

Comment on Olwendo

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Mr. Olwendo takes an interesting, albeit, parabolic approach to reaching an insightful hypothesis regarding the nature of tragedy and its manifestations in both religious and secular literature in his paper, "Untying the Tragic Knot: An Epistemological Problem." His claim that the experience of tragedy, that is, tragedy with a capital "T," is inelucably linked to the experience of a paradox is both, I believe, accurate and helpful to scholars interested in critical approaches to tragedy. He intertwines the foundations of traditional approaches to tragedy dating from Aristotle's *Poetics* and Plato's discussion of the usefulness of Tragedy in *The Republic* with Kant's notion of the "sublime." This is not only a new approach to Tragedy, but one which breaks from the stifling mould of formalism that has long shaped the tragic debate.

I call his approach parabolic because although I see the end at which he arrives as sound and quite important to a discussion of tragedy—that is, the inherent paradox of all tragedy—the steps which Mr. Olwendo takes in elucidating the paradox of tragedy are often slippery and shaky, sometimes even unfirm. He touches on and then moves on to several arguments without spending ample time deconstructing them, which gives the impression that the grounds of his argument are not as solid as they should be. Specifically, his dichotomy of "secular" and "religious" is a Manichaeism in literature which might be rethought. Even the Greek tragedies can be characterized of as "religious," and is only a relatively recent phenomenon (geologically speaking) that they have come to be

considered "secular" at all. The plays of the Dionysian festivals were religious in the "real" sense of the word. Remember, Agamenmon is a member of the cursed house of Atreus, whose history extends back to Tantalus, who fed his son Pelops to an unwitting Zeus; likewise, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Christ is from the line of David, which extends back to Moses. Within such a context, "Agamenmon" might be read as the illumination of the "will" of the God Zeus (as opposed to a Judeo-Christian God) being imposed on an unwilling subject—Agamenmon himself; Agamenmon's "fate" then be read as just dessert according to Zeus, just as Job's fate is at the whim of an equally powerful being, namely, the Judeo-Christian God. We may have forgotten the religion of the Greeks, but this is not to say that their plays cannot be read as representative of any theological understanding of the world. Moreover, one might argue that though perhaps the book of *Job* itself highlights a paradox, the book of *Job* is inextricably linked to the larger discussion of the Judeo-Christian God, namely, the Bible itself, which, ultimately, "unties" the paradox by providing a just reason for Job's suffering. Just as "Agamenmon" relies on *The Illiad* for its background and *The Eumenides* to finally lay the story to rest, so does *Job* rely on the rest of the Bible as its context. It is not safe to reason that since *Job* maintains a paradox in itself, so does the Judeo-Christian tradition. Taken alone, *Job* is no more religious than *The Satanic Verses*. Indeed, deprived of its context, *Job* achieves secular status, if we want to speak of this as achievement. Moreover, how different is the

“Fate” of Agamenmon from the “God” of Job? It seems possible to claim that both stories are equally secular and equally religious, and yet, the question is still valid as to how we understand both *Job* and “Agamenmon” as tragic. Mr Olwendo remains correct in dismissing the rationalizations and formalisms we use to explain tragedy as inadequate constructs. Blindness, sin, pride or overly incestual lust cannot be responsible for anything without a moral system into we which to place such “sins,” either a system which relies on “Fate” or one which has “God” as its ultimate adjudicator. A moral system itself is not primary; it is an invention, despite how frequently it has achieves the status of a convention. Any moral system is itself a rationalization of some kind. But a rationalization of what?

It might be a more grounded approach to ask “why is Tragedy relevant at all?” than to ask, as Mr. Olwendo does, “why does Tragedy please?” Mr. Olwendo answers his question by outlining the “tragic sense of life,” which he formalizes as things which are portrayed to an audience via the inherent paradox of a tragedy’s hero, issue or effect. Though I do not agree with these categories, I do believe Mr. Olwendo has hit the nail on its proverbial head when he speaks of a “tragic sense of life.” I see this tragic sense of life as being more primordial, however. I said earlier that Mr. Olwendo asked why Tragedy pleases, and I think that this is the answer: tragedy pleases because it obviates the fundamental human condition. The human condition is itself a paradox. Any accurate expression of it will betray this paradox within the very structure of the expression. Perhaps didactic stories like the “Everyman” plays gave way to the more morally ambiguous plays of the Renaissance for precisely this reason: they just weren’t believable. In tragedy we are brought face to face with the brutal fact that we live in a world we cannot

control and in which we are inexorably destined to die. All of our attempts at success, understanding, fame, health, love, honor, truth, justice and the “Agamenmican way” are, essentially, futile. To reread the passage from Job 1:1 which Mr. Olwendo uses in his exposition of Tragedy, I would like to focus on the first two lines: “Behold, He will slay me; I wait for Him./But I will argue my ways before Him.” If we take the lines at face value, we can hear Job resolving himself to his inevitable death, and yet he will “argue” his ways before God. Despite the fact that death is the only sure end for Job, he does not give up, and strives in the face of an obviously inevitable defeat. In literature, we find relevance, sometimes even pleasure, because, as Mr. Olwendo has perceptively observed, we can see ourselves reflected in tragedy, or, at least, our existential ontology is reflected in it. There is an essential ambiguity revealed in literature. The message of its impart is neither right nor wrong; its effect is both “pleasing and painful,” as Mr. Olwendo observes. We are, indeed, stuck in a tragic knot.

Does literature make us “admire” its characters? I would say...sometimes. Yet what literature does always do is reveal a fundamental empathy, perhaps not the pity of Plato, nor the cathartic pity of Aristotle, both of which Mr. Olwendo claims are problematic, but rather, a more basic empathy, one which is more akin to pure identification than to any emotional manifestation. The basis of any admiration is, too, empathy; we cannot admire someone we would not like to think ourselves as being in the face of some kind of extreme adversity. We admire heroes precisely because we would like to think we would do the heroic thing in the same situation. If the hero is great because he continues to struggle though already defeated and this is in itself admirable, then, in admiration of the character, we are simply admiring the very conditions in which we find

ourselves already. We are admiring our own admirability via the admirability of the character, who is us, or, at the very least, a possible version of us. This is empathy, which resolves Plato, Aristotle and Kant by providing a mutual ground for a dialogue between them: perhaps we pity sometimes; purge at other times; and maybe sometimes we are repulsed and attracted to the complexity of the character we see before us who fights an impossibly winnable fight. Life itself is incomprehensible, and the job of philosophy, thus far, is as undone as the tragic knot.

Mr. Olwendo has led us to a fruitful ground for further exploration of Tragedy. We might now see that the incomprehensibility of life, that is, life as a paradox, is reflected in the paradox of tragedy. We live only to die. We are subject to laws we cannot know as Job and Agamenmon are pawns in a game they cannot see nor understand. And yet they continue to fight. This is an admirable condition in itself, and we can empathize with such characters because we know their condition to be, finally, our own.

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