

Introduction

On February 18, 1992, a cold and cloudy day in Milwaukee, Rita Isbell made a victim impact statement during the sentencing of the notorious serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer.¹ The previous year, Dahmer had murdered and raped her brother Errol Lindsey. After a parade of weeping family members, Isbell is the very image of rage. She opens by declaring: “This is what hate looks like.” For several minutes, she starkly lays bare her desire for revenge. She screams obscenities. She calls him “Satan.” She wants him to see “what out of control is.” Eventually it takes three guards to restrain her from physically attacking her brother’s murderer, and the judge orders a recess. Isbell’s rage is juxtaposed with the calmness of court proceedings, where participants dressed in pressed suits and ties deliberated on whether the accused was responsible for raping, murdering, and eating seventeen people. Her display of rage also contrasts sharply with our court system’s emphasis on logic, argumentation, and material evidence. Yet, somehow her response seems more genuine and more human than an image of justice removed from such private wrath. The pure spectacle of her honesty also likens her to a character in a Greek tragedy: in her rage, she is Hecuba, or Alcmena, or Medea. Such a spectacle also raises questions as to what might be missing or lost when justice becomes institutionalized and is grounded in an understanding of impartial or dispassionate rationality. Might it be important for our comprehension of justice to understand Medea?

This image of justice as requiring some kind of impartial rationality is found across the history of political thought. Although there is certainly no agreement on what kind of rationality is necessary for just decision making, one dominant perspective emphasizes reason as an instrumental ends-means calculation or maximization of a fairly coherent

set of preferences.² Rawls, for example, reflects an ideal version of this perspective in his theory of justice, which employs a value-neutral form of rationality that avoids introducing “controversial ethical elements.”³ The idea that justice demands objectivity can be found in earlier philosophers, such as Locke’s founding of community on the relinquishing private judgment to impartial arbitrators and settled, known laws.⁴ Even earlier, although Aristotle may have labeled our contemporary view of instrumental reason as a form of “cleverness,” he emphasized the ends-means deliberation of prudence as essential to ethical decision making.⁵ Importantly, however, like most ancient philosophers, Aristotle stresses that contemplative reasoning, which investigates universal or invariable first principles, is a higher form of rational activity.

Plato placed even greater emphasis on rational contemplation as the highest activity of the soul.⁶ He opens his famous examination in the *Republic* by questioning popular ancient Greek opinions of justice, such as keeping oaths or helping friends and harming enemies. Socrates’s own opinion is that justice is found in every member minding their own business and contributing to the community in the role for which they are most naturally suited. Establishing such justice requires not only the famous philosopher-king but holding all things, including the family, in common. This latter point underscores the preference for one’s own as a source of injustice. Whether Plato intends this opinion of justice literally, or as merely a segue into justice as a properly ordered soul, is a long-standing scholarly debate.⁷

More relevant for this present discussion, in this same dialogue on justice, Socrates invokes his most derisive critique of his pedagogical rivals: the poets. Hence, in Book III, Socrates censors poetry that depicts gods or heroes as emotionally excessive or deceitful; in Book V, he suggests those drawn to the theater resemble philosophers, but their love of learning results only in opinions and not truth. And, by Book X, the poets and the makers of tragedy are not only censored but banished.⁸ In particular, Socrates dismisses poets as imitators of imitation who do not understand what improves human beings or cities; instead, they manipulate the people with a kind of wizardry that destroys calculative and prudential understanding. Thus, “unconcerned with justice and other virtues,” the poets are dangerous to good government and banished.⁹ By contrast, Socrates suggests the philosopher possesses a love of learning, desire for wisdom, and always seeks the truth itself concerning the good and the just. Philosophy is nourished not by shadows and images but

by rational calculation, geometry, and dialectic. Like a true pilot, philosophers are useful because they are concerned with the health of the soul and what is truly good for cities. Thus, appearing to set up a strict dichotomy between philosophical truth-seeking and dangerous poetic trickery, Socrates boldly declares that “for a long time, there has been a quarrel (*diaphora*) between poetry and philosophy.”¹⁰

Although this is an extremely crude sketch of Plato’s extensive and highly complex assessment of poetry in this text—and throughout many of his dialogues—the question of whether Plato is serious about this quarrel has itself become another ancient debate.¹¹ In general, the censorship and banning of the poets is taken seriously by scholars who argue that Plato rejects traditional mythology in favor of rational inquiry and proposes an insurmountable distance between poetic inspiration and philosophy.¹² By contrast, the very poetic elements in the dialogues suggest Plato may not be as hostile to the poets as Socrates’s critique implies. Socrates frequently quotes the poets, and especially Homer, as authorities in his arguments.¹³ Poetic elements, such as dramatic context and narrative, are argued as essential for understanding and interpreting his dialogues.¹⁴ Plato also generously employs many other poetic devices from analogy, myths, and allegories, to outrageous examples likely intended to provoke his audience.¹⁵

From this perspective, Plato’s critique of poetry is ironic or, at least, does not support a strict dichotomy between poetry and philosophy.¹⁶ Scholars who think Plato is being ironic about the quarrel often understand poetry as a useful supplement, when directed by philosophy, to point young men and the masses toward truth.¹⁷ Focusing on the critique of poetry in Book III, this interpretation understands poetry as an important step in education but requiring superior philosophic understanding. Going further, other scholars argue Plato incorporates poetic elements as part of, or essential to, his understanding of philosophy.¹⁸ In this case, poetic devices and other elements are not simply complementary to or guided by rational argumentation but rather a necessary aspect or element of philosophic thinking.

Whether Plato’s critique is ironic or serious, at the heart of this ancient quarrel is an important pedagogical question: can poetry provide an education concerning the truth about justice and how to improve citizens and cities? The current scholarly debate concerning Plato’s critique of poetry still focuses on this question from the perspective of the philosopher. By contrast, this analysis takes up Socrates’s challenge

to reverse this polarity by exploring the ancient quarrel from the perspective of a poet.¹⁹ Thus, setting aside the debate as to whether Plato is ironic, it explores the pedagogical questions raised by Plato. Does poetry, for example, lack knowledge concerning what makes people or cities better? Is it destructive of prudence and calculation? Does it really neglect “justice and other virtues”? To investigate such questions, the analysis focuses on the same overarching inquiry of the *Republic*—what is justice?—from the perspective of a contemporary of the historical Socrates: the tragic poet Euripides.

There are several reasons why Euripides is a good “case” for examining whether the poets were serious educators. First, although the poets, and especially Homer, were considered the main educators of Greece, the question of whether Euripides’s tragedies provided a serious education was already salient in the fifth century.²⁰ Aristophanes’s *Frogs* dramatizes a competition between the recently deceased Euripides and the more senior Aeschylus concerning who was the greater poet. Their disagreement hinges on whether tragedians ought to dramatize the complexity of human conflicts (Euripides’s view) or offer an idealized heroic model of behavior (Aeschylus’s view). Aristophanes’s Euripides defends his multifaceted approach because his art “leads the people (*dēmos*) to think,” by “putting in calculation” so that “they can perceive and understand.”²¹ Although we do not know whether the real Euripides said anything similar, it is possible such satire reflected the public perception of Euripides’s tragedies. In addition, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Euripides’s reputation for pedagogical realism is underscored by a quote attributed to Sophocles: “He [Sophocles] portrayed people as they ought to be and Euripides portrayed them as they are.”²² Thus, by the fifth century, Euripides’s reputation already reflected a concern with the education of the common people.

Second, although Euripides was popular in classical antiquity, since at least Hegel’s interest in the *Antigone*, contemporary political thought has been comparably more interested in his rival tragedians.²³ It is not clear why political theorists are less interested in Euripides. Nietzsche’s criticism of Euripides as destructive of the irrational with a preference for rationality highlights the tragedian’s interest in political and philosophic concerns.²⁴ Euripides’s tragedies include, for example, many highly formalized and seemingly superfluous debates on political questions, such as the best regime or relativity of truth. He also incorporates genuine fifth-century political debates, such as the superiority of a “quietist” or isolationist versus “activist” foreign policy. His ideas

often reflect the concerns of fifth-century sophists, such as the power of rhetoric or whether morality can be taught.²⁵ As we will see, Euripides often seems critical of these sophistic views, but he is clearly interested in the intellectual debates of his fifth-century Athens.²⁶ Importantly, however, Aristophanes's comic portrayal is very revealing: Euripides's audience was not limited to the leisured elite discussing philosophy over glasses of wine at symposiums. Instead, as his tragedies were part of a large community festival, his audience included the average, hardworking democratic citizen.

If Euripides is concerned with the education of average citizens, then the quarrel between philosophy and poetry is politically significant. In a democracy, the citizens—the people—are ultimately responsible for questions of justice and political decision making. Taking Socrates's critique at face value, if poetry is unconcerned with "justice and other virtues," then the tragedies are merely entertainment, and the citizens are corrupted, learn nothing, or at most are only introduced to opinions about justice. Furthermore, since many poorer citizens do not possess the leisure time necessary for a philosophic education, they will always be unable to make truly just decisions. In this case, democracy really would be an inferior regime. By contrast, if Euripides's tragedies take justice seriously and enhance (rather than corrupt) prudential and political reasoning, then democratic citizens receive a real education in distinguishing good from bad or the just from unjust. The implications of the quarrel for the possibility of a just democracy are immeasurable.

Although there are other poetic genres, ancient Greek tragedy may have had an even more crucial connection to Athenian democratic education.²⁷ As will be discussed later, although the origin of tragedy predates democracy and is found in other nondemocratic regimes, it flourished in Athens during the democratic period. Like all art forms, tragedy can transmit political propaganda that reinforces group cohesion and promotes community exclusiveness or chauvinism. Yet tragedies can also disrupt and question those traditional norms, expose injustice, and present multiple viewpoints that challenge dogmatic thinking.²⁸ As the audience for tragedy was primarily a gathering of citizens, it provided a valuable pedagogical opportunity for the democratic regime.

This is especially true in Athenian democracy, which did not separate church and state or art and religion. As will be developed below, the Great Dionysia festival provided the leisure and opportunity for the community to come together to watch stories of great heroes and,

potentially, to learn about “justice and the other virtues.” The importance, however, between poetic art forms and democratic education may not be limited to ancient democracy. Our contemporary citizens may have unlimited sources of information and ways to learn, from public education, traditional media, and town-hall discussions, to various forms of online talks, tutorials, and social media. With so much available information, it is still important that citizens develop and practice their prudential capacity to judge this political information and determine the just from the unjust. If theater and the other contemporary poetic legacies, such as film and television, are crucial to the functioning of democracy, then perhaps we, too, ought to reconsider the pedagogical role of our own storytelling genres.²⁹

The “Seeing Place” and the Great Dionysia Festival

Euripides’s tragedies were performed as part of the City or Great Dionysia festival in the Athenian month of *Elaphebolion* (roughly late March to early April).³⁰ Although precious little is known concerning the origins of theater, by tradition, Athenian tragedy began under the tyrant Peisistratus in 534 BCE with the first performances of the innovative poet Thespis.³¹ Most likely, tragedy (*tragōdia* or literally “goat-song”) developed out of long-established community gatherings of performances of dithyrambs (choral songs and dance), which may have included the sacrifice of goats.³² If the legendary Thespis existed, he introduced or singled out an actor (called a *hypocritēs* or pretender) from the rest of the chorus. Aeschylus is thought to have introduced a second—and Sophocles a third—speaking actor interacting at the same time. By unifying the many disparate rural festivals, Peisistratus probably introduced the Great Dionysia festival as part of his overall cultural program intended to create and promote a common Athenian identity.³³

Like the sporting events at the Olympic Games, the tragedies performed at the Great Dionysia festival were competitions, with the city memorializing the winners’ names on official monuments throughout the city.³⁴ In 486 BCE, comedy was added to the Great Dionysia. About twenty years later, the ancient Ionian festival of Lenaea (held in late January) became the second main dramatic competition, especially for the newer genre of comedy. Aristophanes’s *Frogs*, for example, won the Lenaea competition in 405 BCE. Smaller Rural Dionysia festivals continued to

flourish at the local level, and many of the political subdivisions called “demes” had their own theaters. The popularity of dramatic competitions was found across Greece in other major sites, such as Delphi, Epidaurus, Dodona, and as far away as Macedon and Syracuse.

The theater (*theatron* or literally, the “seeing place”) was an open-air space on a natural hill slope that accentuated acoustics. Except for the theater at Epidaurus, what we see today at most other surviving Greek theaters, including the Theater of Dionysus in Athens, reflects later Roman renovations. The earliest theaters had a flat space for the choral dances at the bottom of the hill called the *orchēstra* (the “dancing place”) with the actors entering and exiting to the sides. A temporary cloth and later a wooden structure (the *skēnē* or “tent”) were placed in front of the *orchēstra* and painted to resemble the setting, with the use of a door for a third entrance. Although evidence is unclear, a small, raised platform may have separated visually (and symbolically) the actors from the *orchēstra*. To enhance dramatic effect, other stage devices were introduced. The *ekkyklēma* (the “roll-out”) could be pushed through the doors in the *skēnē* to reveal bodies or something from inside. The more famous *mēchanē* was a crane that suspended actors, especially as gods, from above. The use of the crane in the finale is the origin of the infamous Latin expression: *deus ex machina*. The actors wore stylized masks with exaggerated facial features and costumes that allowed them to assume the identity of their characters. To complete the dramatic effect, they often employed other stage props, such as crowns, swords, or the special items of the recognition scenes.

As Athenian tragedy developed, temporary wooden benches were built on the sloped hillside of the Acropolis. Special seating (*prohedria*) was reserved for civic officials, the ten democratically elected generals, and probably foreign dignitaries as well.³⁵ The size and composition of the audience remain a point of considerable debate. In the *Symposium*, Plato hints that thirty thousand people attended the festival; however, since it seems unlikely the hill slope could accommodate such a large number, he might be referring to those attending the various activities of the five-day festival.³⁶ Such high estimates also may include an unofficial audience who watched from any vantage point, such as higher on the Acropolis or even from strategic positions on trees. Other scholars estimate a number from fourteen hundred to seventeen hundred people, but most recent scholarship proposes a more modest six thousand official ticket holders.

Another source of contention is audience composition. Male citizens, resident foreigners (*metoikoi*), young men undergoing military training (*ephēboi*), and foreign dignitaries certainly were in attendance. Less clear is whether women were allowed to watch productions. Although little empirical evidence confirms this idea, Plato also suggests women, children, and slaves were part of the audience.³⁷ As the price of official tickets was about two obols (approximately one-third of a day laborer's salary), this certainly would be too high a price for poorer women, children, and slaves. Importantly, possibly as early as Pericles's generalship but definitely by the fourth century, a special civic fund (*theōrika*) subsidized poor male citizens' attendance. Thus, the majority of the audience definitely would have been male Athenian citizens.

The introduction of the *theōrika* also underscores the political dimension of the festival. Planning began early the previous summer, when the ancient civic leader called the *Archon Eponymous* selected three *didaskaloi* (the teachers) for the competition. Each competitor would have one day to present his trilogy of three tragedies, usually but not necessarily on a related mythological story or theme, and a satyr play featuring those half-horse ribald companions of Dionysus and a drunken Heracles.³⁸ The *didaskaloi* worked with a rich patron called a *chorēgos*, who recruited and paid for the chorus, actors, trainers, masks, costumes, and other dramatic features as part of their liturgy (*leitourgia*), or expected public duties of wealthy Athenians. The festival began with civic processions (*pompē*), which included a parade of war orphans and involved feasts and other choral competitions. During the latter part of the Peloponnesian War, allies presented their tribute during the festival, which was stored in the Acropolis immediately above the theater space. Each of the ten Athenian political tribes sent one judge chosen democratically by lot to form the competition jury. Although the criteria used to determine the winner are unknown, these judges may have been influenced by the audience: unlike our modern silent spectators, they were so loud and boisterous that the city employed a special police force (the *rhabdouchoi* or "rod-holders") to keep the rowdiness under control. In a final act of democratic oversight, after the festival concluded, a special session of the Assembly was held in the theater to discuss festival proceedings.

In years when the Great Panathenaea was not held, the Great or City Dionysia was the largest festival gathering in Athens. For five days, the city suspended the Assembly and all court business, temporarily freed prisoners, forbid the acquisition of debts, and took on a festive

atmosphere of animal sacrifices, general mirth, and celebration. After all, Dionysus was a god of fertility, death and rebirth, sexuality, and wine. Yet, the degree to which tragedy has “something to do with Dionysus” is highly contentious.³⁹ Although many gods are invoked and some appear as characters on stage, Dionysus is rarely mentioned and rarely appears.⁴⁰ Tragedies are not an enactment of a specific ritual, although some tragedies may mimic ritual or provide an account of the origin of rituals and cult sites. Although this point will be developed further in the chapter on the *Bacchae*, an important hint may be found in Dionysus’s other divine powers as god of paradox, ambiguity, metamorphosis, revelation, and mania. As a liminal god, Dionysus defies boundaries: he has a human mother but is reborn divine; he is Greek and foreign; he is both a new but ancient god. Importantly, he is also the god of *ekstasis*, which literally means “standing outside oneself” and is the root of our word “ecstasy.”⁴¹ In donning their mask, the actors “step outside themselves” to become someone else. By watching, the audience members are invited to step outside their own viewpoint to experience another’s perspective. Tragedy allows the audience, in Aristotle’s words, to see and learn by inferring similarities in these “representations of life.”⁴² Thus, the god of the “seeing place” provides a crucial opportunity for the community to come together to think about the complexities of social life and to practice prudential reasoning by seeing from different viewpoints and inferring similarities with one’s own circumstances.

The Life of Euripides and Transmission of His Plays

Little is reliably known about Euripides.⁴³ By tradition, he was born on the island of Salamis on the same day the Athenians defeated the Persians off its coast in 480 BCE; he is said to have died in self-imposed exile at the court of Archelaus of Macedon in 407 BCE, when he was unintentionally torn apart by the king’s hunting dogs. Probably from Aristophanes, who made frequent fun of Euripides, comes the legend of humble origins, such as his shopkeeper father’s insolvency and subsequent exile from Boeotia or his vegetable-selling mother. Other accounts suggest he was impoverished or lived a kind of hermit life by writing his plays in seclusion in a cave on Salamis. There are typical salacious reports about marital troubles, including a series of unfaithful wives. He is associated with virtually every famous intellectual figure of his day from Anaxagoras

and Protagoras to Prodicus and Socrates. This tradition, however, is highly untrustworthy. Derived from later sources, it rather conveniently supports subsequent interpretations of his tragedies, such as his supposed negative view of women or suspected atheism.

Unfortunately, what is known about Euripides's life is thin. He was born sometime between 480–485 BCE and registered in the Athenian deme *Phlya*, which confirms his parents were Athenian. Aristotle mentions that Euripides was involved a lawsuit concerning property, which suggests he was quite wealthy.⁴⁴ Although it is not certain whether he went into exile or to Macedon, he must have died sometime between 407–406 BCE as he is in Hades in Aristophanes's *Frogs* in 405 BCE and won the Great Dionysia posthumously later that same year.⁴⁵ Unlike his rivals Aeschylus and Sophocles, we have no mention of military or political exploits, even though he would have fought in the war and performed typical citizenship duties. He was popular enough to be frequently quoted, even in his own lifetime. Most famous was the widespread anecdote that during the disastrous Sicilian Expedition, the Syracusans freed Athenian prisoners who sang his choruses.⁴⁶ From the Alexandrian scholars, we have evidence of about ninety-two plays starting with the *Daughters of Pelias* in 455 BCE. From the same sources we also know that he took part in approximately twenty-three competitions; however, including his posthumous victory, he won the Great Dionysia prize only five times.

Compared with seven extant tragedies each from Aeschylus and Sophocles, nineteen of Euripides's plays (including the likely spurious *Rhesus*) survived, as well as countless fragments.⁴⁷ That we have more of his manuscripts attests to his popularity in antiquity but also to fortuitous circumstances. Around 250 CE Alexandrian scholars selected and widely circulated seven tragedies of the other two playwrights but chose ten of Euripides's tragedies (counting the *Rhesus*) for the teaching of Greek in schools.⁴⁸ Along with the even more popular Byzantine Triad (*Hecuba*, *Orestes*, and *Phoenician Women*), these tragedies were transmitted in medieval manuscripts accompanied by *hypotheseis* (short introductions) and *scholia* (explanatory margin notes). We also have an additional nine other Euripidean plays, all copies of which can be traced to a single manuscript.⁴⁹ Known as the "alphabet plays" because their Greek titles are in alphabetical order (epsilon, eta, iota, kappa), this sole manuscript somehow miraculously survived; one can only imagine some medieval scholar scooping up the scrolls as he fled a burning library. Unfortunately, the alphabet plays are transmitted without *scholia*

or any other information, including the other tragedies in the trilogy or date of performance. Although imperfect, contemporary scholarship attempts to date these plays using metrical analysis on the flexibility of Euripides's poetic style.⁵⁰ As the alphabet plays were not chosen for educational purposes, they are important examples of tragedy that often break expected tragic convention and provide a useful glimpse into Euripides's artistic ingenuity.

Outline of the Book

The purpose of this analysis is to explore the question of justice from the perspective of a poet. As such, it is important at the outset to stress the limits of this analysis. First, as tragedy involves and questions cultural norms, it engages with common opinions concerning justice in ancient Athens. Some of these opinions of justice reflect the new thinking of the sophists, but other perspectives are more traditional and found in earlier Homeric epics. Later Greek philosophers, such as Plato, Xenophon, or Aristotle, often explore and question the same or similar ideas of justice. To place Euripides in his historical context and intellectual environment, I will note points of contact between these philosophic accounts and Euripides but refrain from further exploring the meaning and significance of these points of contact. As the goal of this analysis is to provide a poetic account of justice, a respectable or comprehensive comparison between Euripides and these philosophic authors would fundamentally shift the focus of this investigation. Admittedly, some of these points of contact are interesting, surprising, and sometimes enticing, which hopefully invites further research. Secondly, as the goal is to explore Euripides's portrayal of justice, this analysis does not engage in Plato's critique of poetry, nor does it directly evaluate the ancient quarrel as to whether poetry or philosophy offers a better political education. Finally, similar to the points of contact with ancient philosophy, the conclusion of each chapter highlights potential connections of Euripidean justice with ideas in the history of political thought and contemporary political theory. Again, these points of contact are not developed or analyzed; instead, they are intended to highlight connections between Euripides and subsequent ways of thinking about justice. Although the development of Euripides and these other lines of thinking are important, they remain beyond the scope of this investigation into Euripides's understanding of justice.

Similarly, it is important at the outset to stress that this analysis does not assume there really was an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy or that Euripides intentionally addressed such a quarrel—or even deliberately explored the concept of justice. It is reductionist to assume a tragedy is “about” justice or “about” any one particular theme.⁵¹ Like all tragedies, Euripides’s plays are highly complex and resist conclusive interpretations. Instead, the following chapters investigate justice in tragedies that often have other significant themes or avenues of interpretation. In addition, as with all storytelling genres, tragedy does not present a systematic, linear, or rational argument: Euripides offers no theory of justice, no thesis statement, and never directly answers the question “what is justice?” Instead, as Segal stresses, “to discuss Euripides is to speak in paradox,” since his plots are full of reversals of anticipated outcomes and the unexpected realism of characters and settings.⁵² Going beyond the paradoxes Segal outlines as dramatized within his tragedies (such as paradoxical endings, settings, or characterization), Euripides also reflects the god of theater in his approach to understanding justice. Thus justice, like Dionysus, cannot be defined, pinned down, and fully recognized; instead, it mirrors the god’s ambiguity, metamorphosis, and moments of revelation that are part of the experience of human social community.

Dedicated to one tragedy, each chapter explores three intertwined questions. First, what concepts or ideas of justice are identified in the plot, and how are they depicted in his tragedy? Second, does Euripides’s exploration reveal limitations, shortcomings, or raise further questions concerning the various understandings of justice in each play? Third, what lessons does Euripides’s portrayal reveal about ancient conceptions of justice, and how might these lessons be useful for our own efforts to determine the just from unjust. Euripides’s tragedies engage with the main competing perspectives of justice in fifth-century Athens. All plays to some extent address the ancient understanding of justice as helping friends and harming enemies. Certain tragedies focus on the still-relevant perspective of justice as merit, including equality or fairness, as well as some kind of proportional corrective for past injury. Euripides also engages with fifth-century sophistic views that justice is relative and ultimately reducible to unadulterated power. In addition, he includes a dimension of justice as it relates to the recognition, meaning, and enforcing of individual and community boundaries.

By carefully examining the nuances of his complex stories, Euripides reveals contradictions, paradoxes, and limitations of all these various

perspectives of justice. His tragedies do not endorse any one perspective; rather, using the tragedy's dramatic context, Euripides presents a nuanced exploration of competing understandings of justice.⁵³ He reveals the true human cost of institutional failures and our lack of knowledge; he explores the inevitable bias of our judgment and irresolvable impulses at the heart of our desire for justice. Taken together, Euripides's portrayal of justice reveals the limitations of a perspective that relies on institutional solutions and impartial judgment to distinguish the just from unjust. Instead, Euripides presents justice as imprecise and lacking clear boundaries. It appears to reflect something more akin to the ancient Greek idea of a *sōros* or "pile" than an exact measurement.⁵⁴ Such opaqueness reveals why the concept of justice resists classification and definition. It also explains why Euripides does not offer any definitive statement on what the best idea of justice is. Instead, he indicates the important questions to ask about any view of justice, including our own ideas of social justice, restorative justice, or justice as fairness. If he offers any advice on how to create a more decent society, it is to remember with humility that all perspectives of justice are partial, incomplete, and precarious enough to become its opposite.

The chapters cover nine of Euripides's surviving tragedies. To provide a representative sample, the analysis covers five of the tragedies saved for pedagogical purposes (*Medea*, *Phoenician Women*, *Bacchae*, *Hecuba*, and *Alcestis*) and four alphabet plays (*Ion*, *Children of Heracles*, *Suppliant Women*, and *Electra*). Some of these plays, such as the *Medea* or the *Bacchae*, are more familiar to political theorists; others, such as the *Ion*, *Hecuba*, *Children of Heracles* and *Suppliant Women*, have blatant political themes, such as the plight of refugees or fate of political prisoners. Certain plays offer unique or unexpected storytelling, such as the *Alcestis*, *Phoenician Women*, and *Electra*, which reveals the range of Euripides's innovative artistry. In order to assess whether space or location is crucial to his idea of justice, the chapters are organized into three sections of three plays, according to the tragedy's setting: the city, sanctuary or sacred space, and outlying areas (or the wilderness). As Euripides does not present a linear argument, each chapter is designed as a standalone analysis with no expectation that the reader will follow consecutively. There is also no expectation that readers would be familiar with ancient Greek mythology or the specific tragic plots under investigation. To ensure contextual understanding, prior to analysis, each chapter includes an overview of the tragedy's broader mythological background, the main details of the

dramatic plot, and Euripides's potential narrative innovations. Unlike our own expectation of narrative continuity in sequels and prequels, the ancient Greeks did not view mythological stories as canonical or static, and all the playwrights altered aspects of their stories.⁵⁵ Most of the tragedies retold stories developed out of long oral traditions with multiple versions of the same stories existing simultaneously.⁵⁶ Some of the great heroes had more stable life stories, but even the great Heracles's labors varied widely in different times and regions of Greece.⁵⁷ Such mythical innovations are important to note, as they reveal Euripides's narrative choices, which are important for understanding and interpreting his tragedies.

The first three plays, *Medea*, *Bacchae*, and the *Phoenician Women*, are set in the civilized space of a city. In chapter one, *Medea's* story of an abandoned woman highlights the limitations of the ancient ethic of helping friends and harming enemies, especially the difficulty of distinguishing friends from enemies. *Medea's* anger is central, but her desire to reverse wrongdoing reveals justice as limited by the impossibility of true rectification. The *Bacchae*, in chapter 2, is one of the posthumous plays produced in 405 BCE. A rare dramatization of the ambiguous god Dionysus onstage, this tragedy explores the shocking and horrific consequences of failing to recognize the role of the divine in human community. It also exposes a necessary but potential danger inherent in investigating the meaning of justice. Focusing on the *Phoenician Women*, chapter 3 retells the story of Oedipus's sons' mutual slaughter before the Seven-gated Thebes. In this complicated and difficult plot, Euripides explores justice as merit in opposition to the sophistic assertion of the relativity of justice. Through this brothers' war, Euripides exposes the consequences of our inadequate and fallible understanding of the just.

The central section focuses on Euripides's most political plays, all set in the inviolable sacred spaces of temples and sanctuaries: *Ion*, *Children of Heracles*, and *Suppliant Women*. Chapter 4 presents the *Ion*, an innovative retelling of Athens's foundation myth set in the sanctuary of Delphi. Focusing on justice as a belief that the good can be dichotomously separate and autonomous from the bad, this play also exposes the limitations of human perspective and the value of respecting traditional boundaries. The *Children of Heracles*, in chapter 5, is set in a rural sanctuary not far from the site of the famous battle of Marathon. The story turns to the question of justice between political communities and asks the still-relevant question of whether and how much a political

community is obligated to help refugees fleeing persecution. The tragedy reveals the oft-blurred line between justice as merit and political gain, as well as the dark side of justice found in the enjoyment of watching our enemies suffer. In chapter 6, set in Eleusis, the *Suppliant Women* builds on this question of justice between nations by focusing on the Athenian hero Theseus. After debating whether to help noncitizens, Theseus is convinced to retrieve the unburied bodies of the Argive generals who died with Polynices at the famous battle of the Seven against Thebes. This tragedy highlights the boundaries of international law and warns against excessive identification with cosmopolitanism.

The final section includes three plays set in the wilderness, far from the civilization of city and sanctuary: *Hecuba*, *Alcestis*, and *Electra*. Chapter 7 on the *Hecuba* tells the horrific fate of Priam's Queen after the fall of Troy. After discovering that her son has been murdered by her friend and her daughter sacrificed to Achilles, Hecuba's anger draws attention to the limitations of justice as merit, especially when political leadership and institutions are self-serving. It also highlights the complications of justice in warfare when there are no clear demarcations between victim and persecutor. Chapter 8 is dedicated to the most innovative of Euripides's plays: the *Alcestis*. In a departure from traditional myth and reflecting a satyr play, this tragedy tells the story of a woman who agrees to die in place of her husband. Connecting justice to appropriate boundaries, the play reveals that too much virtue becomes its opposite. Since the line between enough and too much is often opaque, the *Alcestis* exposes the search for justice as limited and incomplete. In the final chapter, in the *Electra*, Euripides returns to the famous story of Electra and Orestes's retaliation against their mother for murdering their father. Importantly, unlike Aeschylus's famous *Oresteia* trilogy, this time no divinity intervenes to establish justice in the form of political institutions; instead, Euripides leaves us with the shortcomings of all authority and standards of judgment, including the bias of institutions and our own judgment.⁵⁸

The conclusion sums up the analyses of all nine chapters to assess the seriousness of Euripides's portrayal of justice and his insights on the limitations of these overlapping but differing perspectives. Reflecting an experience of identifying justice in the conditions of limited knowledge, Euripides's tragedies force a thoughtful and serious investigation into the meaning of justice and its role in a political community. His tragedies reveal nuances and limitations of competing conceptions of justice across every setting or environment. As many of these ideas of justice

still resonate, his tragedies raise questions for our own contemporary opinions of justice. Most importantly, Euripides challenges a vision of justice that replaces the centrality of the individual with institutionalized, impartial arbitrators calculating objective outcomes. Justice appears to be not something that one possesses but, reflecting the paradoxical god of the theater himself, it is imprecise and eternally open to inquiry and deliberation.