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**THE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF EVERYDAY ATHENS:
EURIPIDES ON THE FREUDIAN COUCH**

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The biography of Euripides cannot give details about the life of the Athenian tragedian. All that can be determined for certain is that Euripides enjoyed less success compared to the tragedians Aeschylus and Sophocles, and that Euripides spent the end of his life in Macedon. To flesh out this information, we find context clues about his life in the work of other Greek writers, which ranged from the harsh criticism of comic poet Aristophanes, to the glowing praise of Aristotle. The meager evidence that makes up the personal history of Euripides remains cloudy at best—so much so that even attempting a chronological organization of his twenty-two published works remains difficult.

This scarcity of evidence presents an opportunity to offer a hypothetical characterization of Euripides by applying a psychological study of his characters and themes to forming a psychological understanding of their creator. This analysis of Euripides' plays, when applied to Freud's theory of Dream Work, as laid out in his 1909 edition of *On Dreams*, is enough to open a window into Euripides' psychology. This Dream Work theory was developed from many years of psychological observation, and determined that there are universal aspects of dreams that help them function as the fulfillment of subconscious wishes. Freud directly applied this theory to art and creative writing in *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, where he showed that poetry and other works of art are the products of daydreams, and are therefore subjected to the same universal mechanisms as dreams.

Even with a scientific method for psychological deduction, an important aspect of this characterization is the manner by which Euripides' material is approached. Freud's theories suggest that authors often describe aspects of their own self-image, or their

interpretation of the people around them, in individual characters or themes.¹ Using this idea, I will perform a psychological study of characters and themes in four of Euripides' plays, the *Medea*, *Bacchae*, *Hecuba*, and *Trojan Women*, then apply Freud's Dream Work theory to conclusions about the plays in an effort to open a window into the psychology of Euripides himself.

Four themes that emerge in common from these four plays are revenge and loss, Family vs. Society, the experience of strangers, and achieving balance between the previous three themes. Revenge is the theme that most strongly drives the dramatic action, and starts when the protagonist pursues revenge for some wrong done for them; in the course of pursuing this revenge, the protagonist endures suffering and loss when someone close to them dies or is sacrificed for the sake of the revenge. Second is the struggle between family and society, which is exhibited by the way characters devote themselves to the ideals of society or of family. The strangers in these four plays are Medea, Dionysus, Hecuba, and the other Trojans. Their experiences can be grouped into two parts, active and passive, but they all experience suffering at the hands of the Greek majority. The final theme is the achievement of balance between the other themes, which happens from the beginning to the end of the play. Even though this could be said for any literary work, these plays in particular feature protagonists who experience a noticeable shift in the interplay between priorities of family and society, revenge and humility, from the beginning of the plays to the end.

Freud's theories show that the content of plays demonstrate the psychology behind their creator, which grants me the opportunity to begin to characterize Euripides based on

¹Freud describes this phenomenon in *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, 44.

these four themes. The strength of the strangers' reactions to their circumstances demonstrates the ambivalence that Euripides felt towards his society: whether to react and endure the negative consequences of death and suffering, or to be passive and watch as the people closest to me are dragged off to serve a new master? I hope that my study shows that these were questions Euripides faced, and come to a conclusion based on what little is known about him, one that is hypothetical but realistic.

The Art of Dreaming

*"One must approach a great work of art armed with all the scientific understanding one can muster so that, in the end, one can commune with the greatness that the human mind attains only when it contemplates its own smallness."*²

Opening a window into Euripides' mind requires a reliable method for analyzing the work he produced to such an extent as to compensate for my inability to speak with him directly. For this I turn to Freud, who based many of his theories on Greek tragedy by Sophocles. Freud's most famous works, however, deal with dreams, slips of the tongue, or religion—the arts are largely left alone in his longer works. A shorter, more obscure work called *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming* offers a system of understanding the psychology of creative writers such as Euripides. Freud likens the fantasy worlds of adults and children (which he believes is a way to describe poetic writing, as I will show later) to the actions that the subconscious carries out while a person dreams. Combining this theory with Freud's dream theory makes possible the psychoanalysis of the poet, based on

² Devereaux 1985:5.

fundamental principles of the dream work theory which Freud established early in his career. Both works deserve a closer look, but before I outline *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming* and begin to analyze Euripides, I must first summarize his theory of dream-work from his famous 1909 work, *On Dreams*, without which a proper understanding of *Creative Writers* is impossible.

Originally, *On Dreams* was a longer, more technical work called *Interpretation of Dreams*, which was published in 1899. A revised edition in 1909 was more popular and formed the basis for the rest of his career as a psychoanalyst; it describes the dream merely as distorted wish-fulfillment and fully expounded upon the operations that perform this distortion. These theories were developed from a previous method where Freud discovered the existence of the unconscious by means of peeling away memories associated with symptoms of hysterical patients. Called the Cathartic Method, this process demonstrates that some unknown force in the minds of his patients was repressing negative memories and emotions, but these repressed images and feelings were manifested in seemingly unrelated physical symptoms. Freud determined that the patient did not knowingly repress these memories, much less know they existed, and that the repressing action happened in an unconscious part of the mind. Any hysterical symptoms could be alleviated by means of hypnosis, which forced the patient to consciously address the repressed memories.

Soon, however, it was apparent that hypnosis was unreliable as a consistent means to treat hysteria. There already existed research into the analogy of dream life and psychological illnesses, so he drew from his previously developed theories on hysteria to form a new method for psychotherapy. Freud came to the realization that the matter of dreams

could be decoded into a more complete and reliable explanation of psychopathology and hysteria. To do this, Freud documented many of his own dreams and the dreams of his patients, and established four primary features that were common to the majority of the dreams he analyzed: condensation, displacement, representability, and dramatization.

The first two, condensation and displacement, are the most common and most powerful. Freud identified condensation as the stacking and combination of multiple, seemingly unrelated images into a single dream, and displacement as the deflection of emotional import onto something otherwise trivial. According to displacement, any event or object in a dream could be the key to unlocking an important memory otherwise protected by the conscious mind. The images that result from this phenomenon are most often taken from the “dream day” of the individual; that is, the places, people, and things that occur and pass by in the present time as the dream. The other two common aspects of dreams deal with the manner in which the condensed and displaced material is presented: representability is the characteristic by which dream content is a visual image, as opposed to a tactile or audible sensation; dramatization, also called “secondary revision,” is the way a dream appears as a story. These elements were found to both fulfill and protect the subconscious wishes that are withheld from the conscious mind.

Freud adopts these concepts as the foundation of the remainder of his theoretical explorations including analysis of poetry, such as in *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, published in 1908 shortly before the release of the revised edition of *On Dreams*. In *Creative Writers*, Freud calls to mind the way people are often unable to understand why poetic material inspires such emotional affect in an audience. Freud suggests that the answer must have something to do with the psychological constitution of the writer. As he often

does when addressing seemingly impossible questions, Freud answers this question by discussing something else entirely—in this case, something that is similar to poetry in our day to day lives.³ He names the play of children as similar to poetry, and shows how the child at play re-arranges the things of his world into a new way that pleases him. In creating this alternate, imagined reality, the child invests large amounts of emotion and projects things which have emotional import in the reality of the child.⁴ Freud clarifies: “In spite of all the emotion with which he cathects his world of play, the child distinguishes it quite well from reality; and he likes to link his imagine objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world.”⁵ In other words, the child understands that this new world that he created is strictly fantasy; while it is composed of and manipulates aspects of reality, there is a strict understanding in his mind that it is *make-believe*. This became an important distinction in the next part of his study.

This seems a simple reality for the mind of a child when he or she is fantasizing about being a princess or an astronaut, but the matter is not so clear-cut for adults. Freud theorizes that for adults “playing” becomes “day-dreaming,” and this phenomenon comes with more difficult emotional implications. In adults, there is a noticeable departure from the emotional openness than in children, one that carries implications in the psychological stability of the adult mind. Adults are ashamed at their innermost desires and more vehemently repress the wishes which their dreams try to actualize: “The adult, on the contrary, is ashamed of his phantasies and hides them from other people. He cherishes his phantasies as his most intimate possessions, and as a rule he would rather confess his

³ Freud 1908:143.

⁴ Freud 1908:144.

⁵ Freud 1908:144.

misdeeds than tell anyone his phantasies.”⁶ To explain this difference, Freud points out that the two types of dream have two different motives behind their wish-fulfillment: for children, the wish to seem “grown-up” drives play time, while adult daydreaming is driven either by ambitious or by erotic desires—and often a combination of the two.⁷

Freud then made three important qualifications about fantasies and dreams. First, the relationship of fantasy to time is greatly important, and the two are inextricably linked in a continuous cycle from present, to past, to future. This three-way link begins in a current desire, which connects itself unconsciously to an experience of infantile fulfillment of a similar desire. Finally, the unconscious forms a hypothetical situation in the future in which the wish is fulfilled, using the recalled past fulfillment as a model. Freud’s second clarification says that if a fantasy becomes too powerful or over-luxurious, the conditions have thereby been determined for the onset of psychosis or neurosis. It is when the line separating fantasy from reality is blurred that the wish becomes the material driving a neurosis.⁸ Third, and most importantly, Freud says that the relationship of fantasies to dreams is as simple as the essence of the word “daydream.” Freud shows that the daydream undergoes the same dream-work that occurs in the unconscious of the sleeping mind: “When scientific work had succeeded in elucidating this factor of *dream-distortion*, it was no longer difficult to recognize that night-dreams are wish-fulfillments in just the same way as day-dreams—the phantasies which we all know so well.”⁹ Assuming these qualifications, the importance of the mechanisms of dream work become clearer; images

⁶ Freud 1908:145.

⁷ Freud 1908:147.

⁸ Freud 1908:148.

⁹ Freud 1908:149.

from any point in a dreamer's—or poet's—life are fair game for displacement and condensation.

Freud returns to his attempt to understand the source of the emotional affect of poetry and relates the daydreamer to the poet, and the daydream to poetry. Taking examples from several contemporary fictional works, Freud points out similarities between fiction and aspects of dreams, such as the indomitable hero, strictly good and evil characters, and the frequency of which the protagonist is the only character that is wholly depicted; that is, with thoughts and emotions described as though the reader is inside the hero's head. Freud also applied his theory of the relationship between dreaming and poetry to a previously mentioned idea of the relationship between a child's fantasy and the three periods of time inherent in every instance of these fantasies:

A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory.¹⁰

This theory thereby associates creative writing to the wish-fulfillment process, and validates the application of dream work to analyzing poetry.¹¹

The actual process of applying this dream theory to poetry leads Freud to a contradiction in *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*. At an early point, he divides ancient tragedians and epic poets from other writers: "Here we must begin by making an initial distinction. We must separate writers who, like the ancient authors of epics and tragedies,

¹⁰ Freud 1908:151.

¹¹ Freud 1908:152. Of the potential for using dream work on poetry, Freud says that the theory will be "not unfruitful," based as it is on "the assumption that a piece of creative writing, like a daydream, is a continuation of, and substitute for, what was once the play of childhood." Freud frequently phrases conclusions in indefinite terms like this, due in part to his documented anxiety over being accepted by the scientific community. By leaving indefinite conclusions that could create controversy, Freud's position was one of merely adding to the psychological conversation.

take over their material ready-made, from writers who seem to originate their own material.”¹² Later Freud clarifies his point on ancient authors and resolves the conflict regarding tragedians and epic poets, giving them a different kind of power over their creations that blends their own nature and the notoriety of myths in their societies:

We must not neglect, however, to go back to the kind of imaginative works which we have to recognize, not as original creations, but as the re-fashioning of ready-made and familiar material. Even here, the writer keeps a certain amount of independence, which can express itself in the choice of material and in changes in it which are often quite extensive.¹³

This point gives the tragedian a unique position for the analyst to consider. Not only would Euripides have known the myth behind their stories, but the audience would have as well—the power of the play would have to have come from the way the myths were altered or from the words the author put in his characters’ mouths.¹⁴

Freud further discusses myth’s function in the tragedy as an extension of a broader, communal psychology of a given culture. This gives further power to the subject matter which epic poets and tragedians use: “The study of constructions of folk-psychology such as these is far from being complete, but it is extremely probable that myths, for instance, are distorted vestiges of the wishful phantasies of whole nations, the *secular dreams* of youthful humanity.”¹⁵ By manipulating the folk-psychology of Athens, not only is Euripides dramatizing his own thoughts, emotions, and dreams, but he is utilizing material that would have struck a chord in the very psyche of Athens herself.

¹² Freud 1908:149. This separation seems to add a further obstacle to the validity of my Freudian analysis of Euripides.

¹³ Freud 1908:152.

¹⁴ Devereaux 1985:9 describes the myth being shaped by the poet’s mind and experiences, which somewhat resembles the threefold relationship between fantasy and time, “The myth is, thus, a constant presence in the poet’s mind and hence also his drama. For man is a chronoholistic system, whose behavior at any moment (drama) can be understood only in terms of his *entire life history* (myth and earlier dramas).”

¹⁵ Freud 1908:152. Freud’s protégé Carl Jung later fully fleshes out the implications of this theory.

Freud fleshes out this public function of the tragedy in an earlier work, *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage* (1906), when he explored the question found in *Creative Writers* from a different point of view.¹⁶ To explain why the tragedy evokes such passionate emotion of its audience, Freud borrows heavily from Aristotle's conclusion that the entire *purpose* of the tragedy is to purge the individual's emotions by catharsis, or "blowing off steam."¹⁷ For the rest of the work, Freud takes this conclusion as an assumption and attempts to understand how the audience derives its intense emotional affect.

Freud begins by discussing the psychology of the audience member and how he connects with the characters onstage. "The spectator is a ... 'poor wretch to whom nothing of importance can happen,' who has been obliged to damp down, or rather displace, his ambition to stand in his own person at the hub of world affairs... in short, to be a hero."¹⁸ In a sense, the spectator is no different from the child at play that Freud describes in *Creative Writers and Day Dreaming*: just as the child re-arranges reality to suit his desire to act grown up, each audience member escapes from his unimportant existence. In the same way that the child is aware his daydreams are fantasy, Freud theorizes that the audience member remembers that he is only an observer, which heightens the dramatic experience into wish-fulfillment.

Freud then considers how the individual audience member buys into a play, which was a new aspect in his larger dramatic analysis: "And the playwright and actor...spare him something, too. For the spectator knows quite well that actual heroic conduct such as this would be impossible for him without pains and sufferings and acute fears, which would

¹⁶ This was another short work by Freud, but not one he himself published. Its first English translation appeared after Freud's death in the 1942 edition of *Psychoanalysis Quarterly*.

¹⁷ Freud 1906:305.

¹⁸ Freud 1906:305.

almost cancel out the enjoyment.”¹⁹ The audience was compelled to the willful suspension of disbelief at the events onstage, and only through this verisimilitude could the spectator purge his powerful emotions. Freud suggests that a powerful way that to do this is to indulge some repressed impulse or call some conflict to consciousness. The drama provides the ideal atmosphere for the spectator to cathect his emotions: “his suffering is mitigated by the certainty that, firstly, it is someone other than himself who is acting and suffering on the stage, and, secondly, that after all it is only a game, which can threaten no damage to his personal security.”²⁰ Freud places responsibility on the playwright and actors to tread the delicate line between a fantasy world and a re-creation of contemporary society, in order for a play’s greater message to be revealed and properly received by the audience.

Freud next gives an in-depth description of the experience of the spectator, focusing specifically on the mental suffering he undergoes as the play unfolds. Compared to other forms of creative writing, such as lyric poetry or epic poetry, drama delves deeper into the possible emotions of its subject matter; lyric poetry aims to merely vent emotions, epic poetry seeks to help the reader empathize with a hero in his moment of triumph, but the potential depth of dramatic exploration can make even misfortune, struggle, and defeat seem enjoyable.²¹

¹⁹ Freud 1906:305-6. In both essays to this point, Freud exclusively discussed his theory behind the strong emotional effects of art and drama; with this shift, he moves to the larger implications of stagecraft.

²⁰ Freud 1906:306.

²¹ Freud 1906:306. In Section 7 of the fourth essay of 1913’s *Totem and Taboo*, Freud determines that the hero of the Greek tragedy *must* suffer misfortune as a result of ‘tragic guilt.’ One most often encounters this idea referred to as the ‘tragic flaw,’ but Freud paints the hero as a condensed and displaced Primal Father, the victim of the first Oedipal Complex in the prehistory of mankind. In Freud’s estimation, the Hero assumes the guilt that comes from the Chorus’ rebellion against either human or divine authority. From p. 306 of *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage*: “Heroes are first and foremost rebels against God or against something divine; and pleasure is derived, as it seems, from the affliction of a weaker being in the face of divine might—a

Freud places responsibility for fulfilling this potential emotional affect in the audience on the playwright and the characters, a point that will be important in my treatment of Euripides. No matter what type of play is being presented, the audience is led on a psychological journey in which the impulse or instinct at the heart of the emotion is only revealed in such a manner that the spectator is grappling only with his emotions rather than the awareness of the journey itself.²² Freud makes an interesting point regarding this journey, and how its success comes down to the way in which the character is approached. Likening the character to the neurotic, and the audience as the analyst: "For the victim of a neurosis is someone into whose conflict we can gain no insight if we first meet it in a fully established state. But, *per contra*, if we recognize the conflict, we forget that he is a sick man, just as, if he himself recognizes it, he ceases to be ill."²³

I stress again Freud's observation that the responsibility for the power of the play is squarely on the playwright. That this is a factor in characterizing Euripides is obvious when one considers that each tragedy served a specific social function at a specific social gathering: every tragedy would have had to pass through a panel of judges before it even made the stage at the Dionysian festival. Euripides could not merely vent his *own* emotions; he also had to couch them in a way that tugged on the emotions of every citizen in the audience.

Now, armed with the scientific precedent for analyzing the poetry, I aim to examine the tragic elements of each play and use the tragic material of Euripides' works to

pleasure due to masochistic satisfaction as well as to direct enjoyment of a character whose greatness is insisted upon in spite of everything."

²² Freud 1906:309. A large portion of this work is a survey of the types of dramatic performance. The unifying factor in each type of play, however, is the fact that there is some type of conflict that is explored and resolved in some manner that involves suffering for the hero.

²³ Freud 1906:310

characterize their author. The four themes I focus on are revenge and loss, family vs. society, experience of strangers, and rebalance of priorities between all of those elements. These have been identified and discussed many times over by scholars hypothesizing what could have been Euripides' contemporary social message, but never to characterize the playwright himself. No single play could alone form a worthy depiction of Euripides, but analysis of as many examples as possible—taking into account the psychological implications and development of Euripides as his life progressed—does just that.

Euripides and his Daydreams

The psychology found within individual plays varies with every new character and theme; as examples build up, the complexity of the interaction between layers increases as every layer affects the others. This complexity is a result of the condensation of many emotions into every play, and the fact that certain themes are more immediately apparent does not necessarily mean they are more important. Recall that Freud's dream theory calls this phenomenon "displacement," and this only contributes to the complexity. Instead of trying to separate different instances of different themes in every play, I want to begin with one theme, that of loss and revenge, and examine its prevalence in the *Medea*, *Bacchae*, *Hecuba*, and *Trojan Women*. Through this reading, themes of family vs. society, the experience of strangers, and the struggle for balance all emerge in that order; yet all contribute in different ways to providing a clearer window into Euripides' life.

Revenge and loss play the most important role in these four plays. In each one, the protagonists feel as though they have been wronged somehow, which usually occurred

before the plot begins. Avenging this wrong drives the action of the plot. During the course of this revenge, circumstances demand that the protagonist sacrifice some person they love or some principle they believe in, which always ends in loss and suffering.

Revenge is the primary theme of the *Medea*. Medea exercised her anger against Jason for deserting her by murdering their children and the royal family of Corinth, but in the end experienced the regret and despair that came from murdering her own sons to complete her revenge against Jason. Revenge is more complex in the *Bacchae*. Both Dionysus and Pentheus try to exact revenge on the other: Dionysus teaches Pentheus and the rest of Thebes a lesson for not following him; Pentheus, convinced of the Maenads' illicit actions in the forest, attempts to punish Dionysus and his followers for these immoral practices. Though Dionysus never experiences loss, the idea is nevertheless important in the *Bacchae*. In this case, it comes at the end of the play once Dionysus' revenge is complete, and as a result of Pentheus sacrificing his principles by donning the Dionysian garb to spy on his mother and the others. This sacrifice is the tipping point of the plot, and scene where a tearful Agave carries the dismembered body of her son to the center of the city, covered in his blood, demonstrates the entire society's loss of their leader. In the *Hecuba*, the Trojan queen mixes revenge and loss throughout the play, in that Hecuba's revenge comes at the hand of loss, instead of the other way around. Hecuba is faced with the sacrifice of her daughter Polyxena for the sake of Achilles' ghost, and endures the discovery of her son Polydorus's corpse, betrayed before the plot began at the hands of a former ally. Hecuba gets her revenge for the loss of her son by murdering the treacherous Polymestor and his two sons. Even though Agamemnon exonerates Hecuba's actions, she still lost her son and must endure the hardship of burying her own child.

The *Trojan Women* depicts revenge in loss in a different way than the rest of these plays. Loss seems to play the primary role in the *Trojan Women* in many different ways. In one sense, Hecuba and her daughters mourn the loss of their city and husbands; in another, the Trojan women lament their own fate as slaves to new, Greek masters. Specifically, Hecuba mourns Cassandra for her perceived naiveté in the face of a life of servitude and the execution of her grandson Astyanax, who represented the last hope of greatness for her family. Revenge is secondary, but still plays an important role in my study of Euripides in that there *is no* revenge. Hecuba and the other characters are passive and merely have to accept the punishments they receive from the Greeks. This is important because the outcome of the passive reaction is still the same: more suffering. With regards to Euripides, it seems that he is exploring the ways revenge can be exacted in different contexts; each play features different circumstances for the protagonists and different results from their actions. That everything ends in suffering could demonstrate how Euripides felt about his options to achieve some positive result from revenge. The bittersweet conclusion of the *Heuba* seems to offer the best route—at least Hecuba was not punished for murdering her betrayer.

In these plays, revenge can be understood as the result either of conflict between family and society or of the interaction between Greeks and strangers. The motivations behind these more complicated and themes can be described in terms of one of Freud's more famous works: *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), where Freud suggests that instinctual tension lies behind conflict between family and society. Understanding the psychological material behind characters' conflicts proves valuable under the assumption that they are mere extensions of Euripides' own psychology, and sets up the next level of

psychological deconstruction of the plays, a level that requires a more in-depth look at specific examples of the conflict between family and society.

Freud begins *Civilization and its Discontents* by describing his “pleasure principle,” which is that humans strive for happiness at all times, both consciously and unconsciously.²⁴ Freud defines happiness simply as “the (preferably sudden) satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up to a high degree,” but describes a prolonged state of this pleasure as a moment-to-moment experience: “When any situation that is desired by the pleasure principle is prolonged, it only produces a feeling of mild contentment. We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things.”²⁵ Essentially, Freud thinks that pleasure, while immediately enjoyable, is ultimately undesirable in an extended setting. It induces a type of numbness to the satisfaction, one that reduces the amount of pleasure gained from an otherwise powerful experience. Not only is this sort of satisfaction undesirable in an extended setting, but Freud also suggests that such an existence is directly at odds with the world, because every aspect of the universe acts against the fulfillment of desires.

To deflect the impact of the external world on happiness, Freud recommends what he calls “unpleasure avoidance,” a term more difficult to define, but one that has greater potential as a lifestyle choice; the minute-to-minute experience of intense satisfaction is lessened, but the emotional numbness described by Freud is also lessened.²⁶ Clearly there is a better way to live a happy life than the mere fulfillment of physical desires, one that begins by establishing a positive *lifestyle*, rather than a negative, reactionary existence.

²⁴ Freud 1930:4.

²⁵ Freud 1930:43. Here, Freud quotes Goethe’s *Wiemar*, 1810-12: “Alles in der Welt läßt sich ertragen, Nur nicht eine Reihe von schönen Tagen.” (Anything in the world is endurable, only not a series of fair days.)

²⁶ Freud 1930:42.

Freud continues his theory by saying that three sources endanger a person's goal for unpleasure avoidance: the decay of the physical body, the forces of the external world, and human relationships.²⁷ For Freud human relationships are the most threatening because they are the most painful and most inevitable. As an inherently social being, if a person wished to completely escape this source of suffering, he would have to withdraw to isolation, which would come with new consequences:

Against the dreaded external world one can only defend oneself by some kind of turning away from it, if one intends to solve the task by oneself. There is, indeed, another and better path: that of becoming a member of the human community, and, with the help of a technique guided by science, going over to the attack against nature and subjecting her to the human will. Then one is working with all for the good of all. In the last analysis, all suffering is nothing else than sensation; it only exists in so far as we feel it, and we only feel it in consequence of certain ways in which our organism is regulated.²⁸

In other words, Freud recommends a life in society, even though this life inevitably includes suffering at the hands of other people by its very nature. This catch-22 situation is reminiscent of Euripides' depiction of revenge; suffering always results no matter if a person reacts or chooses to be passive.

Moreover, his final point suggests that the experience of unpleasure can be diminished by a well-organized body, with the goal of establishing a positive lifestyle. Freud suggests that the key to this lifestyle could be the regulation of the sense, because they perceive unpleasure in the first place. He offers a few examples of methods to regulate the senses, but each has its pros and cons. The use of intoxicating substances, which may initially seem most effective in offering the desired escape from reality, offer both immediate pleasure and a feeling of freedom from the external world. Ultimately, however,

²⁷ Freud 1930:44.

²⁸ Freud 1930:45.

these are wasteful of a person's natural gifts "which might have been employed for the improvement of the human lot."²⁹ Another method of regulating the senses is to control the instinctual life through overcoming the existence of need from the source, which one achieves by revoking power from the instincts and is common in practices like yoga. Freud notes, however, that such measures if taken to the extreme result in an existence similar to the solitude of voluntary isolation. For Freud it is much better to attempt to control the instincts; he suggests that leaving inhibited instincts unfulfilled is less painful than denying instincts that hold great power over the consciousness.³⁰

As Freud gets closer to his ideal method of "unpleasure avoidance," he discusses the displacement of libido, such as painting for an artist or discovering scientific truths for a scientist. In these cases the individuals devote themselves to such an extent that some of their sexual energy is displaced into their pursuits. The merit of such devotions is that they are considered "higher satisfactions," but ultimately, "their intensity is mild as compared with that derived from the sating of crude and primary instinctual impulses; it does not convulse our physical being," and, moreover, "the weak point of this method is that it is not applicable generally: it is accessible to only a few people."³¹ Here, Freud is quick to recognize the benefits of an intellectual life or one of imagination, but understands that human instincts are too powerful to be completely repressed in a healthy way.

Thus he arrives at the most powerful method of deflecting unpleasure, "the art of living." Through this method, a person is consumed by love of the world and of others; the most obvious form of this love is revealed both through physical passion and devotion to

²⁹ Freud 1930:47. An ironic statement coming from Freud, who purportedly was a heavy cocaine user.

³⁰ Freud 1930:48.

³¹ Freud 1930:49. Freud continues: "It creates no impenetrable armour against the arrows of fortune, and it habitually fails when the source of suffering is a person's own body."

another person, which are the original sources of the highest pleasure achievable. Freud also says that, though this is the most powerful form of unpleasure deflection, it is also the most risky: “The weak side of this technique of living is easy to see. . . that we are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love.”³²

The *Medea* emerges as a particularly good representation of *Civilization and its Discontents*. For example, one could say that Medea devoted her emotions to what Freud would call the “art of living,” and the heartbreak she felt is the manifestation of Freud’s caveat against the most important form of unpleasure deflection. That she is in the throes of love is beyond doubt; numerous characters in the play attest to her long infatuation with Jason, for example, the Nurse in the opening lines of the tragedy, “[I wish that] My lady, Medea, would never have sailed to Iolkos’ towers, her spirit struck senseless with love of Jason” (*Med.* 6-8); and Jason himself, as he argues with Medea later in the play,

“But since you so proudly prate about your favors, I believe the only one of gods or mortals who saved me during my voyage was Aphrodite! A subtle mind you have, but are very slow to grasp the story of how Eros, Love, forced you with his unerring arrows to save my person.” (*Med.* 525-31)

This difference between Jason’s and Medea’s motivations emerges as the conflict that underlies the rest of the action of the play.

Section Four of *Civilization and its Discontents* further develops Freud’s theory on the power of instinctual drive, specifically its various manifestations in society, which sustains the *Medea*’s position as the paradigm of *Civilization and its Discontents* by offering further psychological insight into Medea’s vengeful reaction against Jason. In addition, the

³² Freud 1930:52.

eventual conclusion that men gravitate toward social devotion and women to familial devotion emerges, which is also exhibited by Euripides' plays.

This section contains Freud's meta-philosophical theory of the beginning of civilization, and his thoughts the role the instincts played in pre-historical man. Initially, man was a savage hunter-gatherer who relied on his own physical power to sustain himself and experienced only occasional sexual satisfaction from various female partners. Eventually, humanity came to realize the potential for enhanced utility brought on by working and living in union.³³ In the leisure time that enhanced productivity afforded, man could no longer sate his libidinal drive by the occasional experience of genital satisfaction. To better fulfill this drive, man had woman move in with him, promising a more secure future for her and her children. This move came with two results: man could easily satisfy his sexual appetite as planned, and woman developed strong feelings of attachment to both her children and her male, resulting in the first primal family. This new family was bound together by the power of love, which Freud describes as follows:

The communal life of human beings had, therefore, a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity, and the power of love, which made the man unwilling to be deprived of his sexual object—the woman—, and made the woman unwilling to be deprived of the part of herself which had been separated off of her—the child. Eros and Ananke [Love and Necessity] have become the parents of human civilization too.³⁴

³³ Freud 1930:77.

³⁴ Freud 1930:79-80. While Freud will continue to show how this very union would snowball into a source of dissatisfaction in the human experience, he does note that his description of the first family is similar to the "art of living" which he presented earlier. "We said that man's discovery that sexual love afforded him the strongest experiences of satisfaction, and in fact provided him with the prototype of all happiness. We went on to say that in doing so he made himself dependent in a most dangerous way on a portion of the external world...and exposed himself to extreme suffering if he should be rejected by that object. For that reason the wise men of every age have warned us most emphatically against this way of life; but in spite of this it has not lost its attraction for a great number of people" (80-81).

This depiction of the most rudimentary early societies soon turns sour as civilization grows and man experiences the pain felt by the betrayal of his love. Freud shows how the results of the betrayal (or fear of betrayal) are more strictly defined social roles based on physical gender.

While most men in society are drawn to sexual union and family to achieve happiness, a minority can diminish their partner's power over their emotions (and thereby limit the potential pain of a partner's betrayal, which one should assume to be inevitable) by transforming the nature and aim of their sexual instinct: "What they bring about in themselves in this way is a state of evenly suspended, steadfast, affectionate feeling, which has little external resemblance any more to the story agitations of genital love, from which it is nevertheless derived."³⁵ It seems that, for Freud, the mere possibility of a lover's betrayal is enough to siphon libidinal energy from the relationship to an external outlet. This transformed expression of sexual desire (called aim-inhibited love) manifests itself in the man's devotion to cosmopolitan pursuits such as politics and business, the non-exclusivity of which offers liberation from worry of betrayal. The existence and interplay of these two types of love, however, which emphasize family and community respectively, come to be the primary source of instinctual and emotional discontent among humans in civilization.

The implication is that women are frozen in the original, family-emphasized form of love, while men are free (and encouraged) to develop the aim-inhibited love of the greater community. Gender discrimination is a natural product of the instincts of the individuals in

³⁵ Freud 1930:81. Freud defines this new type of love: "People give the name 'love' to the positive feelings between parents and children, and between the brothers and sisters of a family, although we are obliged to describe this as 'aim-inhibited love' or 'affection'" (82).

society: "Women represent the interests of the family and of sexual life. The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men; it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations, of which women are little capable."³⁶ The result of this divergence in the male's life is his systematic siphoning off of his libido, which forces his woman into the shadows of the background, where she has little choice but to develop bitterness towards her civilization. Man and woman develop two different ways to express these rapidly shifting feelings of love: the masculine becomes the social, feminine the familial.

Freud explains how this bitterness finds expression in society. Instead of trying to contort Eros into something that is not loving, Freud defines a second primary instinct: Death, or Thanatos, which manifests itself as every human's aggressive and destructive tendencies; in the opposition between Thanatos and Eros, Freud believes he found the true nature of the human experience, "And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species."³⁷

This description of a constant struggle between Love and Death is found in the *Medea*. Medea demonstrates ambivalence over the form her revenge will take, particularly regarding the fate of her children, which shows that she feels the pressure of the feminine form of Eros in society. In lines 112-113, Medea appears determined to kill them: "Accursed children of a hateful mother! Perish with your father! The whole house be

³⁶ Freud 1930:84.

³⁷ Freud 1930:111.

damned!" But shortly after this, Medea begs Creon to spare her children from the exile she would soon face:

A single day allow me to remain to think through where I shall go in exile and find some means of life for my children. Their father sets no stock on devising something for them. Have pity on them! You are a father, too. It's natural for you to show them kindness. My concern isn't for me if we go into exile; my tears are rather for them and their misfortunes. (*Med.* 340-47)

This sequence shows how Medea, for all her hatred of Jason and desire for revenge against him, is yet unwilling to completely destroy her family by killing her children. That her children turn out no more than collateral damage to Medea's rage could be explained by the fact that the tragedy was meant to teach a lesson; recall Freud's discussion of the poet's responsibility to lead the audience on a cathartic journey. While this is a valid explanation, the presence of similar occurrences in other plays, as I will show later, also says more about Euripides himself.

Another way the Freud helps explain Jason's actions is when Jason rationalizes his actions in what could be understood in terms of Freud's theory on conflicting types of Love. In the scene where Jason and Medea argue, Medea hurls insults and curses at Jason for abandoning her even after all of the sacrifices she made on his behalf, which she relates in lines 465-519. Jason's response shows that his motivation was not driven by sexual passion:

What luckier scheme could I have found than this, to marry the King's daughter, I, a fugitive? Not—what's chafing you—that I hated your bed and was struck by desire for a new bride, nor eager for a contest in child-producing; I have enough and find no fault with them. (*Med.* 554-58)

Instead, Jason claims to have acted out of the alternative form of Love, of which Freud claims only men are capable:

Uppermost in my mind was for us to live well-off, not destitute, for I know that an impoverished man is shunned by all his friends, I wanted to raise the children in a manner befitting my family, producing brother for those I had with you, to bind the family together so I might prosper. (*Med.* 560-65)

Jason makes no attempt to hide the rhetorical nature of his speech, a manifestation of his transformed, politically-motivated instincts: "I must, it seems, not fall short of perfection in speaking, but just like an expert helmsman, haul up my sail and run before the storm of harsh words your tongue spews, woman" (*Med.* 522-25). One could say that the resulting instinctual frustration that Medea experienced manifested itself through her Death instinct, which inspired her vengeance against Jason. Medea had a difficult time managing her opposing instincts, which resulted in the reputation she still carries throughout literature: one of a renowned and passionate dichotomy between love and hatred. According to *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud might say this dichotomy was brought out by the conflict between social and familial devotion.

The *Trojan Women* seems to have a different feel than the rest of Euripides' tragedies, due to its lack of a traditional plot and its alleged part of a trilogy in the style of Aeschylus.³⁸ Given this lack of a plot, the play progresses as new characters are introduced: the former princesses of the Trojan house, now about to be led off to slavery. In particular, the psychology of the suffering that Hecuba endures compares to the psychology of the *Medea* in that Hecuba could be seen as victim of the Eros of the woman in a family; throughout the play, Hecuba grieves as she sees the last of her sons killed and daughters taken away to slavery. Anselment describes Hecuba as the foremost protagonist in a pageant of "helpless, communal victims of uncontrollable forces."³⁹ Helen, on the other

³⁸ See Konaris (1973) Scodel (1980) on *Trojan Women* as part of a connected trilogy.

³⁹ Anselment 403.

hand, seems to embody the aloof character that Freud describes when establishing the role of a social-minded individual—one who dedicates her emotions to society instead of the potentially painful outlet found in family life. Sienkewicz’s conclusion, that, “Helen serves to make most bitter the suffering of the other women in the play,” women that were already mourning their family’s demise, suggests that the roles of instinctual-driven outburst are switched in *Trojan Women* from the paradigm set forth in the *Medea*.⁴⁰ With this in mind, an analysis of the entire debate seems in order.

The *agon* scene between Hecuba and Helen gives a fitting microcosm of the tensions found in *Civilization and its Discontents*, one that is similar to the *agon* between Jason and Medea. In this instance, Helen represents the new knowledge sophistic society, whereas Hecuba argues from the side of family loyalty and the wronged love of her household. The scene opens with Menelaus calling for Helen to be brought out to answer for the infidelity that caused so much destruction, but the scene should have immediately raised eyebrows from the minute Helen came onstage. Helen is dressed in splendid robes of gold, rather than the rags one would assume of a suppliant. This would have presented a great contrast for the Athenian audience, and it serves a purpose in this interpretation of the play as well; Helen seems to have already eschewed any ties with Troy, and instead attempts to please the eye of the Greek society. Knowing this, Hecuba’s admonishing Menelaus against laying eyes on her (*Troiad.* 890-95) makes sense; in Hecuba’s eyes the more beautiful Helen appears, the less of a chance Hecuba has of proving Helen’s guilt to her own husband.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Sienkewicz 39.

⁴¹ Sienkewicz 41. Sienkewicz also emphasizes this facet of the scene as a visual contrast between Helen and the rest of the women of Troy that would have been immediately apparent to the ancient audience.

Before her execution, Helen begs that she be allowed to defend herself, and Hecuba persuades Menelaus to allow her to argue against Helen's position, assuming that "a full debate will mean her inevitable death" (*Troiad.* 909-10).⁴² Helen begins by blaming Priam and Hecuba, Paris' parents, for giving birth and raising him in the first place (*Troiad.* 919-922).⁴³ Next, Helen claims to have actually helped the Greek society. She explains how Hera had promised Paris the domination of the European continent and Athena promised the destruction of Greece in battle, should Paris have chosen one of them as the most beautiful of the goddesses. Helen says, "Consider the logical consequences which follow. Cypris won, and to this extent my union benefited Greece. You are not under the control of the barbarians, either because of a battle or through tyranny" (*Troiad.* 930-34). Finally, Helen reminds the assembled of Aphrodite's spell, and that perhaps Menelaus should, "Punish the goddess and become more powerful than Zeus, who has the other gods under his power but is himself the slave of this one" (*Troiad.* 947-50).

It seems as though Helen is fulfilling the social role in three ways: by appealing to the greater benefit of Greece on her account, by blaming the family as the source of the first iniquity, and by emphasizing her position as the stereotypical powerless woman under the control of masters both human and divine. Following this speech, the chorus of Trojan women attempts to inspire Hecuba, emphasizing not only her duty to her family but also that to her nation, "My queen, defend your children and your country and destroy the effect

⁴² Translations of *Trojan Women* by Barlow 1986.

⁴³ Barlow 205. In her commentary, Barlow discusses how the first play of this trilogy would have stressed the culpability of Priam and Hecuba; she believes that Hecuba and Priam were as guilty as Oedipus' parents were in the Theban tradition.

of her persuasion, for she speaks well for all that she is guilty. And this is a terrible thing” (*Troiad.* 966-69).⁴⁴

Hecuba begins her rebuttal by attacking Helen’s claim that the blame for her actions rests with the gods, and by contradicting Helen’s claim over actually aiding the Greeks with her infidelity. First, Hecuba points out the folly of even thinking that Hera or Athena would have wished to be crowned Most Beautiful, much less would have given away their precious Greek cities to slavery over such a title,

They did not come to Ida for frivolous games and the extravagance of a beauty contest. For what reason would the goddess Hera conceive such a desire to be beautiful? So that she could possess a husband superior to Zeus? Would Athena be looking for a wedding among the gods when she specifically asked her father to let her remain a virgin because she shunned marriage? Do not make the goddesses out to be irrational, by embellishing your own stupidity. (*Troiad.* 975-82)

Next, Hecuba claims that Aphrodite isn’t even real; instead, she is just a figure of men’s imaginations, and only serves to excuse human lust, “All acts of human intemperance are Aphrodite, and rightly does the name of the goddess begin with the word for folly” (*Troiad.* 989-90). Moreover, she claims that Helen was no more than seduced by the appearance and wealth of Paris; that Menelaus did not have the wealth necessary to sate her taste for luxury (*Troiad.* 991-97). The rest of Hecuba’s speech is similarly logical and precise; she rebuts Helen’s points in order, from discrediting her claim of being dragged, to her claim that she tried to escape Troy, to the fact that Hecuba herself offered Helen a way out of the city (*Troiad.* 998-1021).

⁴⁴ On this short speech by the chorus, Sienkewicz (41) says that the statement is “more than an interlude between the two speeches,” and that the success of both her persuasiveness and seductive appearance were evident in the chorus’ impassioned reaction.

In the last 10 lines of the speech, however, Hecuba betrays the logic of the previous 50 with an outburst about Helen's appearance:

And after all this you have come out here all dressed up, presuming to breathe the same air as your husband, you despicable creature. More fitting had you come humbly in rags, trembling with fear, your head shaved bare. A sense of shame would be more appropriate in you than brazenness, after the wrongs you have committed in the past. (*Troiad.* 1021-29)

Barlow describes the outburst at the end of her speech: "Hecuba ends her speech with a gratuitous, understandable, and irrational outburst about Helen's appearance.... The anger of Hecuba at the last moment blots out logic."⁴⁵ In this moment, Hecuba fulfills my Freudian interpretation of the scene. Her emotions get the best of her, so she drops the guise of playing by the rules of society and reverts back to her familial tendency; her role-reversal is resolved, and, in doing so, the logic of her previous argument was overshadowed by irrationality.

The *Hecuba* features the Trojan queen in a role that again pits her instincts for family against the powers of society, a conflict Freud posited is always present and only varies in its manifestation. This time, Hecuba is immediately stricken with grief over the discovery of her son Polydorus' death at the hands of a former friend Polymestor. Once the navy came to the shores of Polymestor's kingdom, the shade of Achilles commands the Greek army that Polyxena, sister of Polydorus and daughter of Hecuba, must be sacrificed before the fleet can continue on their journey.

Later in the play, another example of the disharmony between family and society occurs, this time between Odysseus and Hecuba. Odysseus was sent to retrieve Polyxena from her mother and lead her to the tomb of Achilles for sacrifice. One would expect

⁴⁵ Barlow 207

Hecuba to beg Odysseus to somehow spare her daughter, but rather reminds Odysseus of a previous moment, when her betrayal of her own country saved his life (*Hec.* 239-250).

Odysseus recognizes this favor for being out of character for a person who might be expected to defend her city above all else, but appeals to the social custom of honoring the dead, and explains that he had no option but to sacrifice Polyxena:

Is not this a foul reproach to treat him as a friend in life, but, when he is gone from us, to treat him so no more? Enough! what will they say, if once more there comes a gathering of the army and a contest with the foe? "Shall we fight or nurse our lives, seeing the dead have no honors?" For myself, indeed, when alive, if my daily store were scant, yet it would be all-sufficient, but my tomb I should wish to be an object of respect, for this gratitude has long to run. (*Hec.* 311-21)

Considering the theme of family vs. society, this moment should not be overlooked for the way it demonstrates the power of social obligation, which exceeds even the debt of his life that Odysseus owes Hecuba. Corey and Eubanks discuss these two moral outlooks, saying, "The first outlook, articulated by Hecuba during her debate with Odysseus, locates moral responsibility in relationships among private individuals; the second, articulated by Odysseus, locates it in the polis and its needs" (225). They continue by identifying this as the primary source of tragedy in the *Hecuba*, "Referring to these moral perspectives later in the play as 'private' and 'public' (see, e.g., 858-860, 902-904), Euripides shows, in no uncertain terms, that tragedy ensues when the demands of one or the other go unnoticed" (225). This imbalance of the two instincts for family and society will be important in the final section of my characterization of Euripides, for the way he seems to be exploring the importance of his own devotions to society and family.

Later in the play, Hecuba's servants discover the body of Polydorus at the mouth of a river, and, upon the body's delivery, Hecuba flies into rage against Polymestor. By chance,

Agamemnon arrives to ask about Polyxena's burial, and Hecuba requests Agamemnon's blessing in avenging her son. Agamemnon's response is interesting, in that he reveals ambivalence over his motivations:

Hecuba, I feel compassion for you and your son and your ill-fortune, as well as for your suppliant gesture, and I would gladly see that impious host pay you this forfeit for the sake of heaven and justice, if I could only find some way to help you without appearing to the army to have plotted the death of the Thracian king for Cassandra's sake. For on one point I am assailed by perplexity: the army count this man their friend, the dead their foe; that he is dear to you is a matter apart, in which the army has no share. Reflect on this; for though you find me ready to share your toil and quick to lend my aid, yet the risk of being reproached by the Achaeans makes me hesitate. (*Hec.* 850-64)

On one hand, Agamemnon recognizes Hecuba's grief and recognizes the validity of her desire for revenge. On the other, he is aware of the social implications of his aiding an enemy of war in revenge against a neutral party. In the end, however, Agamemnon seems convinced that Polymestor's death is just:

So shall it be; yet if the army were able to sail, I could not have granted you this favor; but as it is, for the god sends forth no favoring breeze, the army must wait and look for a calm voyage. Good luck to you, for this is the interest alike of citizen and state, that the wrong-doer be punished and the good man prosper. (*Hec.* 899-902)

This conclusion to the conversation is important, because it seems like Agamemnon has achieved a certain balance in considering the right of both private and public that Hecuba was unable to achieve.

The psychology of the *Bacchae* has been the topic of much discussion, and the social message of the play, which is central to my characterization of Euripides, is equally difficult to miss. Paul Woodruff, in his introduction to his translation of the *Bacchae*, describes the play as "about a kind of power that human beings must simply accept, that can lead them

unwilling to sacrifice and initiation—or to terror and destruction.”⁴⁶ The undulation between rational and irrational, public and private, Greek and foreign drives psychological importance of the themes—as if the same undulation drives Euripides’ mind. In the play, Pentheus’ character displays an obsession with a mistaken judgment of Dionysus that even a casual reader could recognize as neurotic. But analyzing Pentheus in accordance with Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* offers a different perspective on the same issues than others address, especially considering the presence of a similar theme in many of Euripides’ other tragedies.

In the *Bacchae* the family side of the tension described in *Civilization and its Discontents* is not clearly embodied by one character. In this play, the tension is displaced onto different parties that Euripides used to explore his own tensions. On one hand, Dionysus is a member of the royal family of Thebes, and represents the part that was wronged by the social devotion of his cousin Pentheus. The injustice done to Dionysus was committed before the plot begins, so the plot of the play begins as Dionysus puts his plan to exact revenge on Thebes in motion. On the other hand, Agave, aunt of Dionysus and mother of King Pentheus, serves as the conduit of Dionysus’ punishment of Pentheus. Pentheus comes to represent society as the antagonist of Dionysus’ and Agave’s family interests. This double-sided representation of Freud’s theory makes the *Bacchae* a unique example in terms of my analysis for its implications on a potential understanding of Euripides.

Dionysus has the first words in the play, through which he fills in the audience of the events of his birth and the reason why he is in Thebes. Dionysus is the son of Zeus and

⁴⁶ Woodruff 1998:ix

Semele, whose father Cadmus originally founded Thebes, and who was destroyed by a thunderbolt on account of Hera's jealousy (*Bac.* 1-10). Dionysus has returned from journeys around the world wherein he conducted "initiations there and set those places dancing, so that mortals would see me clearly as divine" (*Bac.* 20-23).⁴⁷ Then, Dionysus tells how the people of Thebes have dishonored his mother and insulted him, by saying that she was merely seduced by some man and then claimed Zeus as the father to escape public scrutiny (*Bac.* 28-32). A few lines later, Dionysus explicitly states his purpose in the Thebes, which serves as the defense of both his mother and his own divinity, "This city must fully learn its lesson, like it or not, since it is not initiated in my religion. Besides, I must defend my mother, Semele, and make people see I am a god, born by her to Zeus" (*Bac.* 39-42). From these lines, it is apparent that Dionysus is in Thebes to cement his own godhood among the Thebans, but it is important to remember that, in doing so, he is also motivated to defend his mother's honor.

Pentheus fulfills the social role in a way that few other characters do in Euripides' plays. His hubris towards Dionysus and his neurotic obsession with the mysterious goings-on of Agave and the other Maenads are two of the topics that have dominated the scholarly debate on the play. In the case of my analysis, both his hubris towards the gods and his obsession with his mother and the other women's goings-on contribute to Pentheus' significance as a character in the play. His obsession with punishing everyone involved with the mysterious visitor demonstrates how he values the exercise of his authority over family and citizen alike; the way he denigrates the women and seems to associate the Stranger and the practices of the Bacchic revelry with femininity demonstrates the

⁴⁷ Translations for the *Bacchae* are by Paul Woodruff.

difference that Freud posited regarding the faculty of instinctual control between men and women: Pentheus' hubris is in the pride he takes in his abstinence from the worship of Dionysus.

Euripides also explores the limits of civic power in the *Bacchae*, using Pentheus' hubris as a standard for judgment. Throughout the play, Euripides emphasizes Pentheus' exercise of his power as king, instances of which are most obvious when Pentheus is proclaiming the guilt of the Maenads, Tiresias, and the Stranger. From the beginning, Pentheus is determined to punish the Maenads; in his first speech, he says, "Those I've captured are chained by the hand, and they are under guard in public jail. As for the ones who got away, I'll hunt them down out of the mountains—even my aunt and my mother Agave, and Actaeon's mother as well" (*Bac.* 226-30). In that same speech, he proclaims that he will slay the Stranger that is spreading the madness of the Maenads, promising to cut his head off (*Bac.* 239-41). Later on in the play, Pentheus throws the Stranger in jail, and even the venerable (and male) seer Tiresias is not safe from Pentheus' dramatic retribution; Pentheus orders his guards to destroy the sacred place where Tiresias makes his prophecies (*Bac.* 345-57). That Tiresias is male is important in my interpretation of the play. The implication of Pentheus' actions against Tiresias is that anybody, male or female, that associates themselves with the cult of Dionysus sides against his society. In my interpretation, this sides Tiresias firmly with the women of the play.

Pentheus' demise ends the cycle of Dionysus' retribution, and returns us to a theme that was featured in the *Medea*: mother kills child, Agave kills Pentheus. Both women's actions are irrational; Medea is blinded by jealousy and heartbreak, Agave is under

Dionysus' control. Yet it is important to note that Dionysus is the mastermind behind Pentheus' death, because a different correlation arises between Medea and Dionysus, one that can also be found in *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*. In each play, there is a main character that is a stranger to the Greek world that reacts negatively to the society that has wronged them. In the *Bacchae*, this character is Dionysus disguised as the Stranger; in *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*, this person is Hecuba; in the *Medea*, the foreigner Medea cannot stomach the way the Theban society operates.

The similarities between these four plays and Freud's instinctual theory demonstrate that Freud's discontent is perfectly exhibited in the characters of the play. The analysis of instinctual tension now forms the backdrop for the final level of examining Euripides: the way balance seems to be lost and restored in each play. The struggle between the balance of priorities of revenge, family, and society gets resolved by the action of the plot of each play. In the *Medea*, the conflict between Jason and Medea conjures such emotional power in Medea that she even talks herself into killing her own children. The feeling of the language in the scenes when Medea is debating her decision to kill her children is that she sacrifices her devotion to her family, and that her hatred of Jason overpowers her priorities to protect her loved ones. Moreover, the very presence of Medea and Jason in Thebes seems to set the society off-center, a conflict that is only resolved by Medea exercising her instinctual drive then fleeing the city.

As noted before, a sense of imbalance occurs in the *agon* scene of the *Trojan Women*, when Hecuba ends her otherwise logical debate with an irrational rant, but the entire play

appears to resolve some deeper tension.⁴⁸ Hecuba, whose grief resembled the wounded pride of a queen in the beginning of the play, resigns herself to her fate in the end, once Astyanax' death is announced. Astyanax, the embodiment of familial pride unfit for the queen-turned-slave Hecuba, needed to die in order for Hecuba to move forward on the path of her new life. Again, however, Hecuba as a strictly passive character presents a wrinkle for the importance of this play for Euripides. Should she have been more angry and reacted against her new Greek masters, the play would have a completely different significance. In terms of balance between priorities of family and society or revenge and loss, the *Trojan Women* presents a different means to the same dismal end.

The *Hecuba* features imbalance on numerous levels, and the onset of the imbalance occurs before the beginning of the plot, with Polyneices' death and the discontent of Achilles' ghost. Polyneices' death at Polymestor's hands was bad enough, but the real damage came when Polymestor had the boy's body thrown in the ocean. These two imbalances put the plot to motion, and they continue to be manifested as the play progresses. Achilles' ghost demands the life of Hecuba's daughter Polyxena, which causes Hecuba to try to persuade Odysseus to spare her daughter; despite owing Hecuba his own life, Odysseus cannot help, which furthers Hecuba's tension and the imbalance caused by Achilles' ghost. Although Polyxena is ultimately unable to escape her fate, Hecuba is able to find closure from the situation by insisting that burying her daughter fall on her hands alone. Polymestor's death is the last act of the play and Hecuba's murder resolves the last of the imbalance of Polymestor's initial betrayal. Agamemnon absolves Hecuba of her

⁴⁸ Here, recall the idea Anselment expressed [see pp. 11-12] regarding the relative lack of a plot to the *Trojan Women*, instead calling it a parade of desolate women.

murder, and the play seems to end at a bittersweet note between satisfaction of revenge and mourning of a lost child.

Like the *Hecuba*, imbalance occurs at many levels in the *Bacchae*. In his opening monologue, Dionysus reveals that he is coming to Thebes in the disguise of a Stranger to avenge the disrespect that the people have shown to his mother and his divinity. In other words, Dionysus is in Thebes to correct the religious imbalance of the people of Thebes. This imbalance plays out in two ways as the plot progresses. First, young King Pentheus demonstrates hubris against Dionysus by refusing to recognize his divinity. Pentheus is obsessed with restoring his city to the way it was before the arrival of the Stranger, so much so that he seems to go overboard in his efforts to subdue the Dionysian cult. Second, Dionysus pushes Agave and the other women of the city to becoming maenads, the symbol of bacchic revelry gone too far. Balance seems restored again in the end, when Dionysus tricks Pentheus into being ambushed by his mother and the maenads: Pentheus sacrifices his neurotic devotion to ousting Dionysus and his cult, and dies for his hubris. The people of Thebes are left to experience the divine power of Dionysus first hand.

Euripides: *Dramatis Persona*

In all of the plays I have discussed, the issue at hand is an imbalance of priorities for private and public, family and society that is manifested in social strife and pain of loss. It seems that Freud's theory that blames life in society for the discontent of the human experience, whether in family life or for that of foreigners in a new land, is validated by the plays, which gives credence to Freud's idea of a constant struggle between Eros and

Thanatos, as discussed above. That tragedy, suffering, and loss occur when these two are imbalanced is not surprising.

Suffering and loss are pervasive in many forms in the human experience, many of which Euripides explores in his plays. But the types which are most common in these plays are those incurred by attempting vengeful action against society's harming family values. Through these depictions, Euripides' subconscious emerges to demonstrate a deeper emotional life characterized by conflict, doubt, loss, grief, joy, and oppression. Each play carries its own wealth of themes and possible interpretations, but put together their message changes. We know that Euripides left Athens at the end of his life, which must have been the result of some discontent with his life in Greek society. The way suffering and discontent was depicted in the *Medea*, *Bacchae*, *Hecuba*, and *Trojan Women* suggest that Euripides was weighing his options: should I react violently? Should I just accept the status quo, powerless against the greater social order?

Euripides chose to leave Athens, chose to live life outside of society, which Freud already described as an ultimately unhappy existence. There is no way of knowing what he left behind in Athens, but this small window into his psyche shows that it could not have been better than life in the north.

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