

Preface

The eighteen plays in this volume were written between the years 2006 and 2014. The majority of them – fifteen – take place at various Olympic Games of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, and this gives the overall collection its title. As of this date, four of the plays have been published in Modern Greek, along with three others in Chinese, and there have also been productions and readings of various ones among them to academic audiences in Italy (Velia), Greece (Samos and Archaia Epidavros), China (Beijing [3]), Spain (Benasque [2] and Madrid), Venezuela (Caracas), the USA (Oakdale, NY and New York City), Romania (Craiova), Russia (St. Petersburg), Germany (Kassel), and Brazil (Petropolis), along with two private readings in Toronto. Of these the performance in Velia was in Italian; those in Benasque, Madrid, and Caracas were in Spanish; and those in St. Petersburg, Kassel, and Petropolis were in Russian, German, and Portuguese respectively. Three more plays are currently being translated into Russian.

The quotations from Greek lyric poetry in various plays are, except where otherwise indicated, referred to by their location in *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse*, ed. Gilbert Murray and others (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1930) ('*OBGV*').

I extend warmest thanks to Cherie Braden, Ian Drummond, Natalie Helberg, and Robert Mason for their expert help with the proofreading of the manuscript, and to Mary Frances Ellison for her equally expert help in putting it into final shape for publication.

I dedicate the book to my wife Erna, a woman of unfailing courage, compassion, and resolve in her commitment to justice. In rendering this into Latin I have drawn upon Horace's celebrated description of the *vir iustus et tenax propositi* (*Odes* iii.3), along with the biblical description of the great 'woman of valour' (*mulier fortis*) who was Judith.

Thomas M. Robinson,
Toronto, 2016

General Introduction to the Plays

A question I have often asked myself over the many years that I have been reading Greek literature in general and Greek philosophy in particular is: did these writers, thinkers, and educators of the fifth and fourth centuries ever meet one another, and if they did, what do we know about what they said to one another when they did? I quickly discovered that very little is securely known about the answer to either question, though a number of uncorroborated stories involving various encounters clearly circulated in antiquity, and some have found their way into the writings of biographers such as Diogenes Laertius.

Such stories, however, entertaining and often enlightening as they can on occasion be, came nowhere near answering my questions in the depth I think they merit, and I began to look about for answers to them (if only 'literary' answers) using a quite different approach to my usual scholarly one, and that is, the technique of dramatization. We know, for example, that *literati* of the day were assiduous visitors to the Olympic Games which took place every four years in Greece, and that some of them were even participants. If this is the case, it seems to me that several of them could well have met one another (either by accident or by plan) on such occasions, and might also have taken this as a very relaxing opportunity to discuss various things, not least their work.

Guided by this possibility, I have, in the case of each of the fifteen plays in the volume that are set at various Olympic Games, taken a date in history when we know that the Games took place. With this date firmly in place, I was then able to research which of these extraordinary people were alive and well at the time, and could reasonably be imagined to have been there. I have then further imagined that, after each day's Games were over, they had a habit of congregating together for a little wine and discussion in the early evening, and the conversation that took

place on each of those evenings has finished up constituting one of three Acts in each play.

The *literati* in question were the poets, dramatists, philosophers, educators, and historians of the day, some of them close friends (like Socrates and Euripides), some of them barely able to tolerate one another (like Thrasymachus and just about everyone he engages in conversation); some of them meeting there for the first and only time (like Heraclitus and Parmenides in 476 BCE), some of them meeting there with fair frequency (like Socrates, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Thucydides, and Thrasymachus). Politicians also saw the Games as an opportunity to pitch their wares, and two of them, Pericles and Cleon, play strong roles in a number of the plays, Pericles before the Peloponnesian War and Cleon during the early years of it.

I have further imagined that, from an early date, the group developed the habit of being sure to bring along to the Games a piece of writing (from some play they were working on, perhaps, or some thoughts on politics or education) to share with the others, in hopes of stimulating conversation and criticism.

With this as the basic structure for the various dramas, I have tried to imagine the sort of conversations that might have taken place, within, naturally, the constraints of known historical events, the known writings, plays, etc., of the various participants, and the date (if known) and content (if known) of such writings, dramas, and the like. I have also assumed, in most cases, that they thought of one another as being more or less equals intellectually, and that they tended to treat one another as such (though any comic poets present are, not surprisingly, unsparing in whom they skewer, and the sophist Thrasymachus, exceptionally, can mock just about everybody). In particular, I have imagined Socrates in the possibly unfamiliar situation of having to talk to others as equals, not as a teacher shepherding his pupils, or as a guru-pleading-

ignorance leading various know-alls into humbling admissions of their ignorance. In this new situation he often finds himself on the defensive, in a way that those who know only Plato's Socrates or Xenophon's Socrates will possibly find surprising.

I should add that I have assumed, contrary to general belief, that Socrates did leave his city periodically to attend the Games. Many hold that he never left Athens except for military service, but this is hard to sustain (we know, for example, that he went to Samos as a young man), and it would, even if true, be very unlikely to have included trips to the Games, which would scarcely have been considered 'leaving' one's city. My own assumption is that, for Socrates, 'leaving' his city meant *taking* leave of it (i. e., abandoning it) to do his philosophizing elsewhere (like, say, in Megara), or indulging in 'itinerant' philosophy, after the manner of the sophists, not, once in a quadrennial while, taking a couple of weeks off from philosophical conversations in Athens to visit the Games in Olympia.

I have also taken it for granted that, in conversation, the characters in the plays talked to one another in the standard Greek of the day. Heraclitus, for example, did not, I assume, speak hierophantically in day-to-day conversation, and Parmenides did not, I assume, speak in the prose equivalent of his convoluted verse-hexameters. So the prose of the plays is standard contemporary English, with the one constraint of avoidance, if possible, of egregious linguistic anachronisms; and one word, 'pancratation' – a reference to a no-holds-barred form of all-in wrestling that was a major feature of the Games – occurs with such frequency that I have left it un-italicized.

I should add that the language of my characters has not been sanitized. People like the comic playwrights Cratinus, Aristophanes, and Eupolis, for example, can on occasion be as rude and irreverent in *my* plays as various well-known characters were in *their* plays; Thrasymachus can be as brusque and brash in my plays as he himself was, on occasion, when talking to Socrates (and no doubt to several other people), and so on. I need to say, too, that, since Classical Greece was a male-dominated civilization, this is on occasion reflected in the casual insensitiv-

ity, not to say vulgarity, of language with which some male characters in my plays can, on occasion, talk to one another, not least when the conversation touches on the subject of women. But I am also very happy to say that a number of the *female* characters in the plays (especially Aspasia) are more than a match for them...

Regrettably, the majority of the characters in the plays are males, given that 'respectable' (i. e., married) adult women were not allowed to be present at the Games, and the unrespectable ones who put in an appearance were, with rare exceptions, not part of literary circles. But some remarkable women do, on occasion, figure in the conversation, notable among them being the priestess Diotima, along with the three *hetaerae* ('[female] companions') Aspasia, Lais, and Phryne, the putative goings-on of the first of whom provoke the comedians present into some barbed fun at the expense of Pericles, and the putative goings-on of the latter two of whom cause a good deal of comic distress to the hapless Aristippus and Xenocrates respectively. I have also imagined that three prominent *hetaerae* are more than just a topic of conversation, they actually turn *up* at two of the Games (as they were, of course, free to do), and prove themselves the intellectual equals of any of the men there – Aspasia at the Games of 440, and Lais and Archeanassa at the Games of 404. (In the play *Alcibiades*, and in the trilogy *Aspasia*, various *hetaerae*, back in their home territory of Athens, prove very much the intellectual equals of men in that environment too, to the surprise and chagrin of a few prominent citizens of the day).

The device of 'readings' from finished work or work in progress has also allowed me to introduce some of the great literature of Greece to an audience which might not otherwise ever get to read or hear it, and it is my hope that the contemporary resonance of some of it will be sharply felt. I especially hope that many will be stirred by the excerpts from the Melian Dialogue of Thucydides; by Hecuba's lament over the body of the child Astyanax, from Euripides's *Trojan Women*; and by Antigone's statement of the universal laws of morality, from Sophocles's play of the same name, along with other outstanding passages from Simonides, Pindar, Aes-

chylus, and others.

The plays have also been deliberately written for ease of performance. Typically, a play might be read by students on the first day of an introductory class on the thought and culture of fifth and fourth century Greece, to set the scene, so to speak, and to raise, in the form of drama, a number of questions, some of which the course instructor might feel it worthwhile to engage with/take issue with as the course progresses.

The plays can also be performed, of course, as standard theatre productions. And they have been written in a way which will, I hope, appeal to a much wider audience than simply an academic one.

For those interested in a particular historical figure or figures, I list here some of the more notable names, and the dramatic dates of the plays in which they appear:

Aeschylus 476, 456; *Alcibiades* 423, 416, [400]; *Alcidamas* 360, 348; *Anaxagoras* 456, 440, 432, 424; *Antiphon* 424; *Aristippus* 412, 408, 404, 403, 396; *Aristophanes* 424, 423, 420, 416, 412, 408, 404, 403, [400], 396; *Aristotle* 360, 348; *Aspasia* 440, 432, 423, 403, [400]; *Callias* 420, 416; *Cimon* 456; *Cleon* 440, 432, 423; *Cratinus* 476, 456, 440, 432, 424, 423; *Critias* 408; *Crito* 396; *Democritus* 432, 424, 423, 420, 416, 412, 408, 403, 396; *Demosthenes* 360, 348; *Diogenes of Apollonia* 420, 416, 408; *Diogenes the Cynic* 348; *Empedocles* 476, 456,

423; *Eupolis* 424, 420, 416, 412, [400]; *Euripides* 432, 424, 420, 416, 412, 408, [400]; *Gorgias* 396; *Heraclitus* 476; *Herodotus* 456; *Hippocrates* 404; *Isocrates* 360, 348; *Melissus* 440, 432; *Parmenides* 476, 456; *Pericles* 456, 440, 432; *Pheidias* 456, 440, 432; *Pindar* 476, 456; *Plato* 408, 404, 403, 396, 360, 348; *Polyclitus* 440, 432; *Praxiteles* 360, 348; *Protagoras* 440, 424, 423, 420, 416, [400]; *Simonides* 476; *Socrates* 440, 432, 424, 423, 420, 416, 412, 408, 404, 403, [400], 399; *Sophocles* 456, 440, 424, 432, 423, 416, 412, 408; *Speusippus* 360, 348; *Thrasymachus* 432, 424, 423, 420, 416, 412, 408, 404, 403, [400], 396; *Thucydides* 424, 416, 412, 408, 404; *Xenocrates* 360, 348; *Xenophon* 408, 404, 403, 360; *Zeno* 456, 440, 432.

Finally, at the risk of stating the obvious, let me say that – within the constraints of certain events that are clearly part of the historical record, and not to be tampered with – what I have written are plays, and will, I hope, be judged as such. While I have a 'professional' interest in many of the characters in them, having written widely, in various scholarly journals, on a number of them, I have composed the dramas for the quite different purpose of entertaining, and of generating discussion. If they succeed in doing this, I shall be more than content.

Thomas M. Robinson,
Toronto, 2016

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ATHENA TRIUMPHANT

The Other Olympians.
A Trilogy

(1) An Olympics of the Mind

Dramatis Personae (in order of appearance): Heraclitus, Parmenides, Epicharmus, Pindar, Bacchylides, Aeschylus, Simonides, Empedocles, Sophocles, Cratinus, Anaxagoras, Zeno

Act 1

Olympia, the year of the 76th Olympiad (476 BCE). The evening of the second day's sporting events of the Games.

Two men with interests in philosophy, and, as it turns out, a shared interest in Olympic sports, have chanced to meet in an area where the literati among the spectators tend to congregate each evening, and are sharing some wine and olives. The older of the two, Heraclitus, aged about 64, has been to five Games over the years; Parmenides, aged about 39, has been to three. Parmenides's young friend and pupil, Zeno, aged about 15, is also in attendance.

Heraclitus This wine is good.

Parmenides Yes, it's not bad. Though I prefer water myself. Care for some?

Heraclitus Oh, I'll drink water too. (*Accepts a jug of water from Parmenides, drinks, then hands it on to Zeno*). Thanks. I just suffocated today.

Parmenides We all did. But that's the Games in mid-summer.

Heraclitus I suppose it's the only time of year they could reasonably hold them.

Parmenides True. But it does separate out the enthusiasts among us from the rest.

Heraclitus That includes you, I take it?

Parmenides Absolutely. I'm a pancration man myself. Always have been.

Heraclitus Well, we obviously have more in common than we might have thought. I've always preferred wrestling myself.

Parmenides I don't know whether I'm surprised at that or not.

Heraclitus What do you mean?

Parmenides Well, you live a long way away from these parts, and the big name in wrestling is local. I was too young ever to see Milo myself, but I know his reputation was huge all over Greece, and maybe it reached Ephesus. Was it that which set you going?

Heraclitus In part, yes; when I was a boy he was the only Olympian everyone seemed to know. But it wasn't just his reputation. I actually saw him *wrestle* – right here.

Parmenides Don't say it. When?

Heraclitus At the 65th and 66th Olympiads. The 65th was when he won the crown for the sixth time, and people went crazy. So did I. What a moment. And then we all spent the next four years waiting for the next games, to see if he could win a seventh.

Parmenides He didn't, of course.

Heraclitus You're right. But don't say 'Of course'.

Parmenides Why not?

Heraclitus Because most people felt he was tricked. His young competitor (don't ask me his name) just stayed out of his way till he tired himself out lunging after him. But the other man never showed anyone that he was actually a better *wrestler* than Milo.

Parmenides But he was a good strategist. Does that count for nothing?

Heraclitus Not nothing. But not much either. In wrestling, it seems to me, one looks for a contest between two strong forces, where each accepts to take on the strengths of the other and struggles through till one of them wins. Milo's competitor showed no such acceptance; he was just a plain old coward.

Parmenides But the judges disagreed. They gave him the crown.

Heraclitus Yes, but the spectators hated it. And their instincts were right.

Parmenides I'm not so sure. Milo was just the sentimental favourite, that's all, and nobody wanted him to lose. Unless you think that, in competitive sports, it's the competitiveness in itself, the more or less balanced tension and strife between two opposing strengths, that one comes to see and applaud. The victory of one or other offers a *supplementary* surge of joy or pain, of course, depending on who you were shouting for, but it's no big thing.

Heraclitus Now that you put it that way, I suppose I believe part of what you say. The tension and the strife are certainly an important part of my vision of competitive sports. But I like a good winner as well.

Parmenides Does the same go for other types of competition too? *Dramatic* contests in Athens, for example? It crosses my mind because I notice Aeschylus is here.

Heraclitus He is?

Parmenides Yes, I saw him just now, surrounded by a big throng of admirers. He's on his way to Syracuse, at the invitation of Hiero.

Heraclitus Hiero seems to be able to buy anyone these days. I see he already has Pindar and Bacchylides at his court, and they are here too.

Parmenides And he hasn't stopped yet. Simonides is here as well, and he too is on his

way to Syracuse, at Hiero's invitation. Who'll be next on his list?

Heraclitus I don't know, but I'm sure he's still on the hunt. *He* may have his mind on his team winning the chariot race, but he also knows this is a great place to find poets and dramatists and thinkers. And his wealth can buy him a whole lot of poets and dramatists and thinkers.

Parmenides Like us?

Heraclitus You said it.

Parmenides But surely not many *thinkers* come here. Aren't the two of us exceptions?

Heraclitus Not really. Thales was here before us.

Parmenides He was? Did he enjoy it?

Heraclitus I don't know. He died of heat-stroke. (*Pause*). Would you mind passing me the water jug?

Parmenides My pleasure. (*Passes the water jug. Heraclitus drinks copiously*).

Parmenides Is Hiero *really* interested in thinkers?

Heraclitus We'll soon find out.

Parmenides No doubt. But let's get back to this competition business. Do you think *dramatic* competitions exemplify your general philosophy too?

Heraclitus I don't think they have been around long enough to serve as very strong evidence yet, one way or the other. But I think we'll soon find out.

Parmenides Really? What makes you think so?

Heraclitus A conversation I just had with a young up-and-coming Athenian dramatist who's also here. I don't imagine Hiero knows of him yet, but if he doesn't, he soon will.

Parmenides You're not talking about young Sophocles are you?

Heraclitus You've met him?

Parmenides Not yet, but his reputation has gone before him, and everyone wants to meet him. Including me. They say he's incredibly handsome. So much so that the Athenians chose him to lead the naked boys' parade when they celebrated the victory of Salamis four years ago. And since then he has won a number of prizes as a wrestler and lyre-player. And now he's talking of making his life as a dramatist. Quite an array of talents. And all of nineteen years old!

Heraclitus That's right. And from what he told me he already has ideas of his own about drama which could change the direction of things quite a lot. A few years from now he'll be competing with Aeschylus, I'm sure.

Parmenides And winning?

Heraclitus Just wait.

Parmenides Would a big battle between the two of *them* count as an example of that warfare between opposites that seems to figure so prominently in your view of things?

Heraclitus It would, actually; a very good example, in fact. Have you actually *read* me on this, or are you just talking from hearsay?

Parmenides Oh, I've read you.

Heraclitus You have? You must be one of the few outside my circle of close friends who has. What did you think?

Parmenides What I could understand of it I found interesting, but a lot I found hard to penetrate. And the hierophantic tone of everything put me off.

Heraclitus I guess the feeling is mutual. I tried to read your poem too, but found much of it unintelligible. And I felt a bit frustrated over that, since I sensed you were saying something important.

Parmenides Thank you.

Heraclitus So do we continue talking?

Parmenides Oh, I think so. Have some more wine. (*Pours Heraclitus some wine, and then pours some for himself*). But I think we have to agree on something important first.

Heraclitus What's that?

Parmenides That we'll avoid posturing, and speak normal Greek to each other. I don't need to be addressed as if I were listening to the convoluted pronouncements of some priest or seer, and you tell me *you* don't need to be addressed as though you were listening to some versifying riddle-maker. So can we just agree to talk for the rest of the time in basic Greek? The way in fact we've been talking so far this evening?

Heraclitus Sounds fine to me. And I might just learn something. Maybe you too.

Parmenides Oh, I don't doubt it. But where do we begin?

Heraclitus Why don't we each offer a very brief summary of what we *think* the other was up

to, see what the reaction is, and pick up from there?

Parmenides Not a bad idea. Why don't you start? You know, the dignity of age.

Heraclitus I'm sorry you mentioned that. But let's start.

If I have you right, you seem to think that there are two ways of coming at the world: a 'knowledge' way and an 'opinion' way. Only the 'knowledge' way gets us to truth. And that truth is, that *what* we know is something you call 'that which is', which I assume to be what I call 'the world'. This 'that which is' has several characteristics which are very startling; it is one, it is bounded, it is ball-like in its mass, it is eternal, and it is absolutely homogeneous. Whether you yourself suppose it to be the world around us I have no idea; some of those epithets seem to fit the world around us, some don't. So you're going to have to clarify yourself on this.

As for your 'opinion' way, which cannot give us truth, apparently, I'm not sure whether it's just a different *optic* on 'that which is' or whether it has a different object altogether. And if it does have a different object, what can that object possibly be? The only world I'm sure I know is this one. That's enough to start. And it does touch on what puzzles me most.

Have I caught your intention in any way at all, or have I just got things hopelessly wrong?

Parmenides Wrong? Not in the least; you have a fair understanding of what I was after. And the questions you raise are right to the point. I wish a few more people could see my argument so well.

But why don't I just first summarize my understanding of your argument too, as we agreed? Then we can engage. I'll confine myself to matters brought up in your own summary of me.

As I understand you, you agree with me that knowledge is possible, though not absolute knowledge; only the gods can claim that. And what we know is only one thing, and that is that the world is a single world, and a unity. Anything else is just opinion, since everything constituting the world, including ourselves, is subject to constant change.

What *gives* the world its unity amidst all the constant change is the balanced tension of opposing forces – that 'warfare' among things you

talk about. So Homer got it all wrong; the most desirable state of affairs is war, not peace.

Let's just start with that.

Have I understood you so far, or am I just deceiving myself?

Heraclitus No, you are more or less right so far. And the matters you touch on really are basic. So let's engage. I know the wrestling competition only begins tomorrow, but I think you and I might just be able to show the athletes a thing or two in a match of our own right now. It doesn't have to end this evening; we have other evenings ahead of us. I'd be tempted to ask young Zeno to referee the match, but he really isn't old enough for that yet. Three or four years from now, perhaps.

(*Zeno nods vigorously*).

(*Looking at Zeno, then at Parmenides*) Doesn't this boy talk?

Parmenides Oh, he's very polite; he has been well trained, and only speaks when he thinks he has something to say, or has a really good question to ask.

So just one question before we start. Why wrestling rather than the pancration? The pancration's much more exciting. (*Zeno nods again*). You see, Zeno agrees.

Heraclitus But it's so brutal. I wish they hadn't introduced it into the Games.

Parmenides Yes, it's tough. And people do get killed occasionally. But you can't beat it for thrills.

Heraclitus We're back to an old topic. Neither victory, nor what you call 'excitement', is my own driving motive in coming to watch sport. It's the balanced tension of competitiveness I come for.

Parmenides That's fine, and it has a great sound to it, but I like a little something more. Why *not* a bit of battering and violence? There *are* some *controls*, you know. Biting isn't allowed; nor is eye-gouging. The Spartans allow both in their own Games, but we're not Spartans. Anyway, have it your way; wrestling it will be. I defer to gray hairs again.

Heraclitus (*pausing*) Will you please make that the last reference to my age?

Parmenides I'll try.

Heraclitus Well, let's engage.

Parmenides Let's do that. And let's start by trying to get fully clear on this business about *war* being (what was your phrase?) 'the father of all things'. Your loving competition seems to me fine; I like it too. But warfare? Are you telling me you *liked* what we have just gone through with the Persians?

Heraclitus Where have I ever said I *liked* warfare? In particular, the nasty recent episode with the Persians. I said that warfare, or, more generally, tension and conflict between opposites, is simply the natural state of things. It's just *there*, like the sun and the moon.

Parmenides But you do like it?

Heraclitus No, I hate war, the way I hate the pancration. What I like is competitiveness, war's less violent analogue.

Parmenides Well, can I infer from your dislike of war that you like, and would prefer to have, peace?

Heraclitus My own likes and dislikes are irrelevant. I'm interested, as I think you yourself are, in 'that which is', not in how anyone – including myself – feels about it.

Parmenides Well, let's confine ourselves to 'that which is' in the matter. If the whole of the world consists of opposites in some sort of balanced tension, at any given time and across time, isn't the *overall* picture one of complete peace?

Heraclitus Absolutely.

Parmenides But you don't see this peace as any sort of *objective* to be achieved by war?

Heraclitus No. It simply *is* achieved, overall, by war. Or war is a necessary condition for its achievement, if you like.

Parmenides And you don't see it as in any way preferable to war?

Heraclitus I do, as matter of personal opinion. But I don't consider my opinion to be of any particular importance, as I just said. And in any case the two are only separable in words. The world can't be described as being *either* at war *or* at peace; it is at all times and throughout time equally well describable as being *both*.

That's where *I* stand. Where do you stand on this? I ask because I don't remember you talking about it in your poem. But you certainly left me with the impression that your world is one of the most absolute peace imaginable, with not the

slightest degree of change in it, let alone conflict of any sort, across eternity.

Parmenides That's a fair description of it, as long as you realize that it is the case only from a certain optic. My main point is that, if you look at that which is (we can just call it the world, if you like) simply as a *reality* (not in terms of its ever-changing contents, with their various colours and shapes and smells and the like), and as a *whole*, as the *totality* that it is, then indeed it is, in your words, eternally in a state of peace. While everything in it or comprising it is forever changing, *it*, seen simply in its totality and in terms of its being simply something that has reality, never changes. On the other hand, if you look at the world in terms of how it appears to us in everyday observation, then it looks to me much the way it looks to you, in a state of constant conflict of opposites.

Heraclitus So you agree with me that conflict is the natural state of things after all?

Parmenides Not so fast, please. I would say it's a very prominent feature of things, but I'm puzzled over what else to say about it, except to say that such is my opinion. Because, as you know, I believe that the most that is achievable in talking about the world we see around us is an opinion. Knowledge is only achieved when – and only when – we apply that earlier optic I just talked about.

Heraclitus But this still seems to mean you agree with me, at least in general terms, about the presence of conflict in the world's operations.

Parmenides Not quite. You say there *is* conflict; I say there *appears to me* to be conflict. And that difference, I think, takes us immediately into a much greater, and much more important set of differences between us than simply whether 'warfare' is or is not a useful word to apply to the way the world operates.

Heraclitus True. We're moving into a critical area. Why don't we pick up on it tomorrow evening, after we've seen the pancration, and the wrestling and boxing matches?

Parmenides Suits me. Shall we finish this? (*Pours Heraclitus and himself the last of the wine*).

Act 2

The same place, the next evening. The group now consists of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Zeno, Aeschylus, Pindar, Simonides, Epicharmus, Cratinus, Empedocles, and Sophocles. Sophocles is just concluding a short piece on his lyre, and the rest murmur their approval.

Epicharmus Who organized this little get-together?

Parmenides I did.

Epicharmus To talk about the big mauling-match?

Parmenides Well, that too, no doubt. But actually, I was just curious. I knew Hiero had his eye on a victory in the horse race. And he has good horses. I once went over from Elea to see them race.

But it's the rest of you who really caught my attention. We have half the poets of Hiero's court in attendance – Pindar here, and Bacchylides, and Epicharmus. And then we have a couple of poets who have stopped off on their way to his court – Aeschylus here, and Simonides. And there's Cratinus, too, in from Athens. And we even have someone to provide the music – young Sophocles, a would-be tragedian. And – oh yes – we have another young would-be-poet here, Empedocles, from Acragas. Pindar brought *him* along (do we really need any more Sicilians?), and Aeschylus brought young Sophocles. Cratinus I think just crashed the party.

Epicharmus No, no. *I* invited him. A good party needs at least one drunk. And at least two comic poets. That we now have, courtesy of Cratinus. Though when he'll ever have his first play produced don't ask me.

Parmenides But how come the place is stuffed with Sicilians?

Pindar Oh, it's nothing strange, Parmenides. Hiero never passes up an opportunity to show off the talent he has attracted to Syracuse. (For a consideration of course). So he sent the three of us along with his horses, and he made sure his two recent acquisitions stopped off here *en route* as well, to see and be seen. Sophocles and Empedocles he didn't invite, but only because neither has a profile of any significance yet. Though we'll all be hearing from them soon, I

think. (*Pause*). Why Cratinus dropped in I don't know. But he's always good company.

Heraclitus But you court poets do have little jobs to do for your paymaster, don't you?

Epicharmus Of course. Though not many people see the Olympics as an event for comic poets to ridicule, so my own little job here is unclear; I'll have to think about it. But I do have a strong side interest in philosophy, as some of you know. So it's nice to meet the two of you here. Especially you, Parmenides; you seem to talk such absolute nonsense, just about all of the time.

Parmenides I'm flattered to be noticed, even if only by a comic poet.

Heraclitus But *your* job, Pindar, is clear enough. Hiero's looking for a good victory ode from you, I'm sure.

Pindar Naturally.

Heraclitus Of course you've already written it.

Pindar How *did* you guess?

Parmenides And if he doesn't win?

Pindar You're not serious, are you?

Heraclitus Go on, just imagine he doesn't.

Pindar I can't. But... (*smiling*) well, what I have with me is very flexible. There'll be other victors it would fit, with a few minor changes.

Parmenides What about you, Bacchylides? Has he commissioned an ode from you too?

Bacchylides Of course. Why opt for one when you can get two?

Parmenides Any chance of a little preview – just amongst the group of us, naturally.

Pindar A good try, Parmenides. But the answer's 'No'. Hiero would have us both chopped up if he ever found out. The deal is that *he* hears them first, in a big, public place with a huge audience.

Heraclitus But you could surely just try out the two or three opening lines on us? It isn't the whole ode, by any stretch; and you could say you were just trying to benefit from the lucky presence here of a very sophisticated, supremely cultured group of poets to put a few finishing touches to your masterpiece. I think he'd be flattered.

Pindar Another good try... Oh, alright, I'll think about it.

Parmenides What about you, Aeschylus? Has Hiero offered you enough to make you think of decamping to Syracuse?

Aeschylus Are all Eleans as direct as you, Parmenides?

Parmenides No, just young Zenon here – when he is minded to speak.

Aeschylus Well, to answer your question, I'm going out of curiosity; and for the money of course. We'll see what happens.

Parmenides What about you, Simonides? Why Syracuse, after all this time?

Simonides Well, it was actually my son-in-law here who talked me up with Hiero. So when an invitation came, I felt I really couldn't refuse, for Bacchylides's sake.

Epicharmus So there you are, Parmenides. You have the whole story. Except for young Empedocles and our lyre-player. What are you two doing here?

Empedocles (archly) My grandfather won the horse-race at the seventy-first Olympiad. And my whole family is still into horses. So I leave it to you to guess why I'm here.

Sophocles Well said, Empedocles. Does one really need some ulterior motive for coming to the Games? Why not – to see the athletes compete?

Epicharmus Of course. I'd forgotten that possibility. Thank you for reminding me, Sophocles. You've just given me an excellent idea for a comedy.

Parmenides About the Games? That's rich. Who would you be lampooning? Certainly not Hiero, if you value your salary – or your life.

Epicharmus You're right. I may be a comedian, but I'm not crazy.

Heraclitus Well, who *would* you be lampooning? Most of your plays just joke about figures in mythology. My favourite was your send-up of Hercules. But-

Epicharmus Stop! That's it! We just saw a Hercules today. He's my next play.

Aeschylus Theagenes. Of course!

Epicharmus What a hulk. What magnificent stupidity. What...

Simonides Calm down, Epicharmus.

Parmenides But he *was* amazing, don't you think, Heraclitus?

Heraclitus That was a low blow, Parmenides. You know what I think of the pancration. I kept my eyes shut for the entire thing.

Parmenides I'm sorry; I forgot. But what about the rest of you? Isn't this man the new Milo? Even better, maybe? Milo only wrestled. Theagenes wins at boxing, the pancration, running, and I don't know what else.

Simonides Now it's your turn to calm down, Parmenides. Let's hear from the others. Pindar?

Pindar Oh, he was amazing alright. He pounced on his man like a lion and just mauled him. I think if he hadn't yelled immediate submission he'd have been carried out a corpse.

Heraclitus And you enjoyed that?

Pindar Of course. You have a problem with that?

Heraclitus There has to be *somebody* else who hated seeing this brute at work. Simonides?

Simonides I thought he was amazing. He did what pancratiasts are supposed to do, and superbly.

Heraclitus (disconsolately) Is there nobody...
(*The others look at him stonily*).

Parmenides I think it's time for a toast. To the victory of the new Milo – Theagenes!

All except Heraclitus drink a toast in wine; Heraclitus takes a drink of water in silence.

Epicharmus I think our friend from Ephesus needs some cheering up. So why don't we just all tell you, Heraclitus, that we agree with old Xenophanes that we would none of us ever want to see any of these brainless hulks, particularly the pancratiasts, running our *societies*! They are athletes, not future politicians. If the winners among them get big rewards as well for entertaining us, that's fine too. So relax. Enjoy the entertainment. If you yourself wrote more entertaining stuff somebody might offer *you* a big prize some time.

Parmenides It's true, Heraclitus could do with being cheered up. But the truth is, he's the one who's really in his element here, despite appearances.

Epicharmus Say that again?

Parmenides Why don't you tell them yourself, Heraclitus?

Heraclitus I'd prefer not. But since you're all clearly a cut above the crowd intellectually, I'll risk it. My view is that war is the great driving force of things, and athletic contests are a variant of this war, without the bloodshed. That seems to me simply true, whether I personally like the

Games or not. As it happens, I *do* like them, especially the wrestling contests. But I take exception to the pancration, especially in its Spartan version, where you can have fingers and toes bitten off and eyes gouged out. Leave that to animals.

Pindar (pausing) Are you trying to criticize the Spartans?

Heraclitus In this respect, yes. For the rest, I think some of their political system has merit. And they produce fantastic soldiers.

Simonides I'm glad to hear that. *Brave* soldiers too. I don't think people will forget Thermopylae very soon.

Pindar Or your epitaph on those who died there. Let's hear it again.

Simonides I'm honoured.

(*Recites*) 'Go, stranger, tell the Spartans

Here we lie, obedient

To their command.' (*OBGV #212*)

(*Murmurs of appreciation from the group*).

Aeschylus But you didn't forget the Athenians.

Pindar No. Their greatness in the war will live on too.

(*Recites*) 'We fell before the chariot's onrush,

And by Euripus' shore the people raised

A monument for us. And rightly so.

For we embraced the baleful cloud of war,

And sacrificed the youth we loved.' (*OBGV #211*)

(*More appreciation*).

Epicharmus Oh, I'm drowning in tears. Something funnier, please, Simonides; you can do it.

Simonides Like this?

(*Recites*) 'Here lies a Cretan, Brotachus,

Who never thought he'd end like this.

The trip was strictly business...' (*OBGV #220*)

Epicharmus That's better. Any more like that? Maybe a bit more – wicked?

Simonides Well – there's just the group of us here? – I do have a little something I'm just waiting for the chance to use.

(*Recites*) 'A glutton, slanderer, and drunken sot,

Here lies Timocreon of Rhodes to rot.' (*OBGV #222*)

Epicharmus Oh, naughty! I love it.

Cratinus That wasn't a jibe half-directed at me, by any chance, Simonides?

Simonides Of course it was, my dear Cratinus! You're not telling me you aren't proud of your reputation as the biggest drunkard in Greece – after Timocreon, that is?

Cratinus I'd prefer to be known for other things. But that one will do.

Simonides Well spoken. And why not build on it? A good play about life as seen, say, through a bottle could win you first prize some day.

Cratinus What a wonderful idea. I'll give it some thought. (*Drinks copiously, then looks sheepishly at the others; laughter all round*).

Epicharmus But getting back to the recent war, it's the Athenians who have really come out of the conflict with the advantage, isn't it?

Aeschylus It looks like it. But the Spartans aren't likely to just sit back and let them take over. We are in for a long bout of that warfare that Heraclitus takes to be so basic to things. Just wait for it.

Epicharmus I knew it. I shouldn't have mentioned Athens. Now we're into politics. Such a bore. Can we get back to sports again? And that big mindless lout Theagenes? Such a fat figure of fun!

Heraclitus Oh, shut up, Epicharmus! Why don't we hear more about this biggest of all wrestling matches that is about to begin? Cratinus, you are mad about politics; what views do you have?

Cratinus Oh, I have a few stray thoughts, if you want them – as seen through a bottle, of course. (*Laughter*).

Epicharmus Always the best thoughts, Cratinus.

Cratinus Well, Aeschylus is right. We're in for a major struggle, and it's not at all obvious who'll come out the winner. The Spartans are brainless bores, but they always win in a straight, head-on contest. So the trick, for Athens, will be to avoid ever presenting them with such a contest.

The Athenians are smart, and can fight well when they have to. But they are undisciplined and temperamental, and this could finally kill them.

Pindar As a Dorian, I'm all ears. Give him some more wine. (*Epicharmus pours Cratinus more wine. He drinks*).

Cratinus Take this system of ostracism. All you need is a few people in a bad mood over something, and you can in an insane moment get rid of even your best people. Like Aristides. Athens finally produces a truly just man – and he is exiled in an instant for ten years by a few people scribbling his name on bits of pottery. No time for second thoughts; he's gone. Next time we produce a truly just man we'll probably go one step further and kill him.

Or take Themistocles, who won the war for us. He'll be gone too before the next Olympiad comes round, and by the same process. And you don't keep Sparta (or Persia, or both) at bay by exiling – or maybe even executing – your best generals. But we are silly enough to think you can. One of these days we may be foolish enough to do it in the middle of a full-scale war. And that will be that.

Epicharmus He's drunk. Let's hear somebody who's still sober.

(*Turns to Pindar*). Well, Pindar, did you decide yet? Hiero might lose tomorrow. And that marvellous ode you've written might never see the light of day. At any rate in its present form. Just give us the opening lines. Please.

Pindar What makes you think I have a copy with me? (*Looks carefully around, as though for potential eavesdroppers, and pulls out a scroll from beneath his cloak*). Sophocles? (*Sophocles begins playing the lyre*).

(*Recites*) 'Water is best.
(*All eyes turn to Cratinus, by now asleep*).

Gold shines like fire, and glitters midst
A great man's wealth.

But if, my heart, you wish to sing of Games,

Look to a star that shines

Within sky's emptiness more warmly

Than the sun, and tell

How there exists no contest

That can match Olympia...' (*Olympians 1, opening lines*)

(*Murmurs of appreciation from the group*).

Aeschylus Oh, I think your paymaster might like that, Pindar; just the right tone of sycophancy. What about you, Bacchylides? You're not going to let us down, I hope... No, I thought not.

(*More lyre-playing*).

Bacchylides

(Recites) 'Blessed by fortune, leader
Of the Syracusans of the swirling horses,
You, of all who tread the earth
Will recognize this ornament, this sweet gift
The Muses, crowned with violet, offer.
Cast off the cares of your right-judging heart,
In peace direct your thoughts
To where your guest-friend,
Newly a servant of Urania of the band of gold,
Has woven with the alluring Graces
An ode which, from his sacred isle,
He now sends to your glorious city...' (*Epini-*
cians 5, opening lines)

*(More murmurs of appreciation from some of
the group; though Aeschylus has joined
Cratinus in starting to nod off).*

Simonides My, you ode-writers know how to
lay on the flattery. This leaves only our great
warrior-playwright. (*Turns to Aeschylus*). Wake
up, Aeschylus!

Aeschylus (waking) What's that? Oh... I'm
sorry (*smiles sheepishly; all laugh*).

Epicharmus Aeschylus, they are begging you
for a few heart-rending words. The muse of trag-
edy must be heard from.

Aeschylus What can I say? I haven't any-
thing that... Well, actually, I do. But nothing
yet complete. I'm just thinking my way through
a drama on the great Persian invasion. That's
war enough for Heraclitus, I hope.

The lines are just starting to come to me, and I
don't see finishing things for a couple of years at
least. But if you are willing to put up with some
rough, unfinished material, I'll try out on you a
few lines I'm planning. They're on the rout of
Xerxes. (*Pauses*). Imagine a messenger turning
up in Susa, and telling Queen Atossa the news...
Here are his concluding lines.

(Shouts of assent).

(Recites) 'There is an island facing Salamis,
Small, hard to anchor in, where dance-loving
Pan

The seashore paces. Xerxes had sent his sol-
diers out

To kill with ease – he thought – a foe which,
once their ships

Were wrecked, had sought a haven there, in
hopes

That they might save their comrades from the
hazard of the straits.

How poorly did he see what was to come!

For when the god gave victory to the Greeks,

They clothed themselves with armour of fine
bronze,

Leaped from their ships, surrounded all the
isle,

And left no place to turn.

Our men were struck by rocks they threw,

And killed by arrows falling from their bows.

Finally the Greeks rushed on them with a sin-
gle shout,

And struck and butchered their poor limbs,

Until the life of every one was blotted out.

When he had seen the depth of the disaster,

Xerxes gave a cry of grief. (He had a seat,

A high bank near the sea, whence all his force
was clearly visible).

He tore his garments, gave a shrill howl,

Issued his foot-soldiers a command,

And rushed off in disordered flight.' (*Persians*
447-469)

(Murmurs of approval from all).

Parmenides Well, that puts us all in the mood
for another titanic struggle tomorrow, Hiero's
horses versus the rest. May I propose an anticipa-
tory toast to whoever turns out to be the victor?

*(All drink. Then all offer salutations and
leave, except for Heraclitus, Parmenides, and
Epicharmus, who is checked from leaving by
Parmenides)*

Parmenides Do stay a moment, Epicharmus.
We know your interest in philosophy and medi-
cine, and would welcome your company tomor-
row evening. Hiero, and his victory or failure-

Epicharmus – He'll win –

Parmenides -will get a brief mention, no
doubt. But we'd be very happy to have you par-
ticipate afterwards in a discussion the two of us
were having yesterday which just got delight-
fully sidetracked. A philosophical discussion –
about everything. Are you up for it?

Epicharmus Need you ask? I die daily in Syra-
cuse for lack of serious talk. Can we have
Cratinus present too? I may need comic support.

Heraclitus Fine. But just one proviso. No men-
tion of Theagenes! Otherwise the conversation
will end very suddenly. Or my participation in it,
at any rate.

Epicharmus Alright, the higher good will prevail. But you will permit me now, I hope, as my final pre-philosophical-discussion statement, to say that Theagenes is the most magnificent brute this side of the Minotaur that I have ever had the privilege of seeing. Oh, that bull-like neck, those tree-trunk thighs, those tiny, stupid eyes, that torso, blown up like a pig's bladder, that-

Parmenides (with a cough) Fine, so we meet tomorrow? Let's just finish this off and get some sleep. (They drink the rest of the wine, make their salutations, and leave).

Act 3

The same place, next evening. *Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Epicharmus are sharing some wine together. Zeno sits nearby. Cratinus is already drunk, and nodding off.*

Parmenides He's late.

Heraclitus Who?

Parmenides Our surprise-guest.

Heraclitus Not more surprises. I thought yesterday's group surprising enough.

Parmenides Well, somebody else turned up today, just in time to see Hiero's chariot take the prize. The journey here took him longer than he expected.

Epicharmus Somebody we know?

Parmenides I don't know. But if you don't, you should. He has a big future.

(Pause). Oh, here he is.

(Enter *Anaxagoras*).

Anaxagoras, let me present to you *Heraclitus* and *Epicharmus*, and, not least, my young friend *Zeno*.

(General salutations).

Heraclitus Well, well, the young man from *Clazomenae*. I've been hearing about you.

Anaxagoras I'm flattered.

Heraclitus Is this your first Olympics?

Anaxagoras My second, actually.

Heraclitus You like them?

Anaxagoras A lot. Particularly the chariot races. I've always loved horses; their sweat and pride and elegance. When I see them gallop, the world vanishes, and I'm galloping with them.

Parmenides But you do like other events, too, not just the horse racing?

Anaxagoras Oh yes. The running, the boxing, the wrestling – all of those things.

Epicharmus And the pan- (*Heraclitus glowers*).

Oh, never mind.

(*Heraclitus smiles*).

Parmenides Can I ask you a more general question?

Anaxagoras Do.

Parmenides Are the Games just a relaxation for you, where the mind simply lets things vanish for a while, or do they have a place of some sort in your philosophical scheme of things?

Anaxagoras Oh, they basically just help me relax, but they keep me thinking too.

Parmenides They do? About what?

Epicharmus Not about these senseless athletes, surely?

Anaxagoras Well, actually, yes. Or to be a bit more precise, about the athletes, not about their supposed senselessness.

Epicharmus Now you have me interested. You mean a philosopher can actually *learn* something from watching the antics of these dumb hulks?

Parmenides Oh, stop it, *Epicharmus*. Let's just call them athletes, and let him make his point.

Anaxagoras Thank you, *Parmenides*. What I was trying to say was that you can be struck by two things about the Games, either the senselessness of any individual athlete, or the fact that, in overall terms, winning requires the presence of intelligence, even if it isn't the sort of intelligence that gets translated into, say, political skills. And that strikes me as a pretty good description of the operations of the world as a whole.

Epicharmus It is? You must be joking.

Anaxagoras I thought that was *your* business, *Epicharmus*. (*Laughter*).

Epicharmus Clever. But still, you are joking, aren't you?

Anaxagoras I wasn't aware of it.

Parmenides But it's a big claim, if you're serious. Granted that athletics involves the use of *some* sort of intelligence, what sort of intelligence are the operations of the universe supposed to demonstrate?

Anaxagoras I'm only just beginning to think about the matter. If you're looking for a word, why not call it 'organizational intelligence'?

But why don't you ask Heraclitus? He's already written about all this.

Heraclitus That's true. I do claim that reason underlies things. I myself call it 'that which is wise'; ordinary people are likely to call it 'Zeus'. So we have something important we agree on.

Cratinus (opening his eyes) You two, maybe; not me.

Epicharmus The drunkard awakes.

Cratinus I wasn't asleep. Intellectuals chattering on always keep me awake; they are like a spout that refuses to stop dripping.

Epicharmus You *are* on form, Cratinus; have another drink. (*Pours Cratinus a drink of wine*). So what's nagging you?

Cratinus Just the way you people insist on talking about reason but miss the obvious. Like – it's chaos out there. Where's the order you talk about? I can't even predict tomorrow morning's weather. Or how I'll feel about it, whatever it is. If you asked me to describe *my* life – or the life of most people I know – it's just chaos, which we do our best to organize in some way or other. As for some divine intelligence ordering things, I'd say more likely some jokester – on the good days. On the bad days – some demon or other. Give me another drink. (*Epicharmus pours him more wine*).

Parmenides Do we really have to talk to this man?

Epicharmus I think you'd better. One day he's going to write plays, and you might just figure in them. So watch what you say. *He* might give you a much harder time than I did.

Parmenides That wouldn't be too difficult a task.

Heraclitus Ridiculous. This wreck won't last another five years.

Cratinus Actually, I'm good for another fifty.

Parmenides You are? Who told you? The oracle?

Cratinus You believe that nonsense? I saw it in a bottle – much more reliable.

Heraclitus This man's crazy. Let him go back to sleep.

Epicharmus Well, maybe. But before that I'd like to see you grapple with what he said, Heraclitus. (*Cratinus smiles appreciatively, then closes his eyes again*).

Why does a general balance in things have to mean the presence of a balancer of some sort? Why can't it just be that that's the way things shake down, given sufficient time for them to do so? You all keep talking about eternity; surely that's time enough for things to sort themselves out naturally, without need for an orderer or organizer.

Heraclitus I can't see that. A measured balance in things needs a measure (or balancer).

Epicharmus Oh, come on. Take something absolutely common in nature, like a whirlpool created by the bend of a river. The swirling motion just sorts things out naturally, swinging some stuff to the edge and some to the centre of the pool.

Parmenides Well, I suppose it's only a matter of time before someone with more clout than the local comic poet (my apologies, Epicharmus) comes along and says that Heraclitus and our budding philosopher from Clazomenae here, and anyone who cares to follow them, are all off on a hopelessly false track, and for the sorts of reasons you have just put forward. And that will be an interesting moment. Who will emerge the victor in *that* particular wrestling match?

Epicharmus You mean in that particular pancration? This battle will be no-holds-barred. And there can only be one winner.

Parmenides Well, that's an interesting point in itself. In saying 'there can only be one winner' (the champion of order or the champion of chaos, I assume), you commit yourself to a particular mode of reasoning, with the pancration as your guide. And that's where my own ears start to prick up.

Epicharmus Say more.

Parmenides Well, I believe strongly that if progress in philosophy is to be made, we have to start by getting the rules of thought straight first. Assuming, of course, that there *are* any rules. Such as the one you seem to be currently assuming.

Epicharmus Which is?

Parmenides Don't ask me for a precise term for it, but I mean the assumption that either this or that, but not simultaneously this *and* that. The sky above us at this moment is either absolutely cloud-free or it has some cloud-cover, but it is

not at this moment both cloud-free *and* partially cloud-covered.

Epicharmus Are you suggesting this is open to question?

Parmenides No, I'm suggesting that we should be aware that it *is* an *assumption*. And if it turns out to be a *good* assumption, I'm further suggesting that it would be good to know how to use it to our advantage.

Epicharmus Any more basics you have in mind?

Parmenides Yes, getting right the difference between knowledge and opinion.

Cratinus (*opening his eyes again*) Do we really have to listen to this? Everything is opinion, good sir, including your opinion about that branch of opinion which *you* call knowledge. (*Closes his eyes again*).

Parmenides What's the name of your drunken friend again?

Epicharmus Cratinus.

Parmenides Cratinus. I must remember that. Who was his teacher?

Epicharmus He already told you. The bottle.

Parmenides I must remember that too. (*Laughter*). But to get back to my point – and, as it happens, to his contention. The trouble with philosophy up to now has been that all we have been presented with is opinions. One person says that everything is a variant on water, another person says it's a variant on air, another (*glances at Heraclitus*) says it's a variant on fire, and so on. They all offer some sort of reason *why* they so believe, of course, but who is to blame Cratinus, or anyone else, for saying there are no compelling grounds for accepting one of these opinions over the others, or indeed for accepting *any* of these opinions at all? If you don't have a sense of what would constitute knowledge, rather than just opinion, what chance do you have of seriously adjudicating *any* of these claims? Or anybody's claims about anything, for that matter.

Heraclitus We are back to your big contention, I see. You think there *is* such a thing as knowledge, and that you know exactly what it is.

Parmenides Yes I do.

Heraclitus In that case, you've either made the biggest advance since philosophy first began, or you're fooling yourself.

Parmenides Let's start with your last hypothesis. If I'm fooling myself, in what way exactly am I doing so?

Heraclitus Not by claiming that knowledge is possible. It *is*. But only God actually possesses it. We humans just stumble around trying to find some approximation to it.

Parmenides Yes, I remember you writing something to that effect. But you are much too pessimistic. Knowledge is perfectly attainable provided you look at things from a particular optic.

Heraclitus Yes, I remember your saying that. But oh, so obscurely. Any chance of a little enlightenment now?

Parmenides Of course. My whole poem was, after all, about enlightenment. All one needs to do is to look on the world out there as a *whole*, and simply as a *reality*. Forget its parts, and their shapes, and colours, and smells, and the like. Just concentrate on the world as a totality, and as real, not coloured, or shaped, or fragmented, and so on. And the result will astonish you. More importantly, it will constitute, not just an opinion, but knowledge.

Cratinus (*opening his eyes again*) Sounds ridiculous to me. But I'm listening.

Parmenides I'm flattered. And – dare I say so? – encouraged. So let me press on.

Cratinus I'll need some more wine. (*Epicharmus passes him the jug*). Thank you.

(*Turning to Parmenides*) You were saying?

Parmenides As I see it, opinions are of their nature changeable – by happenstance, by argument, by any number of things. Knowledge is not. It's a stable state of consciousness that you can't be persuaded out of. If you finish up being persuaded out of something you claimed to be knowledge, then you must have been wrong; it was just an opinion *masquerading* as knowledge.

In the case of what I keep calling in my poem 'the real' – which means, as I've just explained to you, the world seen as a totality and in terms simply of its reality, nothing else – is the only thing of which we can have knowledge. We can, of course, look at it in terms of its parts, and in terms of the colours, shapes, and so on of those parts, and this is what we are doing most of the time. I do it myself in some detail in the second part of my poem. And that's just fine, as long as

we remember that the most we'll ever achieve about them will be opinions, of greater or lesser degree of acceptability, depending on the evidence we can muster for any given claim we make. For example, I myself make the claim that the moon gets its light from some source other than itself. That's an opinion, and any strength it will have as an opinion will turn on the persuasive power of the evidence I can muster in favour of my claim.

Heraclitus So you're not saying what so many people *think* you're saying? Many people think you are saying that the world is utterly different from what most people assume. That it's homogeneous, for example, not differentiated, as most people think. Are they wrong about this?

Parmenides Totally. If they really think that, then this is my biggest failure of communication. All I wanted to say was that, in answer to Xenophanes's *pessimism* about ever achieving knowledge of the world of the divine, we can be *optimistic* about achieving knowledge of *this* world – provided we go about things the right way, and ask questions of a type calculated to elicit knowledge, not just opinion.

Anaxagoras But what makes you so sure your own technique *produces* knowledge, not just opinion?

Parmenides All I can do is put forward the best arguments I can, as I did in the poem, and challenge you to refute them.

Take my claim that the real as a totality never came into existence and will never go out of existence. This is something everyone will see as self-evident once they admit that nothing can ever come from nothing. Is there anyone here who thinks that, if you have blank nothingness – no matter, no space – you can suddenly have *something*?

Cratinus This sounds like a trap, but go on.

Parmenides I'm serious. I see it as self-evident that if there is *something* there has always *been* something. Oh, not necessarily the *same* something; but something. Change is going on all the time, naturally. Burn down a house and you have a pile of ash. Chop down a tree and you have material to build a house. But you can't produce something from nothing, and you can't *reduce* anything to nothing either.

If you agree with me on this – and I can't see how you can possibly deny it – then you will also have to agree that, if there *is* something, there has always *been* something and there will always *be* something. In other words, the universe, seen in its totality and simply from the point of view of its reality, is eternal, and in that sense unchanging. Seen from every other optic, of course, it operates in time and is subject to change. As living creatures within the totality, for example, we ourselves are subject to time and change, and collect a little history, as each of us goes along, by reference to what came before us and what will come after us. The universe, by contrast, has no such reference points; its eternity guarantees that, *as a whole*, it will always be what it is, despite the constant subjection to change of all the things that constitute it.

Heraclitus I don't think many people would disagree with you on that. Every philosopher I know, from Thales on, is happy to say the world as a totality is eternal. So you have picked an easy thing to defend, Parmenides. But what about something that looks a lot stranger, like your claim that the real is homogeneous; no colours, no smells, no individual shapes, just some sort of absolutely clear soup – let's call it 'being' soup.

Parmenides You're obviously not listening carefully. I have never said the real is homogeneous; it's obviously differentiated. Who would ever want to deny that? What I said was that, looked at as a *totality* and simply in terms of its reality, the real is homogeneous.

Cratinus Prove it. I'm all ears.

Parmenides I shall. Take your wine-cup, that of Heraclitus, and the space between them. Each of the three things – the two cups and the space between them – is a reality, you would agree?

Cratinus Fine so far.

Parmenides And they are all *equally* realities, you would also agree? None of them is more a reality or less a reality than the others?

Epicharmus I'm following you – amazingly. (Does this mean I'm becoming a philosopher?). (*Laughter*).

Parmenides Well, if that's the case (and it is), the three things are, simply as realities, indistinguishable. And similarly for every other thing in the world. As realities (though *only*, of course as realities), they coalesce, and are indistinguish-

able one from another. So in terms of its reality, the world is composed of supposed parts and supposed entities that are indistinguishable one from another, and can only be described as constituting an undifferentiated, homogeneous mass.

I could, if you want, give you similar very good reasons why I also say that the real as a whole, and viewed simply in terms of its reality, is one, changeless, and finite (specifically, round-shaped in its mass).

Cratinus This is rich. I don't think I've ever stayed awake this long listening to a philosopher. But I think you've said enough already to make your point. Why don't we just stay with that for the moment and see where we get.

Take a plain, blunt would-be comic poet like myself. I think I can actually see pretty clearly what you are driving at, and I can even grasp your reasoning. But you still sound crazy.

Heraclitus I think we should escort this gate-crasher out. The world consists largely of fools, and this is one of them. Let the thinkers stay behind to talk philosophy.

Epicharmus You know something, Heraclitus? You are the sort of arrogant misanthrope who gives philosophy a bad name. Why don't we just throw you out?

Anaxagoras Why throw *anyone* out? We've just reached the stage when things get interesting. So you think Parmenides is crazy, Cratinus? The way Epicharmus here has been telling his audiences? Do say more. (Zeno, pass him some more wine). (*Zeno pours Cratinus more wine*).

Cratinus Well, I'm no philosopher...

Heraclitus You said it ... (*General laughter*).

Cratinus ...but I'm baffled by a number of Parmenides's claims, even if his argument is wonderfully clever. And it *is* wonderfully clever...

Let's start with what looks very good. That distinction between knowledge and opinion, for example. I've never heard it expressed so well or so plausibly. And I'm sure lots of people are going to go along with it.

But where has it got him? To a stage where we 'know' (and let's grant him that we *do* know, just to keep the argument going) a tiny handful of things about the world 'as a whole and as real' that are at best *useless* for any understanding of the world as it is in *day-to-day* experience and at

worst possibly totally false.

Parmenides Give me an example of one you think might be false.

Cratinus Well, you claim that the world is finite and ball-shaped.

Parmenides But you'd agree that it certainly *looks* that way, surely?

Cratinus Of course. I just have to look into the sky at night; it seems like one half of a big sphere. But this is what you yourself call the realm of opinion, not knowledge.

Parmenides True. But sphericity is surely also the perfect figure for a reality that contains the whole of matter and space, and contains no 'more' or 'less' of anything inside it, because it has no parts or internal differentiation.

Cratinus I can't get my mind round this business of homogeneousness, so I'll give that a pass and stay with a couple of *other* things that really bother me about your position. First, what makes you say the universe has a shape at all? *That* makes it sound as though the universe is a reality in the way its parts or *constituents* are realities. But that sounds strange. If you say mankind consists of all those physical things called humans, does that make mankind a physical thing too? So that if you added them all up you would get the number of humans plus an *extra* reality called mankind? Surely mankind is just a *word* meaning the sum *total* of all humans? And 'world' or 'universe' is surely just a *word* meaning the sum total of the things that go to *compose* it?

Epicharmus Why don't you forget play-writing and set up a little philosophy stall in the Agora, Cratinus?

Cratinus Who knows? Maybe I will! (*Laughter*). But let me just lay out my second objection and I'll stop. The trouble with saying the world is round, and that there's nothing outside its outside edge, is that such a statement will never make sense. A physical object has an outside edge, sure enough. But that outside edge is only what it is by reference to a *context* – call it physical space. You can't have a mathematical object like triangularity in physical space, or a physical object, like a fig, in mathematical space. So you can't say that the world is a physical object, with the outside edge that goes with being a physical object, but that it is also not in physical space, since it *contains* all space *within* its curved

boundary. Take your pick: either the world *is* a physical object, and so has some space *outside* of itself to serve as its *context*, or it is *not* a physical object. But if it *is* a physical object of the type I've just described, it cannot be the world, because the world is the sum total of *everything*, including all space. And if it *isn't* a physical object, how can it have an outside *edge*? Because only physical objects have outside edges.

Why on earth can't you just say the universe has no boundary in *space* just as you seem happy to think it has no *temporal* beginning or end either? You could still keep your round world; just call it one 'system' (or some word like that) among *many*, the others not being *visible* to us.

Heraclitus Who let this man into here? Why are comic poets being asked to talk about these things?

Parmenides I'm not sure, but I'm glad he's here. You don't by any chance want to join me in my school in Elea, do you, Cratinus?

Cratinus I'm tempted, since you're the first philosopher I've ever felt challenged enough by to wish to reply to. So thank you. But for the moment I'd be happy enough just to hear your response to my objections.

Parmenides Well, let me start by expressing my satisfaction that you sense the value of my stressing the importance of the distinction between knowledge and opinion. Because that is crucial to where I stand. Philosophers can go on forever claiming that the world is made up in such and such a way, or operates in such and such a way, but there is no chance of progress till we have devices for *evaluating* their various claims, and a beginning at least can be made if we can come up with a sound distinction between knowledge and opinion. My objection to so much of what has passed for philosophy to this date is not so much that any given opinion is wrong as that nothing has been done yet that would count as a sound device for calculating whether the opinion in question is firmly based or not. And the whole thing is made worse by the fact that so many opinions are put forward with the confidence that should only accompany *knowledge* claims. If I can only convince people that *every* claim to do with the world of day-to-day experience is an opinion, and an opinion that

will never constitute knowledge, I'll feel I've done something worthwhile.

Epicharmus But why pursue anything, if *knowledge* about any aspect of the world around us is impossible?

Parmenides Not so fast. There are opinions and opinions, the really good ones being based on far better *evidence* than the others. And that's just fine. One can live a very comfortable life, and build a fine society, and set out a very satisfactory philosophy of nature, based on the common acceptance of well-evidenced opinions. This would remain true even if Heraclitus is right, and absolute knowledge is possessed only by the gods.

Heraclitus Thank you.

Parmenides As for Cratinus's other objections, they are intriguing, and I need to think about them. I'm especially interested in his notion that words like 'world' and 'universe' may turn out to be just that, words, and that they refer, not to some *extra* physical object we call the world but simply to all physical objects *constituting* the world seen as a collectivity. If he is right, my major contention about the universe is called into question. I could, of course, for the sake of argument, just concede to him the possibility that what he calls the 'system' we see around us could turn out to be one among many, but I'd still have to face the objection that the *totality* of such systems could not be physically bounded. If his objection still holds in *that* regard too, I would continue to have to face the possibility that space is unlimited after all.

Anaxagoras Well, why *don't* you face it? Is it a real possibility or not?

Parmenides I'm torn. On the one hand, it seems to make sense; on the other hand, it makes the universe ultimately unknowable, and I find it hard to accept that.

Heraclitus Why? It's still ascertainable at the level of opinion, and you have already argued that well-evidenced opinions are a perfectly good basis for a philosophy of nature.

Parmenides But a finite object is necessary for knowledge. If I know something I grasp it, so to speak, and one can't grasp something that has no boundaries.

Cratinus But you're happy to say that you can apparently grasp a universe that has no *temporal*

boundaries, no *temporal* beginning or end. And in any case, why does the object of knowledge have to be a *thing*, with or without limits? Why can't I simply know *that* the last Olympic Games took place four years ago? This isn't an object; it's just a fact.

But that's another approach to things altogether, one that you philosophers never seem to contemplate. So let's not pursue it.

Parmenides Not now, at any rate; the hour is getting late. But I can well imagine it will be an idea that will have its day some time, along with some of your other ideas.

Heraclitus I can't imagine it! Everyone (except, it seems, this would-be comic poet) knows that the world is a physical object, and that our only disagreement as philosophers is over how to describe it. And everyone knows that knowing is seeing; philosophers disagree merely about how *well* we see. Nobody (well, almost nobody) doubts that the world, like everything constituting it, is a *thing* to be seen.

Parmenides I appreciate your support, Heraclitus. But I'm not sure it's enough to stop me investigating further the objections that have been brought up by our 'would-be comic poet'.

Epicharmus I agree it's getting late, but one final thing, before we go. Young Zeno here has been very silent throughout all this, and it's always interesting (if occasionally exasperating) to hear what the younger generation has to say. Your teacher has proved surprisingly open-minded about some objections to his thinking, Zeno. You must be reacting to this in some way or another.

Zeno I am. Though perhaps in not quite the way you expect.

Heraclitus You *will* defend him, of course? This intruder here can't be allowed to treat him with such contempt.

Zeno I see no contempt, and I feel sure my teacher feels none either.

No, my reaction is along somewhat different lines. If I have learnt anything from my teacher, it is the need for rules for the construction of good arguments and the demolition of bad ones, be they one's own or others'. In fact, I'm beginning to see this as, not just the *basis* for a sound philosophy, as my teacher thinks, but possibly as the very central project *of* philosophy.

Epicharmus You mean all our efforts to describe the world are unimportant?

Zeno No, I didn't say that. Just that they are one subject among many for the basic philosophical enterprise, which is simply 'getting things right', no matter *what* is being discussed. I can see myself spending a long time trying to get straight the rules for doing *this*. My teacher has already elaborated *some* of them in the context of putting together a cosmology; I want to *complete* them, if I can, and in a way that will be relevant to any topic you care to mention.

Cratinus A great project. Long live the young and optimistic! Any thoughts so far?

Zeno Not really. Except one, perhaps.

Parmenides Wait for it. This is when he's dangerous.

Zeno (smiling) With respect, I didn't hear that. (*Laughter*). I merely wanted to say that I have a feeling my life is going to be spent, not trying to *describe* things, the way philosophers have tended to do hitherto, but to examine *arguments*, and consequences of arguments, on any topic. The words that keep ringing in my head are 'if... then', and I sense this manner of argumentation will be my contribution to philosophy.

Anaxagoras Can you give us an example?

Zeno Well, to stay with the topic we have just been discussing, my own instinct is to ask, 'If the world really is a single thing, not multiple, what will follow from that?' If what follows makes sense, fine. But if what follows makes no sense at all, and is maybe even flatly contradictory of the original claim, then start worrying about the claim. And the same for everything else: my instinct is always to say, 'examine the strength of a claim by an inspection of its consequences'. I feel sure there must be secure rules for doing this, whatever the topic, and I hope to spend my life trying to discover them and then apply them.

Another thing that has started to strike me ...

Epicharmus Another philosopher; they can't stop.

Zeno (ignoring him) ...is the paradoxicality of things, and the possible use of this as a philosophical tool. This evening, for example, I was struck by the paradoxicality of the situation my teacher found himself in when confronted with the objections of Cratinus. If the world is a physical object, certain absurd conclusions fol-

low. But if it *isn't* a physical object, other equally absurd conclusions might be claimed to follow. Or take the business of the world's duration. If it had a beginning in time, one could put up a good case for saying that certain absurd-looking conclusions following upon the claim might well suggest that the claim itself is nonsensical. By the same token, if the world had *no* beginning in time, a number of equally absurd conclusions might appear to follow, leading one to object to that claim too. And so on. I suspect this technique could be a very powerful one for helping us achieve clarity in a good many of the claims we make.

Epicharmus Where did you find this boy, Parmenides?

Parmenides Never mind that. (*General laughter*). He's here; and I think he's here to stay.

Cratinus You don't want to send him to Athens for a year or two, do you? I suspect our democracy is going to need a few people who know something about straight thinking.

Heraclitus Like thinking straight enough to have the sense to jettison democracy itself! What societies need is a good strong leader, not this nonsensical popular free-for-all.

Epicharmus Oh, let's not start on that. Why don't you just go back to Ephesus and be quiet, Heraclitus? We'll just have to see how Athens and its democracy plays out, that's all.

Cratinus Oh, don't be too hard on him, Epicharmus. Anybody who thinks the universe talks to us has to have a certain charm about him.

Parmenides On that warm note I think we can end our little discussion. Let's have a morning meeting tomorrow for a few words of farewell.

Cratinus I'll drink to that. (*Turning to Zeno*) The bottle, dear boy.

Parmenides glowers, then smiles, as Zeno passes Cratinus the bottle. He then starts to laugh, and the others gradually join in. Heraclitus holds out longest, and then he too begins to laugh.

Envoi

The next morning, just after sunrise. The literati are having a final few words together before leaving.

Epicharmus Cratinus! I'm amazed. I thought they'd have to carry you here.

Cratinus So did I. But I had such fun last night I just couldn't miss the goodbyes, so I made a special effort. How often does one have fun with philosophers? And the poets weren't bad either. Who else is here? I see the two philosophers, and young Zeno. Young Empedocles and Anaxagoras too. Oh, yes, there's Aeschylus as well, along with our two resident sycophants. I think I'll talk to them first, and get it over with.

(*Walks over to Pindar and Bacchylides*).

So, Pindar. You were right of course. Your paymaster came through, as you predicted.

Pindar Of course. It was an impressive victory, don't you think?

Cratinus You're asking *me*? I was – well – otherwise engaged. (*Looks at his wine flask*). Ask young Empedocles instead; he's the horsey one. Empedocles, we want an expert opinion. Did Hiero deserve to win? Or was the chariot race cooked, as usual?

Empedocles You expect me – his next-door neighbour – to answer that? Are you crazy? I want to get home in one piece. Ask Bacchylides.

Bacchylides Keep me out of this. I wrote a good victory ode; that's the limit of my duties.

Cratinus (aside) And mine too. Now I can talk to the more interesting people around here.

(*Aloud*) Is that last night's party I see over there, Epicharmus?

Epicharmus Yes it is. Let's join them. (*They join Anaxagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Zeno; Pindar, Bacchylides and Empedocles leave*).

So, Anaxagoras? Will you be travelling directly home?

Anaxagoras No, I'll be accompanying Heraclitus as far as Athens. It's a chance to get to know him a bit better. I'll then be staying there a short while before continuing on.

Cratinus You're both welcome to lodge with me while you're in the city. I've developed a sudden taste for talking philosophy. You're both up for some big battles, I hope?

Anaxagoras I am; and I'm happy to accept your invitation. Heraclitus will have to speak for himself. (*Turns and leaves*).

Heraclitus Thank you, Cratinus; your invitation is kind, but I think I'll pass.

I feel the need to be gone.

Cratinus As you wish. (*Turns to Parmenides*).

Ah, Parmenides. What a pleasure to have met you. And what a contest together! That was a *real* Olympics!

Parmenides It was. And with such an interesting difference.

Epicharmus What was that?

Parmenides Well, our own contest was a goal in itself. Absolute victory is out of the question in our sort of Olympics, even though part of the contest is no doubt to search for it. In that sense our battles really do match *Heraclitus's* vision of the nature of the world: ongoing warfare with no winners.

Heraclitus Thank you. I'm glad *some* of my thoughts have prevailed here. That will comfort me a little on the journey home.

Epicharmus Oh, you'll have other consolations too. You can listen in for a while to the uni-

Cratinus Oh, stop it, Epicharmus! He was just starting to feel a tiny bit less grumpy at the world. Be well, Heraclitus. We know you think most of mankind is dumb and stupid, and that this group clearly includes Epicharmus and myself, but we don't hold it against you. We just want to tell you to take a close look at yourself each time you say it.

(*Heraclitus glowers and leaves*).

Parmenides I'm sorry to see him go off less than happy. But I imagine misanthropes are pretty often less than happy. Unless, of course, that's what *makes* them happy!

Epicharmus (*laughing*) Ah, happiness. Now that's a great topic for discussion! As far as *I'm* concerned...

Parmenides As far as *I'm* concerned, the sun is rising higher, and Zeno and I need to be on our way. Somebody else will have to discuss happiness. But I must say I *was* very happy here; it was my best Olympics yet.

Zeno It was my first. And it won't be my last. Not if we can persuade *you* to come back for the next one, Cratinus.

Cratinus I can't wait. And next time I'll bring some thoughts on a delicious comedy which is starting to dance around inside me. I think the Athenians will love it.

Parmenides No guesses as to its contents. Let's leave here fast, Zeno! Till the next time, Cratinus!

(*They leave*).

Cratinus (*alone on stage with Epicharmus*) Will I be back? I don't know. But I'll miss these philosophers. How about you, Epicharmus?

Epicharmus Me too.

Cratinus Are they always that entertaining?

Epicharmus Not on purpose, I'm sure. But you're right; they are even better comic potential than I had thought. And smarter than I had thought, too; especially Parmenides and his young friend. If you want to know the truth, I'm less sure than I was a couple of days ago that Parmenides is just an inflated pig's bladder, and very sure indeed that this boy Zeno is going to stand a lot of things on their head before he's finished. Though whether I'd ever trust a philosopher to run a *society* I'm not sure, whatever old Xenophanes might have thought. Are you really going to make them the subject of your first play?

Cratinus I might. But anything could get in the way. The follies of ordinary Athenians themselves are an unending supply of material, as you know. I hope some other comedian comes along some day to make use of them, even if *I* don't. I know now that they can take a ribbing. Or most of them, anyway.

Epicharmus You're right. Fifty years from now they could be the funniest characters in comedy.

But it's time to go. Shall I see you in four years?

Cratinus I hope so.

Epicharmus Let's drink to that!

Cratinus You took the words out of my mouth. (*Both drink, smile broadly, and drink again*).

(2) A Question of Justice

Dramatis Personae (in order of appearance): Cratinus, Eupolis, Aristophanes, Democritus, Thrasymachus, Socrates, Euripides, Sophocles, Protagoras, Antiphon, Thucydides, Anaxagoras

Act 1

Olympia, the year of the 89th Olympiad (424 BCE). The evening of the first day's sporting events of the Games.

A number of literati, who happen to have met one another over the previous twenty-four hours, have agreed to get together for a social evening of wine and discussion. They are the comic poets Cratinus, Eupolis, and Aristophanes; the tragic poets Sophocles and Euripides; the philosophers Socrates and Democritus; and the sophists Protagoras, Thrasymachus, and Antiphon.

Cratinus (drinking) Am I the only one around here feeling suffocated?

Eupolis You mean intoxicated?

Cratinus No, my dear Eupolis, suffocated. All right – I'm a soak, but at the moment I'm feeling... suffocated.

Aristophanes Give him another drink, Eupolis. Who wants Cratinus suffocated? We need Cratinus drunk, the way he usually is. What's this nonsense about suffocation? It was a hot day, we know, but not *that* hot.

Cratinus Who's talking about the weather? I'm talking about how boring the Games have become.

Eupolis Boring? You're joking.

Cratinus No I'm not. With so few Spartans here – and most of them past it – the Games are just a pain.

Democritus I know what you mean. The Spartans usually send magnificent athletes to the Games, but since this war started they have their minds set on the sport they're *really* good at. Why should they waste their energy on *this*?

Thrasymachus I think Democritus is right. With so few Spartans here it's more like the Boys' Competition. When the War's over we'll no doubt get back to the real thing.

Aristophanes You'll have a long wait, Thrasymachus. This war is set for the duration.

Thrasymachus So you're a prophet, too, Aristophanes? (*Turning to Socrates*) Such a talented young man, don't you think, Socrates?

Socrates Full of talent, I'd say. And unpredictable in whom he decides to skewer. I'd watch your back, if I were you.

Eupolis You're right; he'll knife anybody, foe or friend.

Socrates You should know, Eupolis. But for the moment I think he's too busy knifing politicians.

Eupolis Yes. For the moment...

Aristophanes And a nice feeling it is too. It's been good to rip up Cleon, the miserable upstart. Oh, how the audiences have loved it. The judges too. Three first prizes! Did he hate that! They are the worst sort, these lower-class nonentities who float to the surface like scum and claim to represent the people.

Democritus You mean they *don't*, Aristophanes? Or is it that they don't represent *your* people?

Thrasymachus Oh, be nice to him, Democritus. Who doesn't enjoy seeing Cleon ridiculed? Such a pompous fool. And trying to run a war, at that. No wonder it's likely to last forever. Aristophanes is right.

Cratinus Is he also right about you sophists?

Thrasymachus It's demagogues he's after.

Cratinus That's right, Thrasymachus. Demagogues. Of *every* stripe...

Thrasymachus Does this man always talk in riddles?

Eupolis Not always. But pretty often when he's drunk. Which he's starting to become now. Aristophanes, pour him some more wine.

(*Aristophanes pours wine into Cratinus's goblet*).

Cratinus You people must be really blind. Creon may have failed for the moment in his goal of bringing our young prize-winner to trial, but sooner or later the Athenians will shut us *all* up. It was fine when Athens was at peace, and lording it over a big, growing empire; the politi-

cians could *take* a little ribbing then from comic poets and laugh it off. Or at any rate they could grin and bear it. When I accused Pericles of letting his fancy-woman Aspasia run things I got a big *laugh* from my audience, not a spell in a jail cell – or worse. But it’s different when we are in a war to the death. Just wait for it; we’ll all be confined to nice, ‘safe’ topics fairly soon.

Euripides Such as?

Cratinus You need to ask, Euripides? After what Aristophanes did to you in *The Acharnians*?

Euripides Oh, I thought that was just a passing bit of spleen, in between attacks on his favourite demagogue.

Cratinus You obviously don’t know Aristophanes. But why should I speak for him? Tell him yourself, Aristophanes.

Aristophanes Cratinus is always best when he’s drunk, and occasionally even right. Like now. I think he should stop writing plays and just get someone to capture his drunken remarks for posterity. It’s true what he says about the War. We were starting to become brutalized even before it started, what with that business of Pericles ordering the Samians branded (*branded!* what are we – Persians?). But the War itself has brutalized us further, as we’re led on by our *new* Great Leader.

Yes, I think I’ve probably written my last political play. If Cleon doesn’t put a stop to us, some other demagogue will. But I loved it while it lasted.

Socrates But you’re not finished yet, surely, Aristophanes? Just when I was getting to know you, and beginning to think of you as a friend.

Aristophanes No, Socrates, I’m only just starting. But I’m pretty certain I’ll have to change targets. War politicians are touchy. And unpredictable. And I want to live a bit longer.

Sophocles So your ridiculing Euripides wasn’t just a passing bit of spleen after all?

Aristophanes Of course not. He’s one of these new intellectuals Pericles surrounded himself with. A menace, the lot of them. Almost as big a menace as Cleon.

Sophocles When you say ‘the lot of them’, are you calling the tragic poets too a menace?

Aristophanes Oh, not you, Sophocles. I’m thinking specifically of the new class of free-

thinkers that Pericles seemed to favour so much. And that really means Euripides, among the tragic poets.

Euripides I’m not sure whether to feel annoyed or flattered.

Aristophanes I can’t say it matters. You’re a sophist like all the other sophists, and a woman-hater as well. You shame the stage with the monstrous females you’ve placed on it.

Euripides I expect unlettered people to say such things, Aristophanes, but not a person of your sophistication.

Aristophanes Lay off the flattery please. I can recognize a monster on stage when I see one.

Euripides Like Medea, I take it?

Aristophanes Who else? Do we really have to listen to a witch (and previous murderess) as she sets out to murder her husband and children? We learn from suffering, as Aeschylus put it, but the suffering in question is the suffering of the basically noble, not that of the constitutionally vile.

Euripides And that is how you see Medea?

Aristophanes How else?

Euripides You have no sense that vile treatment of her by her husband might have turned her mind?

Aristophanes Since when did a man’s desire to change his woman merit so dreadful a response?

Euripides Who used the word ‘merit’? My play is about what *is*, and what *is* includes sometimes violent response to pain, including the sort of punishment inflicted by Medea on her husband. Whether he ‘merited’ it I leave to moral thinkers like my friend Socrates here to tell us.

Socrates I’m not sure you can partition your mind quite that easily, Euripides. You have very strong moral views of your own, and you know it. And they emerge with clarity in your dramas for all to see who are open to seeing them.

(*A pause*).

Euripides I’m listening to you. I always do.

Socrates As this war has progressed (if that is the right word), I have noticed that the suffering of women has become something of a feature of your writing. As the War was beginning, you brought onto the stage Medea, a woman who felt treated with contempt by her husband and took her revenge. Since that time you have written plays about two other women, this time women wrecked by war. The war between two mighty

powers of the past, Greece and Troy. It's not a coincidence, I take it, that those plays have been written at a time of another war to the end between two mighty powers?

Euripides I leave that to others to decide.

Socrates Whether my friend Aristophanes would call Hecuba a monster too I don't know. It's certainly easy to do if all one concentrates on is the vengeance she took for the wrongs she suffered. But Euripides himself, it seems clear to me at any rate, wishes us to spend at least as much time thinking about the wrongs she suffered as the vengeance she pursued. And ruminating on the fact that those whom we, as Greeks, tend to assume to be the virtuous side in the conflict can, if victorious, act with a vileness which we as a general rule attribute to barbarians.

Andromache too is a victim of that same conflict, as was her son, cast to his death from the walls of Troy on Greek command.

So I ask you, Euripides, am I right in my surmise? Will this continue to be a feature of your writing as the War continues? Are you planning, despite the absurdity of the belief in some quarters that you hate women, to continue to write plays about women as the most tragic sufferers in war?

Euripides You put it very trenchantly, Socrates, and I can't predict how I shall write on these matters, just as I can't predict how long the War will last. What I *can* say is that I'm beginning to contemplate the idea of a play born some years past when I first saw Sophocles's great drama *Antigone*. (*Bows graciously to Sophocles*).

Sophocles I'm flattered. And intrigued. Tell us more.

Euripides Well, like so many others, I was overwhelmed by the dilemma of Antigone as you laid it out, my dear Sophocles: which should prevail, the decree of a king *forbidding* the burial of a dead warrior or eternal laws that *demand*ed it? Her final choice seemed to me utterly noble, and I have never ceased to think so.

Thrasymachus A mad choice, if you ask me.

Aristophanes Nobody did. (*Laughter*).

Euripides Since that time I have often thought of that terrible war against Thebes, but from a slightly different perspective than yourself, Sophocles. And that is, the sufferings of the mothers of *all* those, not just Polynices, who,

according to the dictate of King Creon, were to be forbidden burial. Whatever the current atmosphere of unbelief amongst the educated, at the time it was strongly believed that to deny burial to the body of a dead man after executing him was to then condemn his *soul as well* to suffering *beyond* the grave. In an earlier conflict Andromache saw the same double vengeance unleashed by Achilles upon her husband Hector, and I suppose that this too has never been far from my mind.

Protagoras Are thoughts on all this just stirring in you, or have you written anything out yet?

Euripides I haven't written anything, but I have been turning over a few lines in my head...

Protagoras Lines that you would like to share with us?

Euripides If you would be so kind as to listen. This is Iphis lamenting the death of her child in war.

(*Euripides recites Suppliant Women 1080 - 1113*).

(*A pause*).

Socrates Wonderful.

Thrasymachus The caterwaulings of the weak, if you ask me.

Aristophanes Nobody did. (*More laughter*).

Thrasymachus How come you are so friendly to Euripides all of a sudden, Aristophanes? What's changed? Have I missed something?

Aristophanes Not really. While I find a lot in Euripides to laugh at, I think he's onto something important here. Women *do* suffer in war.

Thrasymachus So you've *noticed!* Wonderful. I always knew you were intelligent. So what's new? That's life. You can't change things. Women have a bad time in war.

Aristophanes But that's my point. Why *can't* we change things? Or, more precisely, why can't *women* change things? But we are being side-tracked. I was talking about the new intellectuals, and what a menace they are. And that means, for the most part, the self-styled intelligentsia, the sophists.

Antiphon Present company excepted, of course?

Aristophanes Please, Antiphon. You're a sophist yourself, so I presume you'll appreciate a careful little verbal distinction between the per-