

Tragic Piety in Plato's *Euthyphro*

Rory B. Egan

Students of Plato generally recognize that the line of demarcation set by modern scholarly custom between philosophical and literary studies should not be too assiduously honoured, since an appreciation of that literary-dramatic device which Plato developed as a vehicle for philosophical argumentation is essential to a proper understanding of his thought and method. This present essay, assuming a close connection between the Platonic medium and the Platonic message, examines one of the earlier dialogues with the intention of contributing to the evolving understanding of the history and development of that peculiarly Platonic form, the philosophical dialogue, while also revealing another dimension to the arguments presented in one particular dialogue.

Anecdotal biographical tradition informs us that the young Plato had written tragedies only to burn them after coming under the enlightening influence of Socrates.¹ Whether or not that is strictly factual, Plato's surviving works do lend a measure of plausibility to the anecdote, for despite (and no doubt because of) his avowed misgivings about the influence of poets and poetry in society, Plato continued to labour under their influence himself throughout his writing career.² His dialogues, which might even derive their very form from drama, abound with indications of his debt to tragedy and comedy in the form of quotations, explicit references, and patent allusions, not to mention such less palpable ingredients as dramatic irony.³ There are also certain indications in the dialogues

1. See e.g., Diog. Laert. 3.5. For other sources and for a discussion of the tradition see A.S. Riginos, *Platonica, the Anecdotes Concerning the Life and Writings of Plato* (Leiden 1976) 43-48.

2. For a recent essay indicating the strength of that influence see C.P. Segal, "'The Myth Was Saved': Reflections on Homer and the Mythology of Plato's Republic," *Hermes* 106 (1978) 315-336.

3. See e.g., L. Dyer, "Plato as a Playwright," *HSCP* 12 (1901) 165-180; W.C. Greene, "The Spirit of Comedy in Plato," *HSCP* 31 (1920) 63-123; H. Kuhn, "The True Tragedy: On the Relation Between Greek Tragedy and Plato," *HSCP* 52 (1941) 1-40; 53 (1942) 37-88; E. Hoffmann, "Die literarischen Voraussetzungen des Platonverständnisses," *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung* 2 (1957), 465-480; D. Tarrant, "Plato As Dramatist," *JHS* (1955) 82-89; H. Thesleff, *Studies in the Styles of Plato* (Helsinki 1967) 34 & 41f.; D. Clay, "The Tragic and Comic Poet of the Symposium," *Arion* 2 (1975) 238-261; A. Cameron, *Plato's Affair with Tragedy* (Cincinnati 1978). The mime has also been said to have contributed

that Plato intended his new genre, the philosophical drama, to be a competitive and superior alternative to the traditional Athenian drama as an educational medium.⁴ The following paragraphs attempt to bring out additional evidence of this sort by demonstrating that the *Euthyphro* has thematic features, even a plot structure, which show affinities between the Platonic dialogue and Attic drama. I shall also argue that in this particular dialogue Plato deliberately borrows and adapts a common and familiar theme from tragedy in order to dramatize the dangers and shortcomings of poetry as opposed to philosophical inquiry, thereby anticipating the explicit expression of his views on poetry in later dialogues, notably in the 10th book of the *Republic*. Some of the anti-poetic intimations contained in the *Euthyphro* are almost patent and have long been recognized by interpreters of the dialogue,⁵ but those of primary concern here are more allusive and only become apparent when the reader approaches the dialogue with some specific features of Attic tragedy in mind.

The *Euthyphro* opens when Socrates and his sole interlocutor Euthyphro meet at the stoa of the Archon Basileus to which each has come on legal business. Their respective legal problems, while otherwise quite different from one another, both happen to involve questions relating to piety and impiety.⁶ Socrates is being

to the form of Plato's dialogues. On this question see Thesleff, 41ff.; M.W. Haslam, "Plato, Sophron, and the Dramatic Dialogue," *BICS* 19 (1972) 17-37.

4. Cf. P. Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*, trans. H. Mayerhoff (New York, 1958) 120-124; Clay (above, note 3) 252.

5. So. e.g., P. Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago, 1953) 75.

6. Throughout this essay I follow the conventional, if somewhat arbitrary, practice of using the term "piety" to represent what Plato calls δσιότης or τὸ δσιον or εὐσέβεια. It is generally recognized that, in the *Euthyphro* at least, these terms are synonymous, as in 5d and 12e. Cf. J. C. Bolkestein, *Hosios en Eusebes: Bijdrage tot de Godsdienstige en zedelijke terminologie van de Grieken* (Amsterdam 1936) 210; J. Backman, *The Religious Dimensions of Socrates' Thought* (Waterloo, Ont. 1979) 45; D. Kaufmann-Bühler, "Eusebeia," in *Reallexikon für Antik und Christentum* 6 (Stuttgart 1966) 1013f. K.J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford 1974) 248; A.W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford 1960) 132-138. "Impiety" will herein correspond to Greek ἀνοσιότης, τὸ ἀνόσιον, ἀσέβεια, or δυσσέβεια. When I translate or cite Latin documents "piety" will represent *pietas* which is itself regularly used to translate εὐσέβεια into Latin. On this point see Kaufmann-Bühler 1001f.; *TLL* s.vv. *impietas* & *impius*; A.S. Pease, ed., *M. Tulli Ciceronis de natura deorum* (Cambridge, Mass. 1955) 126 & 510f.; A.S. Pease, ed., *Aeneidos Liber IV* (Cambridge, Mass. 1935) 333ff. "Impiety" will correspond to Latin *impietas* and *scelus*. On the synonymy of these two terms see J.A. Hanson, "Plautus as a Source Book for Roman Religion," *TAPA* 90 (1959) 91; E. Segal, *Roman Laughter* (Cambridge, Mass. 1968) 137.

impeached for impiety by one Meletus who, though we are not told as much in the *Euthyphro*, was acting on behalf of the poets in bringing this action against Socrates (*Apol.* 23e) and seems to have been a poet himself. Although Plato represents the meeting of Socrates and Euthyphro as a chance encounter, the mention of Meletus' allegations of Socrates' impiety was surely dictated more by the main theme of the dialogue and by Plato's penchant for the ironic than by any desire to present a factual record of external circumstances, because (if I may anticipate my own arguments somewhat) Socrates is actually engaged for most of the dialogue in showing how utterly inadequate the poets of Athens were in their comprehension and exposition of the nature of piety and impiety. While the interlocutors' common concern over matters of piety does provide an ostensible *raison d'être* for the conversation of Socrates and Euthyphro, it is the subject of Euthyphro's business that furnishes the point of departure for the entire dialogue. He has come to the stoa to take legal action against his father who, he claims, has been responsible for the accidental death of a servant and is therefore guilty of homicide. The servant in question had died after Euthyphro's father had trussed him up and left him unattended pending determination of the proper punitive action to take against him for slaying another servant. When Socrates, upon hearing all of this, questions the propriety of Euthyphro's prosecuting his own father, Euthyphro glibly explains that piety requires the prosecution of a homicide no matter who he might be — father, mother, or anyone else. Euthyphro's moral position in regard to piety, however, is less clear-cut than he appears to realize or admit, because, as Socrates observes, repeating a point that had been raised by Euthyphro's own relatives, the prosecution of one's own father might itself be considered an act of impiety. The discussion from that point on is mainly on the abstract level with only occasional references to the purported circumstances which inspired it. Much of the dialogue is in effect a debate on the nature of piety with Euthyphro's situation serving as a specific paradigm to the abstract generalities.⁷

The debate, predictably, abounds in irony, contradictions, and paradoxes. If Euthyphro, in compliance with the dictates of piety, prosecutes his father for homicide, he will be guilty of impiety towards his father. If, out of piety, he refrains from prosecuting his homicidal parent he will be considered impious by the gods.

7. On this sort of thing as a Platonic device cf. R.A. Oksenberg, "A Speculative Note on Some Dramatic Elements in the *Theaetetus*," *Phronesis* 17 (1972) 227.

Eventually Socrates leads Euthyphro to admit, contrary to an earlier assertion by Euthyphro himself (7a), that piety is not a constant and invariable quality since the same action can be approved of by some of the gods and disapproved by others; that is to say that the same act can be both pious and impious, and in fact two alternative, and mutually exclusive, courses of action can each be both pious and impious (8a). The dialogue never really finds any way out of this paradox. The closest the discussants come to a solution is the agreement that what *all* of the gods love is pious and what they *all* hate is impious while anything else is neither pious nor impious, or else it is both pious and impious (9d). But this of course does not prove satisfactory either, and the debate continues with further attempts to make a rational determination of just what piety is.

Many commentators and interpreters of the *Euthyphro* have been at some pains to argue for the historicity of the specific events which brought Euthyphro and Socrates together on the occasion of the dialogue. There is, in fact, a widespread and tenacious opinion which holds that the story of Euthyphro and his father cannot be fictional because it is too good a story, or because the circumstances described are too strange or bizarre not to be true.⁸ This curious doctrine, by which bizarrerie becomes a criterion of historical veracity, could just as well be used to establish the historicity of, say, the *Oresteia*. But whatever the proportion of fact to fiction might be in Plato's account of the affairs of Euthyphro and Socrates, the significant point here is that the moral issue which motivated the dialogue already had a venerable history in Greek drama by the time Socrates and Euthyphro came to grapple with it. It was an issue, moreover, which in several variants still had a long future as a source of dramatic tension in many works which would be written in subsequent centuries. In virtually every literary contest in which it occurs it involves the question of an offense against a blood relative, just as it does in *Euthyphro*. It is usually found enmeshed in a complicated mythological plot or a tangled dramatic intrigue which would make Euthyphro's situation seem almost simple by comparison. Still, underneath all its various dramaturgical trappings, it is the same basic issue of the internal antinomy of pious-impious actions or of the head-on encounter of piety with piety. The major difference is that in the

8. See e.g., A.E. Taylor, *Plato, the Man and His Work* (London 1926) 146; R.E. Allen, *Plato's "Euthyphro" and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (New York 1970) 20. For another view on the "historicity" of Euthyphro see St. G. Stock, ed., *The "Euthyphro" of Plato* (Oxford, 1909) v.

Euthyphro the issue has been demythologized or, to be more accurate, it has been remythologized.⁹ For Plato uses what might be called the story of the house of Euthyphro in the place of the traditional mythology of Attic tragedy. The attempt to justify this suggestion and to elaborate upon it necessitates the following rather lengthy excursive survey of some of the contexts where the issue is presented either in tragedy itself or in other poems in which the influence of Attic tragedy can be traced. Only through such an excursus can we view the full frequency and importance in Tragedy of those ingredients which are also found in the *Euthyphro*.

The contradictions and tension inherent in the problem of piety entertained by Euthyphro and Socrates are also embodied, for example, in the actions and speech of the Sophoclean heroine Antigone. She, in her piety, has buried her brother Polyneices, thereby impiously disobeying the orders of Creon. She describes the paradox herself with striking concision: τὴν δυσσέβειαν εὐσεβοῦς' ἔκτησάμην (*Ant.* 924). Euripides' *Hippolytus* furnishes another example. In that play the terms of the tentative conclusion reached in the dialogue by Socrates and Euthyphro — that what some of the gods consider pious others consider impious — had been painfully impressed upon Hippolytus. At the beginning of the *Hippolytus* Aphrodite asserts that she expects to be accorded pious attention (σέβας, 5) and that she will punish those who fail to tender it. Hippolytus' companions, the chorus of huntsmen devoted to Artemis, later explicitly include themselves among those who do not honour (οὐ σεβίζομεν, 540) Aphrodite. Hippolytus himself eventually suffers the terrible consequences of the goddess' resentment. It is not, however, merely a matter of his being impious towards Aphrodite. The reason for his fatal lack of piety towards her is, ironically and tragically, that he is assiduously pious towards Artemis (83, 996, 1339, 1368, 1419, 1454). Thus, his case has demonstrated in dramatic form one of the interim deductions reached by Socrates and Euthyphro in speculative discussion: the course of piety can also be the course of impiety.

A similar issue, rife with paradox and irony, runs as a thematic undercurrent through the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus almost from beginning to end. In that trilogy the contradictions of piety are first apparent in the parodos of the *Agamemnon* where the army's demand for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia is said to be righteous (θέμις,

9. On Plato's mythic use of historical persons cf. J.F. Callahan, "Dialectic, Myth, and History in the Philosophy of Plato," in H.F. North, ed., *Interpretations of Plato: a Swarthmore Symposium* (Leiden 1977) 72ff.

216), while only a couple of verses later the change of purpose which Agamemnon undergoes just prior to performing the sacrifice is impious (δυσσεβῆ, 219). The point, of course, is that it is righteous for Agamemnon as commander-in-chief to advance the interests of his expedition, while it is impious for a father to slay his own daughter. Agamemnon is ultimately murdered himself in retaliation for the killing of Iphigenia. Since the death of his daughter was impious it might logically be expected that the retributive slaying of Agamemnon was a pious act. Yet it too is called impious (Ag. 1493, 1516) by the chorus who have earlier asserted that one impious deed begets another like it (758-760). The impious nature of Agamemnon's murder is underscored again in the *Choephoroe* when Electra prays that she will be more pious of hand than her mother has been (141). At this point Electra is contemplating revenge for Agamemnon and has in fact just uttered a prayer for an avenger. She has asked (122) whether what she is praying for is pious and the chorus has assured her that it is. But later, when this assertedly pious vengeance has actually been wrought against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by Orestes, that hero, instead of being recognized for his piety, is actually accused of impiety for his treatment of his mother (*Eum.* 271, 534). So Orestes is guilty of impiety in the eyes of some of the gods, namely the Erinyes, yet he is defended and advised by Apollo, who is acting on behalf of Zeus, and he is acquitted by a jury which Athena has established and on which she herself actually casts the deciding vote. It is Athena, moreover, who in the same play emphasizes the importance of piety in connection with the court of the Areopagus (690, 697) and the future of the Athenian people (897, 910). So Orestes' actions afford another dramatic example of the type about which Socrates and Euthyphro speak, actions which are pleasing to some gods but hateful to others; actions which, according to their interim agreement at least, are simultaneously pious and impious.

The paradoxes and ambiguities of piety are also very much in evidence in the three other Greek plays which deal with the Orestes theme. Early in Sophocles' *Electra* the heroine declares that if there is no retribution for the slain there is no piety (250). In the context this can only mean that piety requires retributive slaying of her own mother. The concept of piety is actually invoked several other times in the course of this play and set in contrast to the actions or intentions of Clytemnestra. On one occasion the chorus assure Chrysothemis of the piety (464) of Electra's advice to disobey Clytemnestra by neglecting to place offerings on the tomb of Agamemnon. Later on Electra criticizes her mother for the way

she is treating her pious children (589) who are members of a pious family (590), and still later Electra assures Chrysothemis that she will have a reputation for piety (968) if she abets the scheme to avenge her father by murdering her mother. Earlier in the play, as she desperately awaited the delayed arrival of Orestes, the one person who might be able to free her from the intolerable household circumstances in which Aegisthus and Clytemnestra were keeping her, Electra had complained that she was unable to conduct herself with decorum or with piety: οὐτε σωφρονεῖν . . . οὐτ' εὐσεβεῖν πάρεστιν (308 f.). Her meaning here is ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so, but it is in any case certain that she is complaining about her relationship with her mother. Since she is awaiting the arrival of an avenger, she probably means that she cannot perform the actions which piety demands in regard to her mother: that is she cannot exact vengeance from her. On the other hand she might also mean that under the circumstances she cannot observe the usual daughterly proprieties and piety toward Clytemnestra. In the next verse at any rate she notes that necessity makes evil deeds fitting for those in evil circumstances. So if we combine this reference to piety with the earlier one that speaks of the piety of retributive justice (250) we find a series of striking contradictions: piety is necessary, necessity makes *evil* deeds fitting, yet piety is impossible. That is, piety towards Agamemnon is necessary, but piety towards Clytemnestra is *ipso facto* impossible. The same course of action, again, is both pious and impious.

Similar antinomies occur in Euripides' *Electra* where Orestes is advised that he will be considered impious (976) if he neglects to avenge his father by killing his mother. But that too must be an intrinsically impious act, and after Orestes has actually committed matricide he asks if any pious person will so much as look upon him (1195). He is not, then, recognized as pious for having performed the deed, even though he would have been regarded as impious had he failed to perform it. Still there is evidently a positive moral aspect to the matricide too, for Castor eventually tells Orestes that he will receive a judgment from the most pious of tribunals (1262).

In Euripides' *Orestes*, Tyndareus claims that if Orestes had chosen to send his mother into exile instead of killing her he would have been pious (503). Because he did not make that choice Tyndareus calls him impious (627), and contrasts him with the pious people (628) who were demanding that he be stoned to death. But these individuals whom Tyndareus considers so pious are contradicted by Diomedes who is reported as arguing that piety

(900) requires sending Orestes into exile. So there is not only a conflict of opinion as to what the pious course of action would be in dealing with the impious matricide Orestes, there is also an apparent difference of opinion as to whether indeed he really was so impious in murdering Clytemnestra, for although he had been declared impious by some (627, 853), the vote which would acquit him is, in the opinion expressed by Apollo, a most pious one (1651). This same contradiction had been more directly and strikingly brought out by Orestes himself when he noted that he was impious for killing his mother but pious for avenging his father: ἐγὼ δ' ἀνόσιός ἐμι μητέρα κτανὼν, ὅσιος δὲ . . . τιμωρῶν πατρί (546f.).

From the preceding series of examples it is evident that the sort of contradiction centering around questions of piety and impiety is well represented in the small proportion of Greek tragedy that has survived, but there is also some indirect evidence that the lost plays would have provided more examples in comparable abundance. For the same contradictions show up later on in passages of Latin poetry which, inasmuch as they deal with mythical characters and events that are known to have been treated by the Attic playwrights and their Roman translators or adapters, are almost certain to have had models and sources in Greek tragedy. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a particularly fruitful source of examples. In reference to Agamemnon, for instance, Ovid remarks that his public duty overcame his piety, just as his function as king superseded his role as father, when he slew Iphigeneia (12.29-30). This of course is reminiscent of the passage in the parodos of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* where the same action is righteous from one point of view but impious from another. Among the many other examples to be gleaned from the *Metamorphoses* is the one involving Agenor, the father of Cadmus. Agenor is simultaneously pious and impious (3.5): that is he is *pius* towards his daughter Europa as he sends Cadmus out to search for her, but *sceleratus* towards Cadmus when he forbids him to return without Europa.

The Procne and Tereus story is one which had been treated in several tragedies¹⁰ before Ovid used it in the 6th book of the

10. Sophocles, Philocles, Livius Andronicus and Accius wrote tragedies using the myth of Tereus. At *Tristia* 2.389 Ovid indicates that he knew some of those plays. On the question of his tragic sources for this part of the *Met.* see G. Lafaye, *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide et leurs modèles grecs* (Paris, 1904) 143; A. Ortega, "Die Tragödie der Pandionstöchter in Ovids *Metamorphosen*," *Forschungen zur römischen Literatur: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Karl Büchner*, ed. W. Wimmel (Wiesbaden 1970) 218.

Metamorphoses where he shows Procne torn by the demands of piety toward her sister Philomela who has been violated by Tereus, piety toward Tereus who is her husband, and piety towards Itys who is her son but also the son of Tereus. Piety towards her sister calls for vengeance against her husband and that vengeance is to be realized through the murder of her own son. So no matter what she does, or what she fails to do, she will be practicing piety while guilty of impiety. She herself observed that piety toward Tereus would itself be an impiety: *scelus est pietas in coniuge Tereo* (6.635).

Another such contradiction concerns Althaea in Book 8 as she faces the prospect of murdering her own son Meleager in order to avenge her brothers whom Meleager has slain. Ovid expresses the ambivalence inherent in her actions with the phrase *impietate pia est* (8.475), words as succinct and as striking as those which Sophocles put into the mouth of *Antigone* (*Ant.* 924) or Euripides into the mouth of Orestes (*Or.* 546-547), to express the countervailing pious and impious qualities of a single action. The story of Meleager had itself been treated by such tragedians as Sophocles, Euripides, and Accius.¹¹

The Alcmaeon episode in Book 9 presents another example. Alcmaeon resolves to exact vengeance from his mother who has had a hand in the death of his father. By avenging one parent against the other he is simultaneously pious and impious, *pius et sceleratus* (9.41). The circumstances of Alcmaeon's crisis of piety are of course very similar to those in which we have seen Orestes in several Greek plays, and we know of several Greek tragedies which dealt with the Alcmaeon story itself.¹²

It would be possible, if perhaps tedious, to add to the catalogue of Ovidian examples.¹³ The possibility that Ovid found these instances of piety and impiety in Greek tragedies (or Roman versions thereof) which dealt with the same mythological events is not only supported by the fact that the theme was common in Tragedy, but also by the fact that plays dealing with those events are definitely known to have existed. The possibility is also enhanced by consideration of a passage from Cicero's *pro Roscio Amerino*.

11. See Lafaye (above, note 10) 150-152, on Euripides and Accius as possible models for Ovid.

12. There is an *Alcmaeon* attested for Sophocles, Euripides, and several other tragedians.

13. Cf. the daughters of Pelias in Book 7 (especially vv. 336-340) previously treated in Sophocles' *Rhizotomoi* and Euripides' *Peliades*; also the story of Myrrha in Book 10 (especially vv. 314-324; 366-367).

Videtisne, quos nobis poetae tradiderunt patris ulciscendi causa supplicium de matre sumpsisse, cum praesertim deorum immortalium iussis atque oraculi id fecisse dicantur tamen ut eos agitent Furiae neque consistere umquam patiantur, quod ne pii quidem sine scelere esse potuerunt. (*S. Rosc.* 66)

Here too we find pious individuals being guilty of impiety, and there can be little doubt that the poets to whom Cicero refers are tragedians. In fact from what he tells us about the plots it is a safe inference that he is talking about such tragic figures as Orestes and Alcmaeon,¹⁴ each of whom had to undertake the pious-impious task of exacting vengeance for homicide from his mother, and so the Ciceronian passage serves to confirm that the theme with which we are concerned was known to Romans from tragedy.

While it would still be possible to add to the list of occurrences of this tragic *topos* in classical literature, particularly by drawing from Seneca's tragedies,¹⁵ the results would be of but slight value for the purposes at hand, since a considerable amount of direct and circumstantial evidence has already been adduced to show that the paradoxes and antinomies of pious and impious conduct were a commonplace in dramatic literature before Plato introduced them into the *Euthyphro*. It is apparent, in other words, that Plato has placed Euthyphro in a dramatic situation animated by countervailing moral forces that represent a variation of a well-worn theme which, being so common in Attic tragedy, must have been thoroughly familiar to the author's compatriots in 4th century Athens.

As a matter of fact Euthyphro's situation, from both a thematic and structural standpoint, bears more than a merely general resemblance to Tragedy in its use of the piety-impiety *topos*. The following is a brief synopsis of the Euthyphro scenario.

1. One of Euthyphro's parents is alleged to be responsible for the death of another party.
2. That other party had himself committed a murder, thereby prompting the reaction that resulted in his own death.
3. The role of Euthyphro's parent in the second death is morally ambiguous and controversial. He was constrained to see that the individual was punished for the earlier murder, and he would himself follow the proper procedure, even consulting a religious authority before acting. The

14. Cf. G. Landgraf, *Kommentar zu Ciceros Rede pro Sex. Roscio Amerino*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig and Berlin, 1914) 139.

15. See *Herc. Oet.* 984ff. & 1027ff.; *Phoen.* 380ff.; *Medea* 261; 719f.

delay caused by his concern for propriety led to the man's death and to Euthyphro's prosecution of him.

4. Piety makes it incumbent upon Euthyphro to prosecute his parent.
5. He duly undertakes to follow the dictates of piety in this regard.
6. This decision, paradoxically, leaves him subject to charges of filial impiety and to the disapproval of his relatives and fellow citizens.
7. The alternative course of action, by which he would show filial piety towards his homicidal parent, would likewise effect a paradox in that he would be guilty of impiety towards others, including his parent's victim.

When the plot of the *Euthyphro* story is outlined in such general terms as these it corresponds to what we have observed in several *Orestes* plays, particularly the *Oresteia* which can be synopsized as follows, with *Orestes* cast in a set of circumstances relating to his parent and piety-impety which are analogous to those of *Euthyphro*.

1. *Orestes'* parent (*Clytemnestra*) has killed another party.
2. That other party (*Agamemnon*) had in turn committed a homicide which led to his own death.
3. The role of *Orestes'* parent (*Clytemnestra*) in the more recent slaying is morally controversial. It is itself an impious act but one performed in retribution for another impious act.
4. *Orestes* is motivated by piety to punish his parent.
5. He acts in accord with the dictates of piety in this respect.
6. He thus incurs charges of filial impiety (*Eum.* 271, 534) and risks the disapproval of men (*Cho.* 902).
7. The alternative course of action open to *Orestes* would also have made him both pious (towards his homicidal parent) and impious (towards that parent's victim). Note that this point is explicit in *Euripides'* *Orestes* (546f.) if it is only implicit in the *Oresteia*.

It might be further noted, as an eighth point of analogy, that in the discussion arising out of *Euthyphro's* case it is concluded at one point that what some of the gods consider pious others consider impious. This is precisely what we find demonstrated in the *Eumenides* where some of the gods regard *Orestes'* actions as impious and others as pious.

This entire set of correspondences can hardly have developed fortuitously because it amounts to more than just a loose accumulation of common motifs in the two different works. Those

motifs are in fact deployed in a structural arrangement that is itself common to the two works. This construct is complex enough to urge upon the observer the hypothesis that Plato consciously adopted the dramatic structure of the *Oresteia*, along with the central moral issue which animates it, when composing his own dramatization of the Euthyphro incident in his philosophical dialogue.

Of course I have here presented those elements common to the *Euthyphro* and the *Oresteia* in such a way that the basic similarities and the points of analogy stand in relief. The perspective is somewhat different when some of the more specific details are entertained and when each work is viewed in its entirety. In the one case, for instance, the victim of the homicidal parent is the other parent whereas it is an unrelated servant in the other. Then, too, the earlier homicide in the *Oresteia* involved a father murdering his daughter whereas the *Euthyphro* had one servant murdering another one. In the *Oresteia*, moreover, there is a strong natural motivation for Orestes to take action against his mother because she has killed his father. Euthyphro can have had no similar motivation to take action against his own parent in the interests of a dead servant. There is even some doubt as to whether the deed with which Euthyphro charged his father was in fact an indictable offense under the laws of the time.¹⁶ Finally, the mode of prosecution is altogether different in the two cases, being retributive murder in the one, and formal judicial proceedings in the other. In sum, the one case is replete with all the impressive apparatus of heroic mythology, whereas the other purports to involve the comparatively mundane circumstances of an Athenian family at the end of the 5th century B.C. So despite all the individual analogies noted above and the common structure which they form, is it not, in view of all the many differences, somewhat ludicrous to compare the two situations at all? No doubt it is, in one sense; and perhaps that is the really significant point, for there are many other ludicrous things about Euthyphro as those interpreters who have remarked upon the bizarre nature of his circumstances would agree.¹⁷ Not the least of the ridiculous developments pertaining to Euthyphro is that as a person who professes to have a special expertise on the subject of piety he is shown by Socrates to be utterly naive and muddleheaded on that very subject. The very notion of invoking piety as the grounds for

16. Cf. Allen (above, note 8) 20-23; but see also S. Panagiotou, "Plato's Euthyphro and the Attic Code on Homicide," *Hermes* 102 (1974) 419-437.

17. See note 8 above.

prosecuting one's own father would probably have struck Athenians as ludicrous, and Grote even likened this to the abhorrent behaviour of Pheidippides in beating his own father in Aristophanes' *Clouds*.¹⁸ Then this same Euthyphro, who is supposed to be a seer, is, as every reader of the dialogue will have known, completely wrong in his predictions about the outcome of Socrates' trial (3e). I would, therefore, suggest that Plato contrived Euthyphro's situation with the intention of establishing for his readers an implicit identification of the blustering simpleton with Tragedy. One effect of this would be to make Tragedy appear quite as ridiculous as the other party to the association.

Plato constructed the *Euthyphro* scenario, with its involvement in the paradoxes and antinomies of piety, around a nucleus which had also served in the construction of a tragedy filled with emotional and moral tension. Despite that the dialogue is not itself a tragedy, or not just a tragedy. In fact most of those interpreters who have been interested in its dramatic qualities have seen them as comic rather than tragic.¹⁹ Still, as we can observe in the *Symposium*, the blending of the comic and the tragic in a single dialogue is altogether consistent with Plato's literary genius and practice.²⁰ In the *Euthyphro* he appears to be taking a tragic theme and adapting it for comic purposes, a practice initiated by 5th century dramatists and one very much in vogue among his contemporaries, the poets of Middle Comedy.²¹ As a matter of fact the very theme of the ambivalence and paradox of piety is something which lent itself well to the comic genre too, as several surviving Roman comedies attest.²² Any comic and satiric qualities which the *Euthyphro* has are only enhanced by comparing it implicitly or allusively to a tragedy such as the *Oresteia*. Not only is the "protagonist" Euthyphro, the literary reincarnation as it were of the heroic Orestes, portrayed as intellectually inept, but the other characters and circumstances are distinctly unheroic, having a certain homey rusticity about them. The effect is wholly ludicrous

18. G. Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Socrates*, Vol. I (London 1888) 442.

19. Greene (above, note 3) 73-74.

20. See Clay (above, note 3) 252f.

21. See e.g., T.B.L. Webster, *Studies in Later Greek Comedy*, 2nd ed. (Manchester 1970) 82-84.

22. Such as Terence's *Hecyra* (see especially vv. 300-303, 479-480, 582-584) with a dilemma of piety involving Pamphilus' duty to his mother and to his wife; Plautus' *Asinaria* where Philaenum's concept of piety clashes with that of her mother (see vv. 507-509); Plautus' *Pseudolus* in which Calidorus' filial piety comes into conflict with his love for a girl (vv. 291-293).

when Euthyphro, his father who apparently had the modest status of a cleruch, the family farming operations, the activities of their slaves, and their comparatively petty legal and ethical problems are substituted for the Argive royal family and all the grand accoutrements of high tragedy.

The *Euthyphro*, then, can be read as a sort of comic pastiche of a tragic theme, or even of a specific tragedy. This has important implications for the purpose and meaning of the dialogue. For one thing it would considerably enhance the effectiveness of the dialogue as an antipoetic tract. Certainly there is one sense, a superficial one, in which the dialogue is *about* Euthyphro and his meeting with Socrates, and there is another deeper sense in which it is *about* piety or the meaning and nature of piety. But if the latter represents the main reason for the existence of the dialogue then the whole exercise would, as most critics acknowledge, have to be considered a failure, for the dialogue never does explicitly elaborate a satisfactory or conclusive definition of what piety is or is not.²³ In a typically Socratic way it is of course the quest for understanding, the posing of the problem and the method by which it is pursued, rather than its resolution, that is of primary importance. So if the *Euthyphro* is a demonstrative exercise in philosophical dialectic, why its comic and tragic elements? The answer might lie not just in its similarities to tragic drama and the issues, common to tragedy, which it explores, but in the pointedly different manner in which it explores them. The similarities, in other words, are used to point up the differences between the poetic and the philosophic way of treating an issue. In the *Euthyphro*, for instance, the notion that the same action could be both pious and impious, or that something which is pious could be loved by some gods and despised by others, is made to appear absurd, or at least problematic; yet these are the very notions which the tragedians had treated with all seriousness and which they and their audiences had accepted implicitly and unquestioningly as one of the sources of tragic tension and as the basis for some of the starkest dilemmas presented in the Athenian theatre.²⁴

Any Athenian of Plato's day (when, incidentally, the *Oresteia*

23. But see C.C.W. Taylor, "The End of the Euthyphro," *Phronesis* 27 (1982) 109-118.

24. Cf. Adkins (above, note 6) 138 who, after citing several passages of Tragedy involving εὐσέβεια and ἀσέβεια or τὸ ὄσιον and τὸ ἀνόσιον observes that such words could be "of little use to Plato and Aristotle as moralists". Adkins (n. 8) does cite the *Euthyphro* here but does not suggest that it might be directly critical of the tragedians.

was still being staged²⁵), acquainted with the theatre, or with dramatic literature, would inevitably have been aware of the potential for tragedy inherent in acts of piety-impiety. To such an Athenian the suggestion made in the *Euthyphro* that those very contradictions which, for generations, had served as the terms of some of the most trenchant ethical and pragmatic problems in his nation's poetry and theatre were intellectually ludicrous would have been at least unsettling and probably outrageous. It might even be that the prevalence and ubiquity of the piety-impiety topos in Tragedy was itself a reflection, and reinforcement, of traditional popular notions about the contradictions and practical difficulties pertaining to the religious, ethical, civic, and domestic observance of piety.²⁶ While there would be many, then, who could appreciate the implications of Plato's treatment of the tragic commonplaces, the contemporary dramatists might have been particularly disturbed by those implications, and if the historical Socrates had similarly ventured to challenge the premises on which so many situations in Tragedy were founded it is not hard to see why he would have aroused the rancour of his prosecutor Meletus and the other poets.

As discernible as Plato's criticisms of the tragic poets might be in the *Euthyphro*, they are certainly not stated explicitly there. On the contrary they are to be inferred from the dramatic confrontation of Euthyphro and the philosopher Socrates. Plato's opinions on the intellectual dangers and failings of the poets do eventually find explicit expression in several famous and important passages of the *Republic*. But these parts of the *Republic*, with their directly stated objections to the poets and poetry, can be complemented by the *Euthyphro* which, with its mordant satiric qualities and its dramatic immediacy, implicitly presents the same objections while simultaneously showing specific examples of the sort of shoddy intellectual practices which elicited those objections. This early dialogue, moreover, also demonstrates an alternative to such practices. According to the reading of the *Euthyphro* which I suggest, then, it must be a practical lesson in the Platonic teaching on the intellectual inadequacies of poetry as compared to philosophical inquiry. At one point (6bc) there is a broad hint that this is one of the intended functions of the dialogue. There Euthyphro, who had earlier been ironically made to represent

25. See T.B.L. Webster, "Fourth Century Tragedy and the *Poetics*," *Hermes* 82 (1954) 295.

26. This seems to be implicit in Dover (above, note 6); Adkins (above, note 6); and L. Pearson, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece* (Stanford 1962) 31f.

himself as being of one mind with Socrates on the subject of piety, actually affirms his faith in the actions attributed to the gods by the poets. This is one of the points on which Socrates most vigorously takes issue with him. Euthyphro also represents the uncritical approach of the poets by relating his own actions to piety without so much as reflecting upon the fundamental issue of just what piety is. This is very close to what the tragedians did as a matter of course when they exploited the antinomies of piety as the matrix of moral and emotional dilemmas in their plays. The philosopher Socrates, the other participant in the dialogue, vicariously pillories the tragedians as represented in the person of Euthyphro. He points up the absurdity of their uncritical approach and their indifference to truth by first eliciting the view, commonly expressed in tragedy, that one and the same act can be both pious and impious and then exploring the different implications of that view before proceeding with a rational inquiry into the nature of piety. Socrates, in other words, adds a measure of intellectual rigor and rational sophistication to the treatment of an issue which, like many important problems, had always, according to the Platonic view, been treated in an emotional and unintellectual manner by the tragedians.

The *Euthyphro* documents in a special way the evolution of the Platonic dialogue from dramatic poetry. The transformation of Plato the Attic tragedian into Plato the philosophical dramatist is not something that occurred instantly, nor in the course of the composition of a single dialogue. The process in fact could never really be completed. And so the *Euthyphro* is in itself both a vestigial tragedy and a work of philosophical dialectic. The philosophical dialogue is juxtaposed and contrasted with tragedy even as it emerges out of it. It thus affords an interesting synchronous view, as if in a series of time-lapse photographs, of Plato's artistic and intellectual metamorphosis, while also providing a demonstration of both why and how Plato intended to replace poetic drama with philosophical drama.