrificial crisis” mimetic rivalry proliferates, hierarchy collapses, and the distinction between sacred and secular violence dissolves. The crisis can be re-

---

69 For Guépin’s general thesis, see esp. xi–xiii, 1–5, 12–23, and 120ff. For Guépin a sacrificial death in tragedy typically follows the model set in the αἰτία for sacrifice given by Pausanias. A crime is followed by a plague. After an oracle is consulted, the murderer is punished and a sacrifice is instituted to commemorate the event. Oedipus Rex follows this pattern precisely except for the failure to institute a cult at the end (see ibid., 10–11).

70 See ibid., 1, 16–17, and 24. In fact the sacrificial death takes place offstage.

71 See ibid., xiii and 19. Another basic tragic plot connected with agricultural ritual includes the disappearance and return of a woman, who is often linked to Korē or Persephone (ibid., 120–33).

72 See ibid., 32–39.

73 See ibid., 19.

74 Girard 1977: 306.
Ritual Irony

solved only by a repetition of the original act of violence against a scapegoat and by a remystification of divinity. For Girard, the classical period during which tragedy reached its height is poised on the edge of a dissolution of ritual culture. Tragedy stands in a transitional position between actual ritual performance and the original spontaneous model that ritual and myth attempt to reproduce or reflect. The verbal *agônes* (contests) of tragedy recapture much of the danger of mimetic violence and loss of hierarchical distinction characteristic of a “sacrificial crisis,” as it sets members of a family and by analogy a whole community into uncontrollable conflict. Tragic *katharsis*, like ritual, restores health to the community through the dramatic “sacrifice” or expulsion of a scapegoat who takes upon himself or herself the violence of the community and transfigures it into the sacred. Members of the audience identify with a hero who is neither altogether like (because of his *hamartia*) nor unlike themselves. The audience resolves its ambivalence when it finally abandons the hero to a destiny that removes him from the community. Like ritual, tragedy advances to the very brink of revealing the origin of culture and then withdraws and effaces these hints with a return to myth and a restoration of cultural and aesthetic differences. Tragedy reflects and uses ritual; yet it is also competitive with ritual in that it performs similar functions. Whereas ritual celebrates lack of differentiation, tragedies can represent a reaction against an excess of communality by asserting the claims to heroism of a suffering individual destroyed by necessity.

Girard offers Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides’ *Bacchae* as primary examples of tragic myths that simultaneously commemorate and efface the original crisis. The sacrificial crisis of the *Oedipus* emerges in the mysterious and contagious plague that has gripped the city of Thebes, a plague that has arisen from the collapse of differences between the generations of the royal family and between king and city. Tiresias and Creon are drawn against their

75See ibid., 131. On “sacrificial crisis” generally, see esp. ibid., 49, and below, Chapter 5 on Dionysus in the *Bacchae*.
78See ibid., 168.
Drama and Sacrifice

will into a destructive mimetic rivalry with their king. Oedipus finally takes the collective violence upon himself, accepts the guilt for the plague, and offers to expel himself from the community as a scapegoat. His discovery of the truth vindicates Apollo’s oracles and thus restores divine authority and divine responsibility for the violence to the community. The pattern recurs in the following generation in the mimetic rivalry of Eteocles and Polyneices, and resolves itself by their deaths and the final extinction of the house of Oedipus. And, as Girard might have added, the death of the brothers, as Euripides makes clear in the _Phoenissae_, repeats the original disastrous internecine violence of the “sown men” or Spartoi who became the first citizens of Thebes.

The _Bacchae_, in Girard’s interpretation, opens in a similar state of cultural crisis and loss of hierarchy and distinction. The maddened women have left the city and its culture to behave like men. In the course of the drama distinctions of rank disappear as everyone adopts the dress and worship of the god; the collapse of the royal palace is symbolic of a larger collapse of the political order. The Dionysiac festival, like sacrifice, commemorates the precultural and undifferentiated state of humanity and takes it back to its violent beginnings, to its origins in reciprocal violence and a mimetic rivalry enacted here by the doubles Dionysus and Pentheus. The _sparagmos_ (tearing apart) of Pentheus reenacts the original unanimous and spontaneous killing of the surrogate victim, as well as restoring order to the community and recreating religion in the form of the cult of Dionysus. Dionysus will now be as beneficial from afar as he was dangerous and violent in proximity. This play presents both the generation of religion from spontaneous collective violence against a single victim and the god as the origin of this violence.

The _Bacchae_, as Girard interprets it, “demystifies the double illusion of a violent divinity and an innocent community.”79 But instead of allowing human violence to create order, peace, and divinity, Euripides distorts the historical process by blurring from the start the distinction between good and bad violence and between divine and human causes for action.80 The poet alternately

79Ibid., 136.
80See ibid., 137–38, also 37.
defends and denounces Dionysiac religion. He comes to the brink of revealing the truth about religion, and simultaneously withdraws from and mystifies the truth by attributing the final origin of violence to the god.

Classical scholars such as Rubino and Griffiths have gone on to argue that Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* is the most extensive example of a Girardian sacrificial crisis in tragedy. In the *Agamemnon* the action unfolds by reference to a series of sacrificial deaths. The cycle of reciprocal violence has plagued the house of Atreus in an endless series of intragenerational rivalries resulting in adultery, cannibalism, and murder presented as sacrifice. Iphigenia’s social marginality fails to make her a neutral victim, for her mother Clytemnestra claims a right to avenge her daughter, a right not ordinarily considered legitimate for a woman. Among the many rival doubles of this play—Agamemnon and Aegisthus, Clytemnestra and Cassandra—man and wife also compete in a world where the divisions between public and private life have disintegrated. For the chorus, Zeus should be a source of beneficial violence. Yet the ambivalence of the chorus toward Iphigenia’s sacrifice is one of many symptoms of an accelerating breakdown of ritual control in the world of the play. In the *Libation Bearers* the united forces of Electra, Orestes, and the chorus attempt with the help of Apollo’s command to reestablish ritual control and divine responsibility for human violence; the rituals at the tomb of Agamemnon recreate a spirit of unanimous violence toward Clytemnestra. It is a sign of this process of remystification that her death is no longer termed a sacrifice. Yet Apollo fails to purify Orestes by ritual alone, and the sacrificial crisis invades the divine world itself. The Erinyes insist on a return to uncontrolled vengeance. The resolution of the *Eumenides* gives ritual a subsidiary role as a source of justice, and civil justice replaces sacrifice as the primary mechanism for controlling intestine violence in human society.

Rubino 1972 and Griffiths 1979. The argument summarized here is primarily that of Griffiths. Griffiths uses Girard’s theory to make interesting distinctions among the three poets in their use of ritual.
Drama and Sacrifice

Poetry and Sacrifice

The evolutionists cannot, of course, document the transition from prehistoric cult and myth to tragedy. Indeed, classical scholars such as Else have attempted to deny that tragedy had originally any connection with the cult of Dionysus. Leaving aside the questions of origins, Burkert and Guépin essentially go no further in their literary interpretation of ritual in tragedy than to assert the importance of the audience’s cathartic confrontation with sacrificial death. Girard’s substantial discussions of tragedy are problematic for the critic precisely because he is not offering a literary interpretation of the texts as they stand. Instead, as in his treatment of the Bacchae, he unmasks the play’s mystification and transformation of the truths that actually dominate it. The Oedipus Rex does not in fact reach a Girardian resolution, since Oedipus himself, not the community, violently discovers and attempts to make himself a scapegoat; in the concluding scenes he has not left Thebes, and it remains unclear whether or when he will. In the Bacchae the destruction of Pentheus is neither spontaneous (it is directed by the god) nor unanimous (only the women of the city perform the act). At the close of the play Thebes will not enjoy peace and order as a result of the establishing of the god’s divinity but will continue to face additional dangerous external Dionysiac invasions. Indeed, owing to the presence of a foreign chorus that departs at the conclusion of the drama and to the infrequent appearance of Thebans other than Pentheus onstage, the city itself establishes little more than an illusory presence in the play. Hence the pity evoked for the house of Cadmus that so dominates these final scenes makes Dionysus’ establishment of his divinity seem little short of disastrous. In short, even if we were to agree that the Girardian scenario forms the implicit background to Greek myth and ritual, uncovering its traces in tragic

82Else 1967 weakens his case by de-emphasizing the role of the chorus and avoiding the ritual material in tragedy itself.
83On the failure of the Oedipus Rex to conform to the typical scapegoat pattern, see Howe 1962.
84On this point see Pucci 1977: 193–94 n. 15.
texts is a complex process and does not explain how and why a tragic poet, working within the limits of his genre and a particular cultural context, has chosen to present mythic and religious truth in specific tragic texts.

Yet the literary critic does not need confirmation of a historical connection between tragedy and sacrificial ritual (should such a thing be possible). Critics of Girard who complain that his texts derive not from history but from literature indirectly confirm the importance of his work for a study of tragedy. Indeed, the texts of the plays themselves offer the best, and perhaps the only solid, evidence that the concerns of the evolutionists are relevant to an understanding of Greek ritual in the classical period. Tragedy continually affirms a relation between ritual and drama and demonstrates a concern both with the often violent origins of cults and with the social and psychological effects of sacrificial violence. The notion among the Greeks that the gods are an ambivalent source of violence and order was, for example, pervasive and even axiomatic. For Heraclitus as well as for the poets, “violence [or war] is the father and king of all” (frag. 53 DK). For Aeschylus god made himself known through charis biaios (Ag. 182, violent grace, if the emended text is correct) and through learning by suffering, although the older poet has more respect for this divine violence than Euripides, who was apt to question it in the most shocking manner. A fragment of the tragic poet Critias (Sisyphus frag. 1 N) suggests that a wise man invented the gods to deter men from evil (hopős eie ti deima toisi kakoisi). Euripides (unless, as some have thought, this fragment actually belongs to his own Sisyphus, not to that of Critias) does not, at least explicitly, go quite so far. In the Iphigenia in Tauris, for example, barbarians, not Greeks, attribute their own violence to the gods. As Iphigenia says of the Taurians’ practice of sacrificing foreigners to Artemis (389–91):

I think these people here, being murderers themselves, displace their own vice onto the goddess. I will not believe evil of the gods.

Yet Euripides also undercuts this patriotic view by reminding us that Iphigenia was herself nearly sacrificed to Artemis by Greeks, and the Greek cult of Artemis established in the final scene recalls for its participants the specter of human sacrifice underlying the more benign rite. The Bacchae, as Girard points out, does come
close to presenting the establishment of god through mass violence. And in the *Heracles*, as we shall see, Euripides hints that Hera’s transcendent spite masks Lycus’ corrupt human politics, while the real nature of the gods transcends altogether such human limitations.

Greek poets consistently create the kind of social crisis that Girard describes before a sacrificial death and sometimes use a heroic sacrifice to resolve this crisis,85 if not precisely in the manner that Girard might lead us to expect. Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Phoenissae* are cases in point. Thucydides, too, analyzed the Athenian plague and the Corcyrean revolt in terms that suit Girard’s “sacrificial crisis.” He linked the plague to the breakdown of the social and religious order, found the origin of revolution in mimetic rivalry and the ensuing lust for revenge, and identified the source of democratic instability in its lack of social differentiation and its willingness to make scapegoats of outstanding men.

In short, despite the well-documented claims by the structuralists that the procedures in the Greek sacrificial rite aim to efface violence, Greek poets use the sacrificial metaphor to confront and explore divine and human violence. Although the extant tragedies are hardly the Dionysiac drama that Guépin proposed for the origins of tragedy, Euripides does allow his plots to be structured by or around sacrifices. The conclusions of Euripides’ plays in particular insistently link myth and actual cult practice, often stressing the origins of cult in sacrificial deaths and demanding that the audience make connections between tragic violence and daily experiences of sacrifice. The poets may, as Girard suggests, have been unwilling to pursue the implications of their views of gods and ritual to the ultimate possible conclusion: to declare the gods a fiction created by human violence and to give to all sacrifice an origin in human slaughter. Indeed, they had a stake in preserving a religious system in which their own drama played a central part. Yet of the three tragic poets, Euripides consistently comes closest to such dismantling of the divine superstructure, while simultaneously insisting on a restoration of ritual to a central place in the politically and socially unstable worlds he creates.

85See also Henrichs 1981, esp. 224, where he emphasizes the parallels between tragic and “historical” human sacrifices.
Ritual Irony

Evolutionist theories, by stressing the potential emotive effects on the observer of sacrifice as a ritual killing, and by considering what questions the rite might raise for such highly intellectual observers and participants in ritual as the Greek poets, also draw attention to the therapeutic effect of tragic violence on the audience. Tragedy indeed strives to understand or justify the deaths of its characters by provoking terror finally balanced by an ensuing release. In its preoccupation with social crises and disasters tragedy calls attention to its own violence and allows it to spill over into the community in a way that violates normal sacrificial procedure. Even the uplifting voluntary sacrifices of Euripidean youth are made to seem deceptive and wasteful in the shabby world in which they are performed. In the inverted world of tragedy, sacrificial deaths can produce *katharsis* through pity and fear for its victims even if an actual sacrificial ritual might produce an indifferent reaction to the animal victim. Indeed, the stress of the evolutionists on the cathartic experience of violence provoked by sacrificial death seems more apt for the deliberately aberrant human sacrifices of tragedy than for ritual practice in the classical period. At the same time, however, tragedy “ritualizes” and distances its sacrificial deaths by having them occur offstage and reported by messengers who mute or transform the violence of the murder by their own attitudes of pity, admiration, or anger.86 Even Medea imbues her murder of the children with the aura of sacrifice before it occurs (1054). The literary critic must in fact recognize, first, that tragic sacrifices, although they drew originally and continued in part to draw on an external model, may operate in ways that are not precisely comparable to the real event to which they refer; and second, that the sacrificial metaphor had a complex independent development in tragic texts from Aeschylus to Euripides.87 As we shall see, this independent literary development of the sacrificial metaphor leads Euripides to imply, especially in the *Heracles* and the *Bacchae*, that his tragedies function in a manner analogous to actual sacrifice. The remedies produced by a real sacrifice and the

86 On this point see Pucci 1977, esp. 179–80.

87 The development of the sacrificial metaphor from Aeschylus to Euripides is beyond the scope of this book. For the complex and unstable relation between tragic sacrifice and real sacrifice, see Pucci 1977 and 1980.
remedies generated by a poetic discourse that reenacts a sacrificial death have similar therapeutic effects. 88

For the literary critic considering the use of the sacrificial metaphor in tragedy, important considerations remain. Structuralist and evolutionist theories of sacrifice can be said to complement each other only on the most general level. Both establish the importance of sacrifice and related rituals to Greek culture, and hence the potential importance of the sacrificial metaphor to tragedy. Both approaches assert that the ritual recognizes, uses, yet also serves to control in specific ways the killing of domestic animals, although for Burkert and Girard sacrificial violence immunizes the community against its own intestine aggression, whereas for the structuralists sacrifice serves to define what must be shut out from the civilized polis. Yet we have also seen that these theorists disagree strongly with one another on a wide range of issues, extending from the possibility of universal or cross-cultural descriptions of sacrifice to the difference between social and individual/psychological explanations of ritual. It is not useful for the literary critic of tragedy to attempt to resolve these differences or to side polemically with one viewpoint or the other. We cannot expect tragedy to reflect theoretical consistency on ritual, and in fact we shall see that it does not. In their use of the sacrificial metaphor, Euripides’ plays often deliberately hint at several incompatible views of human society and divinity and close without definitely affirming any of them. Whereas theories about sacrifice can never by themselves successfully compel arguments about literary texts, we have already seen that both modes of analysis of ritual have helped to generate important questions about ritual in tragedy, although the critic must be more wary in applying the insights of the evolutionists. Furthermore, our concern with tragic representation of human sacrifice, rather than with actual ritual, necessitates the eclectic use of modern theory adopted in the remaining chapters.

The major questions addressed in the following chapters concern the relation between Euripides’ use of ritual and his larger poetic strategies. Despite references to a large number of sacrificial deaths in the Euripidean corpus, there is no attempt to be compre-

88Pucci 1977, esp. 165 and 169.
Ritual Irony

hensive. Instead, each of the remaining chapters confines itself to close examination of one of the poet’s four late plays for the issues each raises concerning ritual and drama in its larger social and intellectual context. All four plays present sacrificial deaths in a ritual setting as the central moment in the drama. The *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the *Phoenissae* are the most important examples of sacrificial actions involving a youth’s voluntary self-sacrifice for a society in crisis. Euripides apparently favored this folktale plot, which is not found in the extant works of other Greek dramatists, to exploit its potential ironies. Here the ritual experience of women and children, who are excluded from political participation, offers an apparent cure for the political crises produced by men and forges unexpected links between public and private worlds. The plays stress the disparity between a political world riven by strife and a ritual world (characterized especially by sacrificial performance, marriage, and lament and reflected in the poetry of the choral odes) that offers an alternative vision of social unity and order. Each play also emphasizes that its current “sacrificial crisis” has a long and consistent history that threatens repetition in the present: youth will destroy itself to appease the curse of civilization. Ritual here mediates in complex and often ironic ways between the divine and human realms, opens moments of communication between political reality and the mythic tradition presented in a connected cycle of choral songs, makes ritual a temporary model for action, and to some degree incorporates the benefits of poetry and the sacred into the profane world.

The *Bacchae* and the *Heracles* serve as examples of plots in which divine vengeance demands an involuntary sacrificial death. Here the sacrificial death(s) also become, as in the *Electra*, a perverted song, *agon*, and festival. The entire public system of ritual in the *polis*, the function of the tragic chorus, and the poetic tradition

89Leaving aside the fragmentary plays, of the plays that focus on a central sacrificial death, the motif in the *Electra* was discussed earlier in this chapter; *Medea* has been well discussed by Pucci 1980; Alcestis’ sacrificial death (74–76) has no sacrificial setting; and some aspects of the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, in which the sacrificial death never occurs, are treated in Chapter 2; see Wolff 1963, Sansone 1975, and Strachan 1976 on the sacrificial motif in the *IT*. The happy resolution of these last two plays, which nevertheless need further analysis, puts them in a different category.
upon which Euripides drew to create his plays stand in jeopardy. These two plays create a fundamental social and poetic crisis and close with the emergence of a new order which makes survival possible, but at a cost so unbearable that their endings have been read as simply ironic or self-deluding. Here the “sacrificial crisis” also entails an explosive confrontation between men and god in which the normal limits between the divine and human worlds collapse simultaneously with the whole political environment, as the poet hints at the kind of identity Girard draws between divine and human violence. Both plays conclude ambiguously with a redefinition of the divine and its relation to men, marked by a restoration of ritual or the establishment of a new cult. Finally, both plays draw a new kind of attention to an overlap between ritual and tragic theater. Ritual, like tragic theater, involves staging, symbolic gestures, dressing up, and role-playing. Both ritual and drama may offer an experience of liminality that establishes or confirms links between past and present, individual and society, as well as among man, god, and nature. Ritual performance may incorporate myth into everyday life, whereas tragic performances implicitly bring mythical tradition into a vital and often restorative confrontation with the politics of democracy. Euripides tries to link his plays with the special ability of ritual to be repetitious and effective in the real world. Yet tragedy ultimately transcends ritual in its capacity to confront ambiguously and with historical consciousness both the fictions upon which the social order is based, and individual identity and suffering.

In each of the four plays, then, ritual does, as it logically should, become the point at which communication occurs between the divine and human realms, between public and private worlds, between past and present, and between myth or choral lyric and a more secular interpretation of events given in the iambic scenes. The model of social relations implicit in sacrifice—timeless, authoritative, efficacious, expressive, and self-contained—is placed in ironic juxtaposition with a historical disorder in the political realm. Finally, both ritual and myth offer similar kinds of fictions and deceptions that aid man in ordering his life, in coming to terms

*See Turner 1969 on liminal states of ritual.
Ritual Irony

with suffering, and in learning to make difficult and irreversible transitions such as those involved in birth, initiation, marriage, and death.91 Whereas Electra’s fictive rituals and Iphigenia’s choice for sacrifice in the *Iphigenia in Aulis* may be self-deceptive, Helen in the *Helen* and Iphigenia in the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, for example, invent rituals that aim both at the fulfillment of a divine plan and at a constructive escape from the disaster of a crippling past. The references to cult that close Euripides’ tragedies offer the audience the opportunity to reenact and to reconsider perpetually both the remedies offered by myth and the disasters heroically faced by the tragic protagonists. Tragedy and ritual are linked by a common claim to offer therapy and immortality, despite a reality that may be incommensurable with them.92 Whatever the costs to the characters in the dramas, citizens can bring the heroism of Heracles or Alcestis into their lives through festival and hero cult. The remaining chapters examine the ways in which Euripides, in his involvement with ritual, is simultaneously ironic, theologically iconoclastic, and intensely religious. Even more important, Euripides’ poetic imagination is formed by his experience of and response to a ritual culture. Above all, then, our concerns here are to understand how the sacrificial metaphor shapes and becomes an intrinsic part of Euripides’ dramaturgy as a whole.

91 On sacrifice as an irreversible transformation, see Burkert 1972: 50. On ritual as a source of learning and necessary deception, see esp. Wolff 1963 and 1965.
92 Discussions of tragedy’s claim to therapeutic effect have been popular since Aristotle. For recent treatments see esp. Pucci 1977 and Simon 1978: 122–54.