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**The hero's role in the *polis*: The evolution of Homeric  
iconography and literary archetypes in classical tragedy**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

This dissertation examines adaptations of the themes and archetypes of Homeric epic in fifth century tragedy. It will propose that Athenian playwrights often highlight the contrast between the themes of individualism and monarchism inherent to these narratives and their own democratic states. Athens reinterpreted the figureheads of Pan-Hellenic mythology to comment on its own state or bolster its legacy across Greece.

The first chapter will explore the core traits of the ἥρως in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as identified in scholarship. It will then compare them against later literature including lyric poetry and philosophical texts which either homage or discuss epic. Through this, one can gauge the reception of heroism within classical Athens, especially by setting it against the rise of hero cults in the sixth century onwards and identifying where this new mould of heroism resembled and differed from what came before. This will form the framework of how an ancient Athenian audience would understand heroism when they began watching a tragic play.

The rest will explore interpretations of different heroic characters on a case-by-case basis. Each chapter will examine portrayals of a specific mythological hero. This involves comparing portrayals of the same character in different plays by different authors. Each chapter will follow the same basic structure, breaking down how the ἥρως is characterised, how they relate to the people around them, and how their actions impact the surrounding πόλις. The thesis will conclude that tragedy's response to heroism encapsulates how any art form responds to its earlier traditions, maintaining what is still relevant, changing what is not, and developing a

springboard to create something that resonates with a new audience.

**Word Count: 273**

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## **Introduction:**

Even thousands of years after its zenith, the culture and literature of Greek antiquity remains both shockingly relevant and widely discussed, partly because the genres of Greek art, from epic and lyric poetry, dramatic tragedy or comedy, sculptural architecture, or painted crafts are all entrenched in the values of the society that crafted them. To understand Homeric epic and its impact, for instance, is to better comprehend those ancient cultures. From archaic, to classical, to Hellenistic, ancient Greece presents a fascinating case study in how art can evolve by continually drawing on past conventions and archetypes to create something new and topical.

This thesis will demonstrate this through one of the clearest examples. The artistic and literary evolution of the Homeric hero or ἥρως, one of the most iconic, and yet most contradictory symbols of the classical era. The archaic-classical concept of heroism was fully established in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, with roots in the wider cycles of oral epic. That same image became instrumental to the culture of fifth century Greece. Athens, especially, remains one of the most visible examples of this influence in action, with the memorisation of Homeric epics being a key component of Athenian schooling. Yet, at the heart of Athens' relationship to the epic tradition, is a curious paradox. The Homeric ἥρως is rooted in its Dark Age origins, itself a fantastical recreation of the Bronze Age. It is, therefore, entrenched in concepts of monarchism, and divine lineage that makes certain individuals inherently superior to their social peers. What role, then, would such an image hold in the ostensibly democratic (its own class divides notwithstanding) Periclean Athens; a state which not only rejected despotic tyranny but condemned foreign powers such as Persia for

equating their mortal rulers with gods, this being one of the core themes of Aeschylus' *Persians*? Despite the Homeric tradition being wildly at odds with Athens' own social values, these characters remained cultural touchstones throughout the fifth century and recurring subjects in drama and art. Why, then, did this logical divide not become more widely controversial? It is this dichotomy that the thesis will seek to answer, examining the cultural representations of heroic characters in fifth century culture, to better grasp how Athens conceptualised these characters and their ideals.

While, naturally, there are multiple approaches one can take to examine heroic portrayals in fifth century Athens, the primary focus here will be the depictions of heroism in Greek tragedies. Tragedy is, in some ways, a generic successor to epic. Aristotle identifies not only 'epic and tragic poetry', but also 'comedy, dithyramb, and most music for aulos and lyre' as all being forms of μίμησις,<sup>1</sup> the process of interpreting and recreating existing concepts. Furthermore, even in the fifth century, epic and tragedy remained parallel genres, with epic performance being integrated into the annual Panathenaia and tragedies were central to the Dionysia festival. These genres would therefore continue to influence each other, repeated at their respective festivals across the years. And such trends have been commented on by scholars such as Nagy.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the bulk of tragedies, with some exceptions such as Aeschylus' *Persians*, are set within the mythologised past of Homeric epic. Tragedy is also uniquely public. The majority of surviving classical tragedies were performed in the Athenian City Dionysia, a religious festival held in honour of

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1447 14-17.

<sup>2</sup> Nagy, 77, 2006.



Dionysus, god of wine and revelry. One of the central moments of the festival was a three-day long drama contest involving (among other works) a performance of a collection of three of each playwrights' tragedies back-to-back, with a group of citizens from across Athens' δῆμοι to judge whose contributions they considered to be the best.

This context has a significant impact on how one should interpret these plays. This was a sacred religious festival. The cult statue of Dionysus may even have been brought into the theatre specifically to oversee the performances. They were likely attended by plenty of people from various other Greek states, especially as Athens' influence on wider Greece via the Delian League grew across the fifth century prior to its defeat by Sparta in 404 B.C.E. That civic element was instrumental to the thematic discourse of these tragedies. Goldhill explores how the identity of the Athenian πόλις was interwoven within the entire procedure of the Dionysia, each stage of the ceremony being 'deeply involved with the city's sense of self. The libations of the ten generals, the display of tribute, the announcement of the city's benefactors, the parade of state- educated boys, now men, in full military uniform, all stress the power of the *polis*, the duties of an individual to the *polis*... This is fundamentally and essentially a festival of the democratic *polis*'.<sup>3</sup> In short, tragedy was a genre not only heavily influenced by Homeric themes and motifs, but one rooted in the ideology of the πόλις which delivered its messages on a public-city wide scale. As a result, this raises questions about how one should interpret the commentary tragic playwrights make on crucial cultural images, including the

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<sup>3</sup> Goldhill, 68, 1987.

themes and ideals of epic heroism.

Admittedly the political aspect of the Dionysia is still a point of contention among scholars. Rhodes, especially, is very critical of being too quick to label any ceremony as inherently democratic, as there is a lack of evidence from other non-democratic Greek city states to compare against.<sup>4</sup> It risks a false equivalency, declaring themes as ‘democratic’ which are more relevant to the ‘general Greek polis ideology’.<sup>5</sup> Plus, romanticising Athenian democracy by suggesting that it was free to voice any idea is a false assumption to evaluate these texts under. Carter takes a similar perspective, observing that ‘he has Athens chiefly in mind’ in his findings in a way that is ‘too restrictive’.<sup>6</sup> Only a minority of plays depict Athens directly and ‘the dramatic setting of Greek tragedies tends to reflect the shape of the Greek city-state generally’. It is not inherently Athenian or democratic.<sup>7</sup> There are doubtless specific plays where Goldhill’s more direct association with Athens is appropriate, especially if the narrative or characters revolve around Athens. To ignore the democratic undertones of a work such as Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, for instance, a play this thesis will address in due time, simply because one cannot pinpoint the extent of democracy’s influence on the genre, would be misguided. Tragedy may not be inherently Athenian, but when examining extant works from that city and that time particular period, one cannot discount the playwrights’ consciousness of the current political climate entirely. Perhaps, then, one may find a middle ground between these different approaches. Consider Carter’s remarks upon tragedy as a reflection of the ‘city-state’ generally. In the same vein, Rhodes does not condone wholly ignoring

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<sup>4</sup> Rhodes, 106, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Rhodes, 115, 2003

<sup>6</sup> Carter, 38, 2007

<sup>7</sup> Carter, 44, 2007.

political readings of tragedy. In his own words, ‘I see Athenian drama as reflecting the *polis* in general rather than the democratic polis in particular’.<sup>8</sup> It is possible to observe themes of the individual and the community without aligning them with Athens as Goldhill does (unless the specific play should provide good reason). In effect, one can moderate between the stances of these scholars where relevant while examining the plays. Therefore, one can interpret the thematic influences of epic (itself a medium which extends far beyond Athens) upon tragedy in a wider sense.

With all of this in mind, this thesis will examine the presentation of numerous ἥρωες across tragic plays. Each character will be the focus of a specific chapter, since often multiple playwrights will each have interpreted the same hero. It will focus on how their behaviour is contrasted with the wider society around them and whether Athens ever recognised the inherent contradiction of these individualised, superhuman protagonists in a culture built around a wider city state, or πόλις. Athenian drama is just as much a product of the fifth century, as a representation of the heroic past. Such duality will be the crux of this thesis, understanding the nature and perception of the ἥρωες, and how that changed in the leap from the archaic to the classical hero. In short, it will attempt to discern the hero’s role in the πόλις.

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<sup>8</sup> Rhodes, 119, 2003.

## **Chapter One: From archaic to classical-the context of a hero**

Before examining the representations of the hero in drama, one needs to better understand what being lauded as a ἥρωες meant. For this meaning is both incredibly complex, and undeniably changed overtime. To truly grasp the role of heroism in tragedy is to understand the literary tradition that led up to it. While Nagy warns against the risk of generalising such an abstract concept as ‘an epic hero’, he calls Achilles in the *Iliad* and Odysseus in the *Odyssey* ‘the most representative examples of ancient poetic constructs’<sup>9</sup> of heroism. Thus, they make a natural starting point. From there, it will move to examples of archaic literature, providing a bridge between the genres of Dark Age epic and Classical Age tragedy. Nonetheless, it is also worth considering that the term ἥρωες developed new meanings and associations by the time of the Dionysia’s formation. Therefore, the thesis will examine a selection of evidence from fifth century hero cults, to gain a wider perspective on the cultural impact of heroism. With all these aspects of reference in place, this thesis will have developed a multi-faceted view of the heroic identity, to be assessed against the various tragedies of the fifth century.

### **The Homeric hero**

Between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, there is certainly no shortage of evidence with which to form an image of the Homeric ἥρωες. Whether one focuses on the two protagonists, Achilles and Odysseus, or extends the definition to their various contemporaries such as Hector, Patroclus, Ajax and more, there are multiple immediate recurring traits. For one, heroes are associated with the nobility. Odysseus is the displaced king of Ithaca, Agamemnon rules Mycenae, Hector is the crown-prince of Troy. In keeping with antiquated expectations of class, these characters are

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<sup>9</sup> Nagy, 71, 2006.

unquestionably positioned above everyday people. In Book Two of the *Iliad*, for instance, Odysseus is notably different in his temperament towards the would-be deserters, pacifying any ‘king or man of eminence’ with ‘coaxing words’, but striking the ‘common people’ with a staff.<sup>10</sup> While he must present a degree of courtesy with his fellow nobles, he exerts much harsher force over those deemed socially inferior to him. That superiority is evident in all aspects of their physicality, not just strength; Achilles<sup>11</sup> and Paris,<sup>12</sup> for example, are both described as exceptionally beautiful.

One of the best examples to understand heroic traits is the point of contrast within the epics themselves, Book Two of the *Iliad* introduces Thersites, a man loathed by the Argives. While the heroes are in peak physical condition in a way that makes them both beautiful and strong, Thersites is weaker, ‘bandy-legged, and lame in foot, and his shoulders/ hunched together’,<sup>13</sup> the ugliest member of the army. When Odysseus attacks him with the staff, it aligns him with the commoners who attempt to abandon the war effort. He also lacks any respect or good opinion among the soldiers, as they all, even those still angry with Agamemnon, are willing to laugh at Thersites’ expense.<sup>14</sup> Even his intelligence and way with words is said to be ‘disorderly’ and ‘unruly’,<sup>15</sup> an image reinforced by his verbal sparring match with Odysseus, a man renowned for his unmatched levels of wit and charisma. Oftentimes, the best way to demonstrate an ideology is to represent its polar opposite. As Hall observes, Panhellenic Athens itself, in controlling the Delian

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<sup>10</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 2.188-199.

<sup>11</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 24.629.

<sup>12</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 3.16.

<sup>13</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 2.217-8.

<sup>14</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 2.270.

<sup>15</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 2.213.

League defined its identity by setting itself against the image of the ‘anti-Greek, the barbarian’.<sup>16</sup> Thersites effectively plays this role in the *Iliad*, defining Homeric heroism through its opposite. Already, one can somewhat discern an image of the ἥρως. It describes a particular kind of physically able, well-educated, exceptional member of the nobility, whose natural ability and place in the hierarchy commands respect, allowing them to stand out as exceptional in a way others could not.

This association with the extraordinary manifests as a desire for κλέος. This can be best understood as ‘glory’, yet the matter is more complex than that. The hero seeks a fame, fortune and honour or τιμή that is able to endure long after their death, ideally defining them for generations to come. Because this τιμή will persist after death, fame and mortality go hand in hand in Homeric epic. An ignoble death becomes the greatest insult to such a warrior. Odysseus explicitly raises this dreaded prospect in the *Odyssey*. Faced with the prospect of death in Poseidon’s storm, he wishes he could instead have died defending Achilles’ corpse at Troy.<sup>17</sup> In the *Iliad* especially, where the backdrop Trojan War provides a looming threat of death, the characters cling to this glory as a form of morbid compensation for their demise. Κλέος is therefore a form of immortality, allowing warriors to be remembered in a way that allows some part of them to persist in perpetuity. Sarpedon contemplates this dichotomy. He admits to Glaucus that he would not resign himself to death fighting ‘in the first ranks’ if he could avoid it. However, he is aware that ‘death’s spectre’s stand over us in their thousands, which no mortal can flee from or escape...’ In that case, he reasons, stepping out in search of glory is the best

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<sup>16</sup> Hall, 60, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 5.311-3.

alternative.<sup>18</sup>

Placing this in Sarpedon's mouth is especially intriguing should one agree with Strauss-Clay's interpretation, that Sarpedon is the epic's chief exemplar of honour through death. He is the 'paradigmatic hero, who as the last son of Zeus, is both a powerful king and warrior and whose personal accomplishments coincide with his heroic status. He fights far from his homeland, chooses a noble death, and receives both everlasting honor in hero cult and immortal glory in epic'.<sup>19</sup> If Sarpedon is indeed an exemplary, then one would expect to see aspects of his story manifest in the other characters. Sure enough, this conflict is also evident in the choice faced by Achilles. His twin-fate is the clearest indication of how κλέος connects to the concepts of life and death. He describes how his mother Thetis has told him that he has two 'spectres'<sup>20</sup> leading to his death, two fates, a peaceful life or a glorious death. The unending glory of warfare comes at the cost of life with a family and household. But the renown makes that sacrifice worthwhile. After Achilles is slighted by Agamemnon, and subsequently withdraws from the fighting, such a reputation seems unobtainable to him. Without the promise of immortal glory, now that it has been tarred by shame, death loses that worth. 'I now see that battling with the enemy, on and on without ceasing, earns no gratitude' he remarks '...a man dies just the same, whether he has done much or nothing'.<sup>21</sup>

Incidentally, this link between death and glory is another recurring theme. As Nagy recounts, oral poetry in the Epic Cycle deals with the theme of immortality much

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<sup>18</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 12.322-5.

<sup>19</sup> Strauss-Clay, 38, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 9.411.

<sup>21</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 9. 316-20.

more directly. In the *Aethiopis*, ‘after [Achilles] is killed at Troy, his body is transported by his goddess mother to a paradisiacal realm where he is made immortal...the *Iliad*, in contrast, acknowledges the ultimate immortalization of Achilles, but these references are kept implicit and never made explicit...’<sup>22</sup> And it is not a misnomer for to compare Homer to the wider Cycle, since scholarship already has cause to speculate that they were likely interlinked in the minds of contemporary listeners to. As Foley remarks, ‘Once upon a time, the ‘Cycle’ was not regarded as separate from ‘Homer’. Even in Aristotle’s distinction, this term’ may have been a collective term for the whole oral tradition. ‘It is not until the later period of textualization that the Cycle becomes synonymous with ‘not-Homer’. Once segregation from Homer is in force, the distinction is further emphasized by conferred notions of quality and aesthetics, beginning with Aristotle and continuing today’.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, even before one adds other texts into the equation, other Homeric works already complicate these themes. The *Odyssey*, for instance, undermines the connection between death and glory, largely because Odysseus can win glory without dying young or in battle. Pache calls Odysseus an ‘atypical hero’, one who ‘must return home, live a long life, and die in his own bed.’ Pache perceives this as part of the *Odyssey*’s theme: ‘playfully’ redefining ‘heroism in a way that makes an unheroic death a precondition of its hero achieving its epic glory’.<sup>24</sup> The *Odyssey* treats minstrels and bards intriguingly as well. It may seem incongruous to give the blind, minstrel Demodocus the title of ἦρωες.<sup>25</sup> However, if one defines the concept

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<sup>22</sup> Nagy, 84, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Foley 79, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Pache, 97, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 1.482.



through this distinction from humanity, and closeness to the gods, then calling a bard who performs music through the inspiration of the Muses a hero does not seem so far-fetched. In many ways, that indicates one of the key problems of understanding the Homeric hero. The exact nature of κλέος is complicated and multi-faceted, coming in various forms.

Victory in battle repeatedly appears to be a natural indicator of heroic renown. The *Iliad* has a variety of ἀριστεία passages dedicated to the battles of an individual hero. Diomedes overwhelms both the Trojans and even the god Ares with Athena's aid. Achilles' return to the battlefield is marked by him driving the Trojans into defeat and culminates in Hector's death. During Hector's ἀριστεία, Zeus is explicitly described as giving him glory due to his impending death.<sup>26</sup> Material possessions are also a factor. Odysseus, having been stranded on Scherie, makes it a priority to obtain wealth and treasure to bring back with him to Ithaca. These prizes are established as an inevitable consequence of Odysseus' time amongst the Phaeacians as early as the council of gods in Book Five. The *Iliad* meanwhile, has the duel between Hector and Ajax end not with either party dying in defence of their community, but instead with the two exchanging gifts. This correlates with Strauss' interpretation that 'the hero fights far from home, not to defend his family and city, but solely to acquire honour and status'.<sup>27</sup> Nor is this an isolated occurrence. On the contrary, the primary conflict of the *Iliad* begins with a material dispute over Briseis and Chryseis, the concubines of Achilles and Agamemnon respectively. To be stripped of what is effectively a prize for his skill in warfare is a direct slight to

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<sup>26</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 15. 611-2.

<sup>27</sup> Strauss-Clay, 34, 2009.

Achilles' κλέος, enough to reduce him to a violent rage. In fact, Achilles' instinctual first response is to kill Agamemnon on the spot.<sup>28</sup> Which indicates another critical point. The Homeric ἥρωες will prioritise their own glory even at the expense of their wider society. After the meeting in Book One, Achilles prays to Thetis to turn the tide of the war in favour of the Trojans, causing the deaths of hundreds of Greek soldiers as punishment for Agamemnon's insult to his pride.<sup>29</sup> Achilles feels justified in making such a drastic choice because he feels he has been robbed of his κλέος via the loss of Briseis. Achilles' pride matters more than the lives of his comrades. This is an expected part of the mentality of a ἥρωες, one on which Achilles is never truly challenged or confronted.

These aforementioned factors all serve to make them outsiders to their wider society. Often their entire moral code is built around an individualistic and external need for a good reputation. Lawrence uses Hector's fatal confrontation with Achilles as an example. Hector 'regards himself as morally compromised because his failure to heed excellent advice has resulted in the deaths of many Trojan soldiers'. Yet he redeems himself through 'saving face through an act of courage'. Hector enters a fight he cannot win to overcome his feelings of shame, or αἰδώς. Being 'seen to act virtuously' is just as, perhaps more important than their actual behaviour.<sup>30</sup> Their connection to the gods, such as Achilles' ability to turn the tide of the war through prayer, is another factor. Achilles' divine blood allows him to ignore social or even religious conventions. At the beginning of Book Twenty-Four of the *Iliad*, Apollo condemns Achilles' 'cruel nature'.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as Hera points out, Achilles is 'born of a

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<sup>28</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 1.188-92.

<sup>29</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 1.365-412.

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence, 2, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 24. 40-2.

goddess', which elevates him even above Hector in the eyes of the gods.<sup>32</sup> He has licence to act ungodly, being both extraordinary, and dangerous. Meanwhile, Odysseus' unique relationship with Athena marks him out amongst other heroes. In the *Odyssey*, Athena is anthropomorphised in her interactions with her favourite warrior in a most unorthodox way. When Odysseus and Telemachus conceal the weapons in the storeroom, Athena walks ahead 'carrying a golden lamp'<sup>33</sup> to light the pair's way. Likewise, after Odysseus arrives on Ithaca, he and Athena sit down by an olive tree to plan their strategy against the Suitors.<sup>34</sup> The two speak to each other as equals and co-conspirators in a surprisingly human manner. She is physically involved with Odysseus in a way she is not with other mortals. Whether through their social or metaphysical position, the heroes are separated from their wider community. They have licence to place their personal interest above their πόλις, sometimes in extreme ways.

This divide between heroes and everyday people has been recognised in scholarship as well. Clarke, for instance, suggests that this is essential to how the *Iliad* uses similes related to animals. 'The beast-simile', he writes, becomes emblematic of the heroic μένος, 'the force of personality' which can motivate a hero in the face of peril, but in excess can drive them into 'μανία, uncontrolled frenzy'.<sup>35</sup> This can become hubristic in a way that can drive a hero beyond their mortal limits, to their cost.<sup>36</sup> This culminates in Achilles killing Hector and denying him burial. Here, he argues, such similes demonstrate that Achilles 'is abandoning human values

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<sup>32</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 24.58-9.

<sup>33</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 19.33.

<sup>34</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 13.371-2.

<sup>35</sup> Clarke, 148, 1995.

<sup>36</sup> Clarke, 150, 1995.

and society and choosing death in preference to life'<sup>37</sup>. In the context of a discussion on the hero's role in the πόλις, such a view of the hero as a concept that is inhuman and fatalistic is extremely pertinent. There specially illuminating considering Haubold's findings, beginning with the concepts raised in Nagy's work, 'the relationship between the 'the people '(λαός) , 'grief (ἄχος) , 'power ' (κράτος) , 'the hero ' (ἥρωες)''<sup>38</sup> and expands on the relationship Homeric heroes share with their wider 'λαοί'. In fact, Haubold goes so far as to suggest that this structure is crucial to how one understands a Homeric hero:

'Life among λαοί, as epitomized by the formula 'shepherd of the people '...is built, above all, on social interaction. It divides the world into groups and leaders who are correlated through an unambiguously stable grammatical hierarchy. There are 'shepherds of the people '... in the formulaic language of early Greek epic, but no 'people of the shepherds'...At this level, at least, the shepherd is always a function of his group. As a result, our understanding of the Homeric individual becomes closely implicated with that of the people around him'.<sup>39</sup> This is especially significant in the context of the transition from the dark age to the classical. This is the period when these fragmented oral traditions were collected and written down coincided with 'drastic changes... which eventually transformed a world of dominant aristocratic households into the classical city-state... The ensuing mixture accounts for the difficulties we have today in describing Homer' s social world.'<sup>40</sup>

The observation that heroism was born out of the class structure that no longer

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<sup>37</sup> Clarke, 155, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Nagy, 82-4, 1979.

<sup>39</sup> Haubold, 10, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Haubold, 11, 2014.

exists appears in plenty of scholarship. Strauss-Clay addresses this in her own discussion of Sarpedon's speech in Book Twelve. In her own words, 'the Homeric hero must have originated in a time when small communities were continually at war with each other; privileges such as Sarpedon mentions – *dais* and *temenos* – were granted to the warrior community whose job it was to protect the community when it was attacked'. But when that class becomes so ingrained as part of the nobility, even in times of peace, that it 'perpetuates itself' even if it outright harms the order it is meant to uphold.<sup>41</sup> In the *Iliad*, for instance, Agamemnon is both the βασιλεύς and ποιμήν to the Greek forces. Achilles, however, stands apart from this as something else entirely, in direct contrast with that same ποιμήν, his wrath inflicting suffering on the 'λαοί' in an almost godlike way.<sup>42</sup> That wrath is expressly rooted in his desire for glory, and is the Achaean army's doom and later their salvation once he turns that same anger upon Hector and re-joins the battle. In fact, Graziosi and Haubold have suggested that the hero's entire mindset 'in particular, their preoccupation with personal honour' is much more reminiscent of the Homeric depiction of gods, than it is of the other mortal characters.<sup>43</sup> Much like Clarke's association of heroes with animals, Homeric scholarship recognises heroes as something other, sometimes even greater, than human, which raises questions as to whether they can exist within a stable community.

Even in the *Odyssey*, which on the surface seems much more optimistic that the hero can readjust to their πόλις, troubling implications remain, as Haubold observes. Odysseus' νόστος is rooted in a desire to re-integrate into his own household and

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<sup>41</sup> Strauss-Clay, 32-3, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Haubold, 64-5, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Graziosi and Haubold, 121, 2005.

community. Yet, that same impulse places him in direct conflict with the Suitors, who themselves are nobility, and (to some extent) members of Odysseus' own λαοί.<sup>44</sup> Their deaths are framed as a necessary evil owing to their own 'villainy',<sup>45</sup> much like how Odysseus' companions are said to die owing to their own 'folly',<sup>46</sup> thereby rejecting the notion that Odysseus is obligated to save or spare these groups. Even so, the Suitors' murder has tangible social consequences, which form a rift between ἥρωες and λαοί that plays out across Book 24, and ultimately requires Athena's influence to put to rest. Much like Achilles, Odysseus is both the saviour and the enemy of his own society. Haubold even argues that the *Odyssey's* approach to the λαοί goes further, since both the Suitors, and Odysseus' own companions, effectively die for Odysseus' benefit, and in neither case is Odysseus himself blamed for it<sup>47</sup>. He returns his kingdom to order through violence, which extends at times to the λαοί he is supposed to rule as βασιλεύς. Such tensions are a vivid example of how, long before tragedy formed as a genre, the relationship between hero and state within the Homeric tradition was already rife with ambiguity.

From this, one has a basic understanding of what conventions define a Homeric hero. They are repeatedly portrayed as exceptional figures of noble (often divine) birth who performed extraordinary tasks (especially regarding warfare or battle). They are primarily driven by the pursuit of κλέος, immortality achieved through fame and glory. To earn this, they seek out triumph in warfare and military prizes, defending their personal honour at all costs. All of these factors, noble and divine lineage, significant ability, and an individualistic desire to maintain their own

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<sup>44</sup> Haubold, 123, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 20.393.

<sup>46</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 1.8.

<sup>47</sup> Haubold, 144, 2014.

honour, present them as outsiders. They will steadfastly pursue κλέος even if it might isolate them from their own πόλις, or from humanity in general. This all forms the definition of the Greek ἥρωος and laid the groundwork for the way future generations would engage with the concept.

### **The hero beyond Homer**

So, Homeric epic, while not the definitive origin of the idea, can perhaps be called the point where the classical Greek concept of the ἥρωος truly took the shape that would define it going forward. However, there was no shortage of heroic portrayals in literature. Therefore, there was a much larger history of literary tradition that may have influenced fifth century tragedy in its depiction of heroism. One particularly relevant example is archaic lyric poetry, the most obvious chronological poetic bridge between Homer and tragedy. In Pindar's work, particularly, one can see a key example of what will become a key trait of Homer's reception in Greek literature: the attempt to reconcile ancient heroes with contemporary themes and ideals. Take *Pythian Ode* 11 as a case study, which deliberately intertwines the story of Thrasydaeus, a contemporary athlete, with the myth of Orestes. Drawing upon the link from Thrasydaeus' home in Thebes, itself the mythical home of Pylades, 'the host of Laconian Orestes'.<sup>48</sup> This allows Pindar to numerate upon the history of Orestes, and the house of Atreus as a whole, from the motivations of Clytemnestra, the death of Agamemnon, to Orestes' final revenge.

Finally, he celebrates the joy of the 'middle estate' of moderated success, far from the corruption of tyranny and the insolent envy that inevitably follows those who

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<sup>48</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 11.16.

reach the greatest heights of fame.<sup>49</sup> It is important to consider why Pindar emulates heroic myths in such a manner. Pavlou describes ‘Pindar’s mythical detours’ as existing ‘to praise, extol and glorify contemporary victors’. They celebrate the ‘birth of heroes, the colonisation of cities, the establishment of hero cults, rituals and athletic games’ and that focus is typically reflected in Pindar’s subject matter.<sup>50</sup> Now this perspective comes with the risk of reducing the significance of these diversions. As Sigelman remarks, in scholarship on Pindar ‘Myth is thus reduced to fable; it is seen as camouflaging a lesson that can be extracted and explicated in direct’.<sup>51</sup> But it is still worthy to note that Pindar combines cultural celebration with the heroic tradition, in ways that allow the two to comment on each other.

In the case of *Pythian* 11, focus is placed especially on specific themes from the myth of Orsestes, most notably those of ξενία, family ties and reputation. As Sigelman points out, ξενία becomes a key framing device of Pindar’s retelling of the *Oresteia*, ‘the source of healing that sets the topsy-turvy world of the Atridae back on its base...re-establishing the past as the source of the life of the future’.<sup>52</sup> As noted previously, Pindar breaks chronology by beginning not with the death of Agamemnon, but with Pylades acting as a host to Orestes in Thebes, after the latter has been rescued from Clytemnestra.<sup>53</sup> Pindar returns to this theme when, directly before Orestes takes revenge on Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, he draws specific attention to the sanctuary the young Orestes receives from ‘his aged host Strophius’.<sup>54</sup> Thus, as Sigelman remarks, ‘the beginnings and ends of this narrative’,

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<sup>49</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 11.51-8.

<sup>50</sup> Pavlou, 96, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Sigelman, 87, 2016

<sup>52</sup> Sigelman, 93, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 11. 15-18.

<sup>54</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 11.35.



are ‘the parent child relationship’ which is warped by Clytemnestra’s actions, and the role played by guest friendship in restoring that world to normal. Orestes’ return gives closure and meaning to the long and bloody history of his family. In other words, ‘The future, as always in Pindar, reinvigorates the past, granting it fresh meaning and significance’.<sup>55</sup>

Pindar is keen to emphasise the themes of guest-friendship and co-existence that make this νόστος possible. The ode is structured in such a way that the audience implicitly associate the two in their minds. This purpose comes from the parallel drawn between the triumph of Orestes, and that of Thrasydaeus. ‘Thrasydaios, like Orestes, is a son who departs to Pytho to revive the glory of his fathers. Pytho is the sacred realm where life springs forth anew’.<sup>56</sup> Thrasydaeus brings honour to his family name, through his athletic victory, Orestes, by undoing the shame of his murder. The young ἥρως and the local victor stand alongside each other as proof of the ever-changing relationship between past and present, how the next generation can glorify, redeem and celebrate their ancestors. However, that sense of lineage and heroic ancestry can be a double-edged sword. While it can inspire the next generation to live up to that mantle, it can also make the prospect of disgrace so much more shameful. Clytemnestra’s deceit brought the scorn of others, a mockery that was felt all the more harshly precisely because of how glorious this household once was.<sup>57</sup> In that case, it is small wonder why, even in this moment of celebration, Pindar cannot seem to help dwelling upon the simpler, safer ‘middle estate

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<sup>55</sup> Sigelman, 103, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Sigelman, 107, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 11.29-30.

flourishing with more enduring/ prosperity'.<sup>58</sup> In short, in works such as *Pythian* 11. Homeric themes of κλέος, reputation and the hero's relationship to wider society are transplanted from their old context into a new one in a way that reveals more about both. This theme of connecting heroes to an abstract notion of the past, while pondering how that history correlates to the future will be a recurring concept of this thesis.

The connection between the epic and lyric traditions may run deeper than a vaguely chronological sequence. Graziosi and Haubold point out that the lyric and epic poetry already 'mutually and influenced and defined one another' as early as the archaic period. The sheer presence of epic poetry and how 'widely performed' it was guaranteed it would have some degree of influence upon lyric and the frequent homages to Homer in Pindar especially only prove that further, yet epic itself draws upon 'what we now call lyric forms, such as the funeral lament or the wedding song'. However, they acknowledge that it is currently difficult to recognise 'how epic engaged with specific lyric poems'.<sup>59</sup> Yet their priorities contrast sharply. The treatment of epic across the archaic and classical eras seems mostly focused upon preservation, gathering the various oral works into a definitive written version. 'There seems to have been a system of mutual control whereby audiences insisted that rhapsodes perform Homer correctly, while rhapsodes in turn refused to change the poems in order to suit the tastes of particular audiences or the political demands of the moment', Graziosi and Haubold write. Therefore 'a narrowly defined corpus of Homeric epic was cherished and protected through time', rejecting works that

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<sup>58</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 11.52-3.

<sup>59</sup> Graziosi and Haubold, 96, 2009.

were deemed, for whatever reason, ‘not truly Homeric’<sup>60</sup>. By contrast, they argue, ‘Lyric poets often urged audiences to reject what they had previously heard and accept a new version of a well-known story’<sup>61</sup>. Two genres which both drew upon the same literary origin, and influenced each other stylistically, but with very different priorities, one built on tradition, the other on innovation.

To see another example of that shift in action, consider Peri’s observations on Pindar’s portrayal of the epic heroes. Peri also recognises many of the stylistic flourishes these arguments have called attention to, including Pindar’s ‘independence and freedom as a poet by turning the chronology of events upside down, by selecting episodes external to the most obvious source (the Iliad), and by suppressing some connotations while reinforcing others’.<sup>62</sup> Throughout his portrayals across both the *Nemean* and *Isthmian* odes, Achilles’ ‘determination’ is depicted in a way that resembles a ‘Homeric trait of the hero’s personality, but presents it in a noble light, as persistence rather than obstinacy, purified of all the impious connotations and paralyzing consequences it has in the Iliad’.<sup>63</sup> His vision of Odysseus is ‘a mean and despicable character, devoid of all the charm he had in the Odyssey’. But simply, ‘Pindar admires the art of Homer, but shows with his verbal and rhetoric techniques...that he can shake off the yoke of Homeric tradition whenever necessary, and imposes the deep mark of his authority upon his subject matter’.<sup>64</sup> It is very easy to see a through line between Sigelman’s assessment of Pindar’s Orestes, and Peri’s commentary on his Achilles and Odysseus. They both identify a

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<sup>60</sup> Graziosi and Haubold, 106, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Graziosi and Haubold, 107, 2009.

<sup>62</sup> Peri, 5, 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Peri, 3, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Peri, 6, 2018.

tendency in Pindar's work to provide unorthodox spins upon the world, themes and characters of Homer, to recontextualise them for a new era. Peri urges readers not to diminish this as a simplification of these characters, but rather as proof of how 'Throughout the archaic age', the likes of Pindar, Bacchylides and Simonides 'activate' or 'mute' different aspects of Homer's characterisation 'at different times, according to the specific aims of their compositions'. And they both seem to consolidate Graziosi and Haubold's impression of the genre as a whole. Lyric takes extensive artistic liberties with epic for a new culture.

What makes this still more relevant to this particular discussion is that the two recognise where 'attic drama' comes into play here. Like lyric, drama (tragedy especially) draws repeatedly upon the themes, concepts and characters of the epic cycles, but with a priority for individual innovation, driven by the fact that 'the public expected to be surprised by new plays, offering novel perspectives on the mythical past and the political present' in order to claim that much-sought first prize in the Dionysia. In contrast to the traditionalist preservation of epic, tragedy both could (and often needed) to 'pick up cultural and political trends at a rate quite unthinkable in epic'.<sup>65</sup>

These innovations are especially important to consider, since they can also be seen alongside a shift away not only from the style of Homer, but even its ideology. The earlier example from Pindar already seemed to subtly question the concepts of heritage and familial reputation and their cost, but by moving further along the chronological line from the archaic era to the Hellenistic, it soon quickly becomes

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<sup>65</sup> Graziosi and Haubold, 112, 2009.

clear how much Greece's relationship to its heroic past would change. Towards the end of the fifth century and proceeding into the fourth, one can see a growing suspicion with the Homeric tradition as a whole. Plato, for instance, discusses ethics in Homer in multiple texts. In the *Hippias Minor*, Plato revolves a discussion around skill, virtue around a literary comparison between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Beginning from a hypothesis that the *Iliad* is the superior work because its protagonist is steadfast and honest compared to the wilier, more dishonest Odysseus. Plato's Socrates objects to the notion that Achilles is entirely honest, since in Book Nine of the *Iliad* in which Achilles, despite claiming to hate men who say one thing despite meaning another, himself lies, since he never even attempts to act on his declaration to leave Troy and return to Phthia.<sup>66</sup> In fact, he directly contradicts himself in the same book upon speaking to Ajax, where he instead states his intention to remain in his tent unless Hector himself should break through the line and reach the Greek ships, a contradiction, Socrates notes, that Odysseus does not even notice.<sup>67</sup>

Hippias counters that Achilles did not wilfully deceive 'by design, but against his will'. Achilles merely changed his mind and chose to go back on his word.<sup>68</sup> Yet, as Socrates points out, this contradicts Hippias' assumption that Achilles is the greater man as it presents Achilles as less wise and aware than Odysseus. By such metrics, Odysseus is the better man because he is unambiguously skilled at lying and withholds the truth with full knowledge. Achilles only appears honest out of ineptitude.<sup>69</sup> The conversation expands into a wider contemplation on the role that

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<sup>66</sup> Plato, *Hippias Minor* 370c-e.

<sup>67</sup> Plato, *Hippias Minor* 370 a-c.

<sup>68</sup> Plato, *Hippias Minor* 370e.

<sup>69</sup> Plato, *Hippias Minor* 371e.

both power, knowledge and honesty all have on the nature of justice, leading Socrates to wonder aloud if perhaps the mark of a better man is to have the capability to act with intention and competence rather than accidentally, even if their skill is used to less than moral ends. Committing crimes in purposeful knowledge therefore, would, by such standards, be better than doing so in blind ignorance.<sup>70</sup> It is worth noting that Socrates himself does not seem pleased with his conclusion, and ends by slyly remarking that it is ‘terrible’ for a ‘wise man’ like Hippias to come to such an end point through accident.<sup>71</sup> At least a man as ‘worthless’<sup>72</sup> as Socrates, can be forgiven for reaching such a strange conclusion.

This in turn raises the question of how much Plato intends to make a statement about Homeric ethics, or how much these remarks serves purely to highlight and mock Hippias’ own logical fallacies. Perhaps then, the *Hippias Minor* is intentionally contradictory, a commentary on how misguided it is to judge who is the better person or even the better work of art, in such a simplistic view as Hippias does. The question of how much Plato sincerely believed anything he placed in Socrates’ mouth, or how much of it reflected Socrates’ as Plato knew him, is itself a long-standing source of scholarly debate, after all.<sup>73</sup> Yet regardless of whether one were to read the text as being in good faith or dismiss it as inherently fallacious, it is

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<sup>70</sup> Plato, *Hippias Minor* 376 b.

<sup>71</sup> Plato, *Hippias Minor* 376 c.

<sup>72</sup> Plato, *Hippias Minor* 372b.

<sup>73</sup> It is worth noting that, while the reading of the *Hippias Minor* as being a parody or simply antiquated by Plato’s later writings does exist, it has seen pushback by re-evaluations of the text in recent years. Jones and Sharma object to the judgements that the text is either ‘an early, false start, inferior to Plato’s other works, or else as nothing but an attack on Hippias’ decidedly un-Socratic views’. (Jones & Sharma, 113, 2017). To them, Socrates’ goal is more than merely mocking Hippias’ ignorance but rather convincing him to question his limited ‘conception of virtue as simplicity and vice as artfulness’. (Jones & Sharma, 135, 2017). This, the text is perfectly in line with the Socratic concept of accepting that one knows nothing, discarding false assumptions to better reach the truth. In that sense, it stands as one of many examples this thesis will discuss of Homer being recontextualised for completely new artistic purposes.

still extremely telling for Plato to frame discussion over justice, and whether one's skill matters more than their moral integrity, around Homeric heroes, characters who, as has been discussed, are defined by exceptional skill in such a way that often leads them to transgress conventional morality. Evidently, even centuries later, Homer weighed on people's minds during discussions of what defines a great man.

It is interesting that such ethical discussions, especially of Odysseus occur again elsewhere in similar texts. Montiglio cites the *Hippias Minor* as part of a trend whereby 'the Sophists shared in this negative evaluation of Odysseus. Hippias and Gorgias seem to have targeted Odysseus' pliable intelligence, which they equated with immorality'.<sup>74</sup> Montiglio sees a wider change in Odysseus' reception, as 'by the fifth century had lost his title even as the much-suffering hero, which he still held in archaic poetry, and his readiness to serve, as we have seen, was tainted with accusations of self-interest', with his depiction by different schools only changing further across the centuries.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, in the *Republic*, Plato rejects epic poetry's message that the gods or their descendants could have 'had the gall to carry out dreadful and impious deeds'. To Plato, stories which portray the gods as being a source of evil 'are harmful to those who hear them...everyone will excuse himself for being evil if he is convinced that they do and have done such things...'<sup>76</sup> In Plato, one sees a questioning of the ethics of the Homeric world. Furthermore, this criticism resolves expressly around the question of whether such behaviour ought to be permitted in the Plato's ideal πόλις.

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<sup>74</sup> Montiglio, 7, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Montiglio, 36, 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Plato, *Republic* 391d-e.

Plato was neither the only nor the first ancient author to voice such qualms. Xenophanes expressed distaste with how ‘Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all sorts of things that are matters of reproach and censure among men: theft, adultery, and mutual deception’<sup>77</sup>. Supposedly, Stesichorus was also incredibly overt in his rejection of Homer in his *Palinode*. According to the surviving fragments the poem frames itself as a defence from Helen of Sparta, denying the belief that she deserted her husband Menelaus and so ignited the spark of the Trojan War<sup>78</sup> instead claiming the war was fought instead over an ‘phantom’ in her shape<sup>79</sup>. He even incorporates the traditional belief about Homer as an individual rather than a collection of oral poets. Specifically, he not only implies that Homer was blind, but frames that as a divine punishment from Helen for slandering her<sup>80</sup>.

Naturally these voices cannot be taken as representative of all of classical culture. They are the beliefs of a handful of figures in Greek aristocracy, writing at different points in history (Xenophanes death circa 478 predates Plato’s birth by approximately fifty years). What this does suggest is that, despite how entrenched Homer’s works were in the public consciousness there was still room to question their ideals and experiment with them. It was conceivable, even then, to declare Homer’s themes and characterisations as fallible, or even entirely unethical. In fact, as Hunter observes, the *Hippias Minor*, especially, indicates that ‘Moralising always remained at the very heart of mainstream criticism’ regarding ‘the καλόν of poetry...what we might loosely call ‘aesthetic’, criteria, and it could hardly be otherwise, given the very close links between ‘literary criticism’, education and

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<sup>77</sup> Xenophanes, *Testimonia* D8-B11.

<sup>78</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 243a.

<sup>79</sup> Plato, *Republic* 9.596c.

<sup>80</sup> Isocrates, *Helen* 64.



rhetoric'.<sup>81</sup> And when the texts appeared problematic or incongruent with how these fifth and fourth century thinkers saw reality, they were willing to comment on it and even use it as a mark of criticism. It would of course, be fallacious to say that the Greeks rejected any work they so much as remotely disagreed with on moral grounds. But they appear at least somewhat concerned with how much their own cultural and literary heritage reflected them as they were now.

What should be apparent by this point is that epic continued to define the generic direction of literature beyond the dark age, in one way or another. While new poetic forms and genres such as the historical and the philosophical developed in their own right, the Homeric tradition was never entirely forgotten. Whether it was through careful preservation, lyric innovation, or dramatic competition, it carved itself a place in Attic discourse as a significant influence. But that discourse was not wholly reverential. As the years went on, authors would begin to question the themes that were integral to the entire Homeric world. This is crucial to consider when this thesis turns to directly examining the tragedies. When playwrights comment on the interplay of heroism and its role within the πόλις, especially when that dynamic appears confrontational or negative, those remarks carry much more weight when examined as part of a wider movement to innovate on, or even critique, the Homeric epics that inspired them.

### **The hero cult: a new definition**

What makes this matter still more complicated is the fact that there is another matter at play; One that has a drastic impact on the concept of a ἥρωες and what it meant in the classical period. *Specifically*, the rise of hero cults. This marked a

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<sup>81</sup> Hunter, 87, 2016.

significant turning point in the cult and religious practices across Greece. As Clay neatly phrases it, it ‘obliges us to distinguish between the living “heroes” of the Homeric epics and the heroes who were in death the objects of cult’<sup>82</sup>. Unlike the literary Homeric ἦρως, where the term could be freely used for warriors while they lived so long as they embodied the archetype, ἦρως in the religious context was used solely for the deceased. Furthermore, the profound impact of Homeric epic meant that figures such as Achilles, Agamemnon or Odysseus held meaning across the Panhellenic territories. They may have commanded more reverence in a particular city, (especially if that was believed to be their birthplace), but the texts, and its characters, were known and respected across Greece.

By contrast, a hero cult was a much more localised phenomenon. In fact, a hero’s connection to a single πόλις was crucial to their religious identity. Additionally, a Homeric hero was defined first and foremost as an individual, and oral poets in the Homeric tradition were not afraid to let that act as a source of conflict with the πόλις or the λαοί. While scholars like Haubold recognise the Homeric hero as part of the social hierarchy, they are nonetheless distinct within that system and their actions are rarely expressly in the interests of that community. A cult-hero only has any meaning or significance in the context of one specific state, and the impact (both good and bad) their actions may have on it. For instance, Pausanias describes how the Marathonians ‘worship both those who died in the fighting, calling them heroes, and secondly Marathon, from whom the parish derives its name, and then Heracles, saying that they were the first among the Greeks to acknowledge him as a god’<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup>Clay, 64, 2004.

<sup>83</sup> Pausanias *Description of Greece*, 1.32.4.

Notice how hero-cults could honour a force of multiple warriors, not just an individual. In fact, it could do both at once. This is further evidence that cult heroes were more regarded for public service than personal κλέος. Second, this cult worships figures who definitively lived and died in a battle which definitively took place. While the record of the battle is clearly affected by folklore, such as the legend that one can still hear the sounds of battle at Marathon at night, it has a clear historical root, at least more-so than the much more complicated field of the ‘Homeric question’. Regardless, this example stays true to one of the most important aspects of epic heroism. Heroes are regarded as being much more akin to gods than they are to people. Here, for instance, the soldiers at Marathon are revered alongside Heracles, the mythological son of Zeus who ascended to godhood upon his death. And, since that divide between heroes and everyday mortals is pivotal to this discussion, it is an important commonality to identify. Incidentally, while κλέος is much less explicitly addressed by Pausanias, the heroes are still revered for a feat of martial prowess which culminated in their deaths during battle. That is naturally a concept entrenched in Homer.

That being said, heroes were certainly not limited to the traits that defined the Homeric ἥρωες. Take this other account from Pausanias:

‘Some children, the number of whom is not recorded, while playing about the sanctuary found a rope, and tying it round the neck of the image said that Artemis was being strangled. The Caphyans, detecting what the children had done, stoned them to death. When they had done this, a malady befell their women, whose babies

were stillborn, until the Pythian priestess bade them bury the children, and sacrifice to them every year as sacrifice is made to heroes, because they had been wrongly put to death. The Caphyans still obey this oracle'<sup>84</sup>.

This example is intriguing for how much it veers from the Homeric archetype. This cult celebrates not an adult warrior, but a group of children. They are honoured not for a feat of their own, but what was done to them. If anything, their cult exists as a penance for an act of sacrilege against Artemis, not to celebrate a positive feat. It serves as one of the best examples of how much the tradition of religious heroes could vary from the epic one. Nonetheless, this passage indicates another important aspect of hero cults, one that arguably does fall more in line with Homer. Their impact upon a community was not always entirely beneficial. The Caphyan cult was established on the advice of the oracle to undo religious pollution. The honours are bestowed upon the children under the threat that this 'malady' from Artemis might return one day. Therefore, much like the gods, heroes could provide harm to a community as well as protection depending on whether they were sufficiently honoured. Plus, the Homeric Achilles and Odysseus could easily be both the ruin and the saviour of their respective 'λαοί'. The traditions of hero-cult, while they could be wildly different from Homer's concept, were still not wholly removed.

However, to stress the similarities and differences of the epic and cult heroes raises the question of whether Greeks themselves saw such a connection between the two. Both meanings certainly fall under the same word, but how interconnected the two were within the contemporary culture is questionable. To demonstrate this, Clay

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<sup>84</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 8.23.6-7

points to the ‘five ages of mankind in the *Works and Days*’ by Hesiod.<sup>85</sup> Hesiod calls the heroes of Homer the ‘godly race’, explicitly separating them from the ‘the race of iron’.<sup>86</sup> Here again, one can see the implication that the heroes are more than human. They are not only distinct from the people of Hesiod’s day, but definitively better. While the men of iron undergo ‘toil and misery’ dispensed by the gods, the handful of heroes chosen by Zeus ‘dwell with carefree heart in the Isle of the Blessed Ones’<sup>87</sup>. If a hero is indeed ‘godly’, then can they be judged by human standards at all? Here again one sees a tendency to correlate the hero much more closely to gods than to humans. That distinction is central to Clay’s argument that scholars must not draw a false equivalency between the Homeric hero, and those of local hero cults. The former is already ‘a part of a distant past’<sup>88</sup>, while the cults will always be part of the current lesser race of iron.

As Clay observes, the Homeric epics do not really acknowledge any aspect of worship in their understanding of heroism. There are moments that may have parallels, such as how the *Iliad*’s Catalogue of the Ships acknowledges that Erechtheus is recognised as the ‘autochthonous’ founder of Athens, and that he is bestowed sacrifices across the seasons in his name<sup>89</sup>. Yet these Homeric references to cult worship are few and far between. Even the epics themselves seem to delineate heroes in different ways. He notes the contrast between the warrior ἥρωες of the *Iliad* and those named ἥρωες in the *Odyssey*, such as the young Telemachos and Peirestratos. These men are hardly “warriors of the Trojan-War period”. Neither

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<sup>85</sup> Clay, 64, 2004.

<sup>86</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days* 176.

<sup>87</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days* 170-7.

<sup>88</sup> Clay, 65, 2004.

<sup>89</sup> Clay, 64, 2004.

went to Troy.’<sup>90</sup> This only further complicates the implications of the term ἥρωες. Nor do the epics truly address this divine aspect of heroism. While heroic characters die and are honoured with funeral rites, (such as Patroclus and Hector in the *Iliad*), they are paid tribute in strictly human terms. The characters of the *Iliad* never perform divine rituals for a dead mortal, even a ἥρωες. The Homeric tradition was not cultivated with the same mentality as the cult tradition. They share certain facets, while wildly differing in others, but the oral poets who passed down the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* across the generations do not seem to have expressly drawn upon heroic cults in their portrayals of heroism. And classical and Hellenistic authors appear hesitant to conflate the two.

This is also important since identifying how much influence, if any, Homer had upon Greek hero-cults, has been a major part of scholarly discourse. Just as there is debate on how distinct the epic and religious hero were in their roles, so too there is division on whether they share any common historical root. Coldstream is emphatic upon the role ‘the influence of epic’<sup>91</sup> within the development of hero-cults. He draws the history of the subject including the work of Farnell and Cook to supplement this. In the process, he recognises an important point: hero-cults were not only dedicated to local figures, but to those of epic as well. He draws attention towards specific locations which seem to have a significant focus on cults dedicated to these heroes, pointing out Mycenae, especially, ‘as rich in such hero cults’<sup>92</sup>. This argument has resonated with certain other academics. Antonaccio, for example, points to the shrine of Menelaus at Sparta as evidence which ‘suggests that Spartans

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<sup>90</sup> Clay 65, 2004.

<sup>91</sup> Coldstream, 15, 1976.

<sup>92</sup> Coldstream, 9, 1976.

found hero cult a particularly useful ritual construct early in their history’, and in a cult rooted much more in epic than previously discussed examples.<sup>93</sup> However, in recent years, this perspective has undergone more criticism. Already, one can see this in Clay’s remarks, but other scholars have disputed this point. There, are numerous factors as to why this pushback has occurred. Whitley responds directly to Coldstream’s argument, and many of his arguments are matters already touched upon here such as the complexities of ἥρωες as a term.<sup>94</sup>

The difficulty of dating is another issue. It might be easier to suggest that hero-cults were directly inspired by epic, if they were definitively dated from the end of the eighth century BCE,<sup>95</sup> and thus after the dark ages in which the oral tradition was at its height, yet this dating is still highly contested. This is not helped by the sheer amount of ambiguity within the field. In Mirto’s words: ‘Greek heroes were not a homogenous group but can be found at all levels on a scale running from the ordinary dead up to the gods’ and the various examples from ancient texts so far only demonstrate that variety further. This makes it extremely difficult to assert any statement as broad as ‘epic heroism was the precursor to hero cult’. Robert nearly summarises the difficulties in this matter: ‘Hero-cult cannot, it is true, be understood in isolation from myth, since the same conception of a past time of heightened reality underlines both phenomena. But Homer did not create the one any more than he created the other.’<sup>96</sup>

In short, while the nature and history of the cult is problematic and difficult to

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<sup>93</sup> Antonaccio, 197, 1995

<sup>94</sup> Whitley, 218, 1994.

<sup>95</sup> Osbourne, 116, 2012.

<sup>96</sup> Robert, 37, 2012.

study, it is still a crucial piece of the puzzle when understanding the Attic ἥρωζ. Even if it is difficult to clarify precisely when it was established, it is safe to say that, by the time of Periclean Athens, hero cults were a firmly ensconced part of Greek worship. Furthermore, it did so while maintaining a separate concept of heroism, existing alongside its epic counterpart, with its own degrees of ambiguity and variations. Thus, as will be made apparent once this thesis turns to the plays themselves, both definitions of ἥρωζ could be reflected within drama, sometimes simultaneously.

### **The hero and the past**

From all of this, it is apparent that the concept of the ἥρωζ is a complex matter to dissect, especially in the context of the classical period. It is an icon drawing upon a multitude of different archetypes, many of which change and evolve with time. The Homeric tradition presents an image of superhuman nobility, uniquely in touch with the gods and with deeds of great import to their name. They are typically apart from human society, and highly morally ambiguous, driven much more by the desire for κλέος than by any code of social ethics. This image became a common source of reference in later works, with many authors attempting to recontextualise the concept in different ways. This ranged from embracing, even emphasising, that heritage and connecting it to the current day, to the exact opposite, outright rejecting not just the heroic code, but the value system of Homer in general. This is only further complicated by the growing presence of a new heroic archetype in cult. This was even more ambiguous and free-flowing than the Homeric definition. It could include people of any age, class or gender, as long as they were dead, and had performed some significant act to make them important to their πόλις. To the Athenian people of the fifth century, these different ideas were all part of what constituted a ἥρωζ,



and any and all of them could influence literary portrayals of heroism.

That is not to say that there is nothing to connect these disparate ideals of heroism. Both the heroic and cult image of Homer share a complicated relationship with their wider societies. Just as Homeric heroes can, like gods, act independently of human moral codes, and make snap decisions with far reaching consequences for humans, so too can the cult hero act as both help and hinderance to their πόλις on a whim. Such is their right as chthonic beings. Both are also unified by a fixation with death, this being the chief factor that separates them from the gods and is in many ways what grants them their heroic status. However, as isolated as they are from their λαοί, they are, in many ways, dependent upon the recognition and reverence they receive from ordinary people. As Antonaccio notes, across ‘Myth, epic and ritual...The formula of κλέος...and τιμή...are the two sides of the hero’s praise: epic and cult’. It must be asked if heroic κλέος and religious worship are necessarily so distinct. At the same time though, Antonaccio’s suggestion that this understanding of heroism is ‘deliberately conservative unchanging’ is highly debatable.<sup>97</sup> On the contrary, the experimentation of Pindar, Stesichorus, Plato and others, would imply that that heroism, like any artistic ideal, was continually evolving and changing, taking on new cultural significance and ideas.

In short, when examining tragedy, and its own experimentations with this theme, there are many different aspects to keep in mind. The focus on the individual in a democratic festival, the complicated yet co-dependent relationship with the people, the blurred line between human and god, and the way the heroic archetype

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<sup>97</sup> Antonaccio, 4, 1995.

interplayed with contemporary understandings of class and gender. With all of this in mind, perhaps one can look at the tragic ἥρωες with a fresh perspective and shed new light on a core difficult question: What do tragic playwrights suggest was truly the role of a hero, in the realm of the πόλις?

## **Chapter Two: Ajax- κλέος and the πόλις; conflicting interests**

The previous chapter explored the various definitions and implications of the ἥρωες in the context of classical Athens. With that established, there remains the core question of this thesis; How did fifth century tragedy as a genre portray and respond to this concept? What messages and roles did the ἥρωες serve within drama? Answering this question will involve discussing a wide variety of plays by multiple tragedians. Since there are numerous occasions in which different playwrights delivered their own interpretations of the same myth, and by extension, the same character. Therefore, chapters will be divided according to the hero they portray and will compare how one mythical ἥρωες was re-interpreted across various plays. This particular chapter involves one of the less explored heroes and thus will be primarily concerned with one specific play. That hero is Ajax, the son of Telamon and one of the most renowned warriors among the Achaeans at Troy.

Ajax is especially intriguing as he is Athenian by birth, originally hailing from Salamis. He is the namesake of one of the ten Attic tribes and had his own cult in Salamis.<sup>98</sup> Despite this, at least among the surviving evidence, he does not seem to be explored that much by authors in the genre. The only surviving play to examine him in detail is Sophocles' *Ajax*, which will be the bulk of this chapter's focus. Yet, the *Ajax* happens to be one of the most blatant discussions of the relationship between the ἥρωες and πόλις. The play is a nuanced commentary on themes of individual honour, collective duty and the dichotomy of death and glory, questioning how compatible the pursuit of κλέος is with both its mythical wartime λαοί, and its democratic fifth century audience, without entirely rejecting the heroic past or

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<sup>98</sup> Barker, 1-2, 2006.

lionising the current system. The *Ajax* is Greek tragedy both at its most Homeric and its most contemporary, a frank discussion both of why the ἥρωες and πόλις is such a problematic dynamic, and why Athens was still so reverent of the heroic model regardless.

### **The struggle with κλέος**

Sophocles' *Ajax* opens with a conflict centred regarding κλέος, which drives much of Ajax's own actions. The dispute over the armour of Achilles drives a wedge between Ajax and Odysseus, and ultimately causes Ajax to descend into madness. This manifests in Ajax attempting to kill his comrades, and his sense of shame upon failing to do so is pivotal to the narrative. Deliriously, he boasts of his triumph to Athena. He attempted to kill the Atridae 'So that never again shall they refuse honour to Ajax'.<sup>99</sup> Immediately the audience is presented with a highly Homeric dichotomy. Ajax speaks with pride of his violent rebellion against his ποιμήν. Furthermore, he does so while describing his actions in Homeric terms of honour and disgrace. While much of this is narrated after the fact by the characters rather than witnessed, the tale they describe strongly resembles the opening of the *Iliad*. Achilles was stripped of his prize, the symbol of his skill as proven in battle. Ajax has been overlooked for a similar honour. In both cases the ἥρωες responds to this slight with violence and a desire for revenge against their erstwhile companions. Achilles was briefly tempted to directly kill his ποιμήν,<sup>100</sup> Ajax sets out purposefully in the middle of the night for the same motive. And in both cases, it is those closest to the protagonist who suffer as a result. Patroclus dies because of the curse Achilles

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<sup>99</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 98.

<sup>100</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 1.188-92.

invoked in his bitterness, an irony pointed out by Thetis.<sup>101</sup> Likewise Ajax's concubine, Tecmessa and her son are left destitute by his death, a prospect she raises early on in the play.<sup>102</sup> Barker also recognises both Achilles and Ajax as being 'left precariously on the margins of society'. Combined with this play's focus on the other characters' reactions to Ajax's decline 'It is as if Sophocles has dramatized the responses of those affected by Achilles' descent'.<sup>103</sup>

The *Ajax* consciously echoes many of the themes of the *Iliad*, and in doing so presents the struggle of 'the integration of extraordinary men into the democratic polis'.<sup>104</sup> These Homeric parallels become more evident once Ajax's sanity is restored. Once Ajax emerges from the tent, and converses with Tecmessa and the chorus, the resulting scene plays out with strong parallels to the embassy to Achilles in Book Nine of the *Iliad*. Here, the ἥρωϊς is met by his companions, in a state of disgrace. With his honour in ruins, he begins to doubt himself and recognises how lost and isolated he is. He declares: 'And now what must I do, I who patently am hated by the gods, and loathed by the army of the Greeks, and hated, too, by Troy and by these plains?'<sup>105</sup> This scene draws attention to one of the greatest ironies of the Homeric archetype. Despite being a persona rooted in the need for notoriety and public acclaim, it is an inherently lonely concept, between god and mortal, yet removed from either. Ajax is both isolated from his comrades and manipulated by the goddess who once supported him. His struggles with ideals of glory, shame and legacy, like his Homeric forbears, end in tragedy.

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<sup>101</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 18.73-7.

<sup>102</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 496-515.

<sup>103</sup> Barker, 8, 2006.

<sup>104</sup> Lawrence, 102, 2013.

<sup>105</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 457-9.

Even the acts of violence that open the play have a Homeric subtext to them, to the point of parody. The previous chapter established the concept of the ἀριστεία, in which the ἥρωος undergoes some large-scale victory in battle. Ajax's slaughter of the animals is a hollow mockery of the ἀριστεία. He slays many victims to preserve his sense of honour but kills only defenceless animals. He is abetted in his actions by a god, the same goddess who inspired Diomedes and assisted Achilles in killing Hector, but this manifests as a god given madness. Instead of giving Ajax power, it robs him of agency and restraint. Rather than κλέος, this brings only shame. He is frustrated that though his force was worthy of fear and respect, the result was pitiful.<sup>106</sup> This is the first sign that the *Ajax* is willing to test the boundaries of heroism, placing its protagonist in circumstances which call into question his psyche as well as both his ethical and heroic code.

Ajax's despair upon perceiving his own disgrace illustrates how integral his reputation is to his identity, and thus how ingrained he is within the Homeric archetype. Upon leaving the hut and entering the stage, he expresses his wish for death.<sup>107</sup> While Ajax's first appearance on stage was under Athena's manipulation, this is the first time Ajax is seen with his mental faculties intact. This not only makes for a striking contrast, but Ajax immediately demanding death makes for a powerful establishing moment of character. There are multiple points like this where the play directly links Ajax's desire for death to his heroic drive. As Ajax deliberates his next course of action, he once again raises the possibility of his death: 'But am I to go to the Trojan wall, challenge them all single-handed, achieve some feat, and at last

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<sup>106</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 366.

<sup>107</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 361.

perish? No, in that way I would give pleasure, I think, to the sons of Atreus. That cannot be!’<sup>108</sup> Much like the sentiment Sarpedon expressed in the *Iliad*, death and glory are intertwined. It is only his disdain for the Atridae that prevents him from seeking death. Even in the moment of Ajax’s suicide, this connection remains, as he falls upon the sword given to him by Hector,<sup>109</sup> a fact pointed out by Teucer.<sup>110</sup> Sophocles has recreated the Homeric world on the stage. Which then raises the question of how, having established this literary context, the *Ajax* appears to subvert and challenge the image of the Homeric hero.

### **The Sophoclean hero**

Before moving forward, however, it is worth remembering that while the *Ajax* is especially overt in its Homeric influences, it is far from the only tragedy to explore these themes. On the contrary, the Sophoclean hero has itself been recognised as its own distinct archetype, not only in scholarship but even in ancient literature. One such example is Aristotle’s *Poetics*. There, Aristotle proposes the ideal protagonist of a tragedy to be ‘a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty.’<sup>111</sup> Much of the response to the *Poetics* has involved trying to understand the meaning of the term ‘error’ or ἀμαρτία. The phrase ‘tragic flaw’ has become a commonly used pseudonym for the concept, but it can still be difficult to grasp. ἀμαρτία can certainly refer to a moral failing or character defect, but it can also mean a simple mistake in perception. Nonetheless, while the details are somewhat ambiguous, one can see a model taking shape.

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<sup>108</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 466-70.

<sup>109</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 288-307.

<sup>110</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 1026-33.

<sup>111</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453a.

This concept takes more concrete form in modern scholarship. Knox, especially, discusses the defining traits of Sophocles' protagonists. Most notably he recognises that, when compared to Aeschylus' works, he is far more focused on a single character. 'In Aeschylean trilogies...The action of the characters is an organic part of the larger design' he writes, 'it has its being in a hugely imagined world where the sweep of history affords us a perspective for the suffering we see on stage, and offers us consolation by giving it meaning'.<sup>112</sup> By contrast, 'The Sophoclean hero acts in a terrifying vacuum, a present which has no future to comfort and no past to guide, an isolation in time and space which imposes on the hero the full responsibility for his own action and consequences'.<sup>113</sup> In short, Sophocles is less concerned with the rich narrative tapestry that brought his characters to this point, and more-so with how their own choices shape their futures. This past, even when it is addressed, is not the focus.

Sophocles' plays, then, revolve around the choices of individuals, the resolve of those who make them, and the repercussions they have upon their immediate surroundings. Their decisions are 'emphatic' and 'uncompromising'.<sup>114</sup> Whether it is Oedipus' determination to uncover the truth of the plague upon Thebes or Electra's refusal to submit to her murderous mother and stepfather, these characters never sway from their goals. It is that refusal to submit, or compromise, which drives the rest of the play. They are 'subjected to pressure from all sides'<sup>115</sup> and asked to recognise 'the appeal to reason and emotion, the advice to reflect and be persuaded',

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<sup>112</sup> Knox, 4, 1961.

<sup>113</sup> Knox, 5, 1961.

<sup>114</sup> Knox, 10, 1961.

<sup>115</sup> Knox, 8, 1961.



in short, to ‘yield’.<sup>116</sup> Teiresias, in the *Antigone*, discusses the dangers of such a mindset: ‘Obstinacy’ he warns ‘lays you open to the charge of blundering’.<sup>117</sup> When they hear these challenges, they react with violence, seeing any questioning of their decisions as an attack. The character does not fundamentally learn any true lesson or change at their core.<sup>118</sup> They are immovable, and that drives them to ruin. Another key aspect of the Sophoclean hero is what Knox calls their ‘δεινός’ nature, ‘“strange, dreadful, terrible’’. “Dreadful to see, dreadful to hear”’.<sup>119</sup> Their unshakable drive is so extreme that it becomes a source of fear to the surrounding chorus. When Antigone defends her violation of Creon’s decree, the chorus are visibly disturbed. They recognise her refusal to yield, calling her ‘savage’ for it.<sup>120</sup> No other character can empathise with the hero or understand their plight. Much like their Homeric forebears, the Sophoclean heroes are uniquely driven in a way that sets them apart from regular people. Being a δεινός hero is equal parts a blessing of glory, and a curse of misfortune. Loneliness is a crucial part of the Sophoclean hero, a character who can connect with no-one, and with whom no-one can connect.

Knox’s theory is certainly an interesting one, which comes with many points both in favour and against. Certainly, it has gained a prominent place in the scholarly tradition. Taplin once remarked that ‘Knox’s essay on the Ajax of Sophocles is so well argued and so much the best recent contribution in English that his interpretation is in danger of becoming an orthodoxy’.<sup>121</sup> Certainly, it is unwise to take the remarks of any one scholar as gospel. After all, it is fallacious to assume that

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<sup>116</sup> Knox, 15, 1961.

<sup>117</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone* 1028.

<sup>118</sup> Knox, 26, 1961.

<sup>119</sup> Knox, 23, 1961.

<sup>120</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone* 471-2.

<sup>121</sup> Taplin, 122, 2011.

one can reasonably presume any trends in the existing evidence. The surviving ancient works of drama represent only a fraction of Attic output. This makes it extremely difficult to extrapolate any definitive genre conventions or recurring ideas from the fragmentary text on offer. Nonetheless, there is still plenty of overlap between Knox's theory and the textual evidence at hand, as previously illustrated. Take the framework laid down by Aristotle, for example. The ἀμαρτία, in this context, becomes that signature refusal to relent upon one's decisions, thereby becoming δεινός. Of course, Aristotle himself is far from an objective authority on what defines great literature, but these parallels still benefit Knox's case. While the current evidence may be limited, Aristotle wrote as he did in the fourth century B.C.E. with access to plenty of additional plays that no longer survive. If Aristotle, even with a much larger frame of reference, was noticing similar conventions as Knox did with a much more limited set of works, then it gives the latter's argument much more credence.

Ajax exemplifies many of the traits Knox identified. He is unflinching in his commitment to preserving his honour. At his lowest point, Ajax frantically ruminates upon all possible courses of action but remains emphatic that above all else: 'I must think of some action that will prove to my aged father that I his son was born no coward'.<sup>122</sup> His actions are constantly rooted in these values of personal honour and the nobility of his heritage. Even when the hero is at a loss as to what to do, he would rather act than do nothing. Likewise, this is a play rooted in the present time. Sophocles only relays the specifics of Athena's grudge against Ajax roughly halfway through the play. By the time the Messenger explains that Athena is furious at the

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<sup>122</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 470-2.

warrior for rejecting her aid in battle,<sup>123</sup> Ajax has already departed to commit suicide. Ajax himself never even stops to consider the circumstances that led him to this point. The only time he addresses or even references Athena is in the grips of his madness during the prologue. If one follows Knox's theory, then perhaps the reason Sophocles is so slow to convey this information is because it does not truly matter. What is more important is Ajax's choices as an individual and how they drive the action of the play, from his failed attempted murder that turns his commanders irreversibly against him, to his act of suicide that drives the discussion within the play's finale.

Likewise, Ajax remains a consistent outsider, one who embodies the δεινός mentality of the Sophoclean hero. Even when Ajax is not on stage, Sophocles urges viewers to see him as such. The chorus sadly remark how the army takes glee in the rumours of Ajax's disgrace, and how his position of nobility and fame makes him a better target for slander and rejection. 'For when someone shoots at noble spirits, he will never miss, though if he were to say such things against me he would not win credence; for it is against him who has that envy marches'.<sup>124</sup> This is especially intriguing when one remembers that Pindar too, remarked on the perilous line heroes walk between fame and disgrace.<sup>125</sup> Perhaps this stands as evidence of interplay between genres that led to tragedy's formation in the first place, an ongoing commentary on epic that has finally reached this point. From his first conversation with Tecmessa and the chorus, it is immediately evident how they struggle to relate to him. When Tecmessa relays the story of Ajax's delusion, she sadly describes how

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<sup>123</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 770-5.

<sup>124</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 151-3.

<sup>125</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 11.29-30.

Ajax ‘while he was sick, took pleasure in the troubles that possessed him, but to us who were sane caused grief by his proximity’.<sup>126</sup> Already, therefore, the audience is compelled to see the pain that Ajax is inflicting on those he supposedly loves. This continues as Tecmessa voices her fear of being left destitute if Ajax should die:

‘For on the day when you perish and by your death abandon me, believe that on that day I shall be seized with violence by the Argives together with your son and shall have the treatment of a slave’.<sup>127</sup>

Tecmessa’s words add tangible consequences to Ajax’s future actions. It is now explicitly clear, to Ajax, to the rest of the cast, and to the audience, that if Ajax pursues his heroic code of honour to the extreme of a dignified death, he will be abandoning his concubine and son. As such, there is emphasis upon the hero’s impact on the surroundings, and the innocents who suffer as a result of their single-mindedness. Even more tellingly, Tecmessa admits that she hid Eurysaces, Ajax’s son, from him during his delirium, fearful that he might murder his own child. It is important to understand how shocking a sentiment this is within the contemporary mindset. Infanticide is naturally considered a terrible act within 21<sup>st</sup> century western culture and beyond, but in classical Attic culture, it comes with still more appalling connotations. The Athenian concept of *κύριος* placed drastically more emphasis on the importance of legitimate offspring. The single greatest purpose of any officially sanctioned marriage between a Greek man and woman was ‘to recreate the *oikos* under control of the husband, to guarantee the continuity of family property (land,

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<sup>126</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 271-3.

<sup>127</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 496-9.

house, and retainers) by providing heirs, and to secure the continued religious observances owed to its dead members'.<sup>128</sup> The procreation of the next generation of the bloodline was thus a pivotal aspect of the status quo of the entire state. To even contemplate the possibility that Ajax might turn his hands upon his own son, even an illegitimate son, is an extremely powerful reinforcement of how afraid of him even those closest to him have become. As shall become evident further throughout this thesis, in the genre of tragedy the threat to the family and to the οἶκος, becomes a recurring symbol of a δεινός hero. It is the clearest expression of how disconnected the protagonist has become from their place in society.

This problematic estrangement remains prevalent directly up to the moment of Ajax's death. Finglass, for instance, recognises the contradictory statement of Ajax's final words as he commits suicide. On the one hand, he admits that his 'passing will have emotional consequences for others, including people from outside his immediate family – the people of the polis that he left behind so long ago'. Yet at the same time, this rare moment of empathy and self-awareness 'makes conspicuous the absence of any corresponding concern for the people around him at Troy, people who will be bereft and defenceless thanks to his suicide: Tecmessa, Eurysaces, and his soldiers as represented by the chorus'.<sup>129</sup> That ignorance is only made more noticeable when Tecmessa, discovering Ajax's body, mournfully reminds the audience that, without Ajax's protection, she and her son will be doomed to humiliation and cruelty, subject to the 'yoke of slavery' by new, crueller masters.<sup>130</sup> The chorus echo a similar sentiment, that it is as if Ajax has killed his comrades

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<sup>128</sup> Rehm, 12, 1994.

<sup>129</sup> Finglass, 307-8, 2017.

<sup>130</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 944-5.

through his suicide.<sup>131</sup> The play moves directly from Ajax's suicide, to this reminder of the damaging effect it has upon his friends, in what Barker calls a violation of *philia*.<sup>132</sup> Tecmessa ruefully remarks that the Achaeans will regret laughing at Ajax's fate. 'Even if they did not miss him while he lived, now that he is dead they may lament him in the urgency of battle'.<sup>133</sup> While she frames this as a mockery of the commanders, it carries a sub textual reminder of the damage Ajax has done to the Greeks' military campaign. Ajax has already turned against his fellow soldiers, and now he has robbed the Achaeans of one of their best warriors out of his own personal code of honour. In many ways, this is the culmination of how Ajax has betrayed everyone close to him for his own unflinching devotion to the heroic code, a mentality which is, by nature, self-centred.

When Ajax emerges from the tent and declares his intent to die, he is challenged by the chorus and Tecmessa. Here, as Knox describes, the ἦρως lashes out at this perceived threat. When Tecmessa attempts to convince him not to act recklessly, the conversation descends into a violent argument. She urges him 'for your son's sake and for that of the gods not to abandon us!' yet he only responds with violence, not only against her, but even the gods.<sup>134</sup> As he clings further to his position, Tecmessa voices her fear that he may do some terrible harm.<sup>135</sup> Ajax's aggression is even more apparent when one remembers that Tecmessa opened this conversation not with direct confrontation but a mere question.<sup>136</sup> To the Sophoclean hero, even this constitutes a personal attack upon their resolve, one that only further pushes him to

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<sup>131</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 901-2.

<sup>132</sup> Barker, 6, 2006.

<sup>133</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 962-3.

<sup>134</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 587-90.

<sup>135</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 593.

<sup>136</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 585.

refuse to yield. To him, any attempt to ‘educate [his] character’ is foolishness. In this passage one can see a microcosm of the various traits of the Sophoclean hero. The protagonist drives ahead with stubborn willpower. The other characters see him as δεινός and struggle to empathise or relate to his emotional extremes. Therefore, they urge him to relent, causing him to react to this challenge of his judgement with fierce hostility. He is only further committed to drive ahead with his choice, until it ultimately leads to his destruction, having never truly learned or changed from his experiences.

Now, as much as this may seem to line up, it is worth remembering that Knox’s theory, while influential, is far from gospel amongst scholars. Already, one can see Taplin’s warning not to treat it as orthodoxy, and he says this as a lead-in to a very different, somewhat warmer, analysis of Ajax. For instance, one of his objections is whether Ajax’s suicide is truly an abandonment of his allies.

‘Let us at this point step back and ask what would have been the consequences for Ajax and his dependants if he had not committed suicide, as Tecmessa and the chorus so fervently hope. Sophocles does not labour this question but he still subtly works in the answers. Ajax would have been stoned to death by the soldiery...he would have died utterly...Ajax's dependants foresee perils enough following Ajax's suicide: if he had been stoned...their lot would scarcely have been happier.’<sup>137</sup>

The key difference, in Taplin’s case, is that Ajax’s final speech before departing to take his own life, is seen as sincere in sentiment, and not wholly as an act of

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<sup>137</sup> Taplin, 125, 1979.

deception. Even if he still goes through with the act, the pity he shows here for his concubine and child is genuine. 'The suicide remains fixed; but his attitude to it has softened, and he now sees that it will be the best thing for his wife and child as well'.<sup>138</sup> Likewise, Ajax defers to the comrades he has betrayed by leaving his corpse to be found by both his friends and foes. They will be the judges who decide whether to honour his body and he knows that. And he is proven right 'as Odysseus, and thence the other Greeks, give due acknowledgement to Ajax's τιμή'.<sup>139</sup> The critical factor to Taplin though, is that it demonstrates that Ajax has at least somewhat, relented, something Knox insists he can never do. 'He sees...that his name and presence will not cease to exist the moment that he dies; that his corpse and his τιμή and his power to help or neglect his dependants, all at present at such a low ebb, will, instead of ending with his death, continue and indeed revive. He realises that the seesaw of human affairs, so memorably expressed by Athena at 131-2, may tip even after death, and that, since he is now down at his lowest, he can only go up...Ajax is learning not to be the kind of self-obsessed, inflexible fanatic which Knox insists that he must remain'.<sup>140</sup>

Taplin is open that this argument is not infallible. The matter of how much Ajax's remarks here can be taken 'at surface value without irony' is an extremely difficult one.<sup>141</sup> And by his own admission, this more humanist approach could easily be dismissed as 'bland and even sentimental'<sup>142</sup> compared to Knox's. Yet it is a noteworthy response, especially since, while it agrees with many of the traits that

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<sup>138</sup> Taplin, 126, 1979.

<sup>139</sup> Taplin, 127, 1979.

<sup>140</sup> Taplin, 126-7, 1979.

<sup>141</sup> Taplin, 128, 1979.

<sup>142</sup> Taplin, 129, 1979.



Knox defined in a ‘Sophoclean hero’, this question of whether a hero can ever learn and grow past that state, becomes a point of contention. As this thesis progresses, this capacity and/or failure of heroic characters to learn from their experiences, will be a recurring topic in the exploration of heroes in tragedy. As such, it seems prudent to keep Talin’s words in mind for now.

Regardless of these disagreements, plenty of Knox’s argument aligns extremely well with the narrative of the *Ajax*. More than that, it allows for a new hypothesis. Tragedians, Sophocles especially, used their medium to re-appraise the heroic world in new contemporary perspectives. The Sophoclean hero that Knox identifies, can be seen as an evolution of the Homeric hero, a remarkable individual with a unique influence upon the world around him, whose unshakable will and almost god-like power leaves them alone and displaced in the world around them. This perspective turns the *Ajax* into a fascinating response to Homeric epic, pitting the ἥρωες against the λαοί.

### **Ajax and the λαοί**

In the latter half of the play, the *Ajax* moves onto a discussion of how to treat Ajax’s deceased body. Through this, Sophocles presents his audience with a discussion on duty to the state, how to respond to dishonour and disgrace, and how to remember great and flawed men. It places the problem of the ἥρωες and λαοί at the heart of the action. No longer explored merely through the subtext of Ajax’s own character and behaviour, this theme is openly discussed within the play. With Menelaus’ entry, when he makes the shocking declaration that Ajax’s body must be left unburied, the theme of the state is well and truly vocalised:

‘Because after thinking we had brought him from home as an ally and friend to the Achaeans, when we had him with us we found him more an enemy than the Phrygians’<sup>143</sup>.

Menelaus makes explicit a subject that has hung over the play since its inception; that Ajax has effectively become εχθρός, an enemy of his own λαοί. He has refused to accept the ruling of his superiors, instead taking that judgement as a slight upon his personal honour, using that to fuel his violence towards the army, who are for the purposes of the war, his λαοί. Throughout the speeches of both Menelaus and Agamemnon, there is a distinct effort to reject the importance of Ajax as an individual, to contextualise his crime not as a hero, but a citizen who has betrayed the πόλις. ‘Even if a man has a mighty frame’, Menelaus remarks, ‘he must remember that he can be brought down even by small mischief’.<sup>144</sup> He is keen to remind all present that Ajax is a man like any other, that he can die like any other, and is subservient to the same laws. When one considers how the question of the super-human or divine aspect of a ἥρωας, was so pivotal to their exemption from human law within the *Iliad*, then Menelaus’ attempt to ground Ajax in purely human terms is extremely telling.

That tension pervades into the confrontation with Agamemnon. Teucer, in defence of Ajax, emphasises Ajax’s nature as an individual, and the freedom he had regarding his own choices, thereby questioning the Atridae’s command over both him and the entire army.<sup>145</sup> Agamemnon mockingly refutes any notion of such

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<sup>143</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 1052-4.

<sup>144</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 1077-8.

<sup>145</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 1097-104.

individuality.<sup>146</sup> The play has now transitioned into a discussion of Ajax's character, how he should be remembered and honoured in the aftermath of such a scandal. And much of that debate revolves around Ajax's role as an individual. When one focuses upon Ajax's choices and thoughts as one man, it becomes easier to take the defensive attitude of Teucer. Meanwhile, viewing Ajax as a single member of a larger community lends more credence to the harsher perspective of Agamemnon and Menelaus.<sup>147</sup>

However, despite how much of the play's first half explores the darker aspects of Ajax's decisions, and their effect upon the λαοί, it ultimately concludes with his vindication. Menelaus' accusations come with troubling implications regarding the πόλις he embodies. 'The laws of a city can never function well where no one is afraid, nor can an army be sensibly controlled, when it has not the protection of fear and respect'.<sup>148</sup> Here the connection between the army and the state becomes explicit. This parallel was one that Haubold explored in the *Iliad*,<sup>149</sup> as discussed in the previous chapter, and the *Ajax* makes that concept extremely apparent. Yet the state Menelaus describes is not the same kind of πόλις as Periclean Athens. It more closely resembles an oligarchy, where a tyrant's rule is unquestioned, and the people must pay deference, even if it comes through fear. Finglass expands on the troubling aspects of Menelaus' speech, from his 'obvious pleasure' at his former comrade's misfortune, much more concerned with his own 'authoritarianism' than with the

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<sup>146</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 1238.

<sup>147</sup> This is especially pertinent should one take Ajax as emblematic of the individualism of tyrants. Rabinowitz, in her discussions on portrayals of the πόλις, refers to Seaford and other scholars who frame tragedy as 'eruption of conflict caused by the actions of individuals', who 'abuse their legitimate power' and drag their community into chaos (Rabinowitz, 55, 2006).

<sup>148</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 1073-4.

<sup>149</sup> Haubold, 3, 2014.

more pressing, and justifiable, concern of Ajax's treachery. He argues that such urges to remain silent and obey the status quo would be extremely distasteful to the Athenians. 'Greater obedience is naturally expected in a military context, yet even the generals who gave Athenians orders in war were annually elected by the Assembly, and thus ultimately owed their power to the troops that they commanded. And effective generals know how to inspire their men rather than simply order them to do their will'.<sup>150</sup> The current analysis seems to paint the *Ajax* as the tragic tale of a great, yet isolated man, overcome by jealousy, rigidity and pride, until he is ousted from his community and driven to death. But Menelaus and Agamemnon's words complicate the question of the state versus the individual. Ajax's apparent crime is a violation of the established order, but if that system is overtly flawed or corrupt, does that not alter one's perception of Ajax's transgressions?

The final scenes expand on this dichotomy. Odysseus ends the debate in favour of Ajax's burial, despite Agamemnon's wishes. Odysseus, upon his entrance, calls Ajax a 'valiant corpse',<sup>151</sup> reflecting the pity he voiced for Ajax in the prologue<sup>152</sup> and in doing so, establishes that, unlike the Atridae, he still acknowledges and respects Ajax's heroism in spite of his actions. Furthermore, he defends Ajax in terms of codes of common justice.

'I beg you not to venture to cast this man out ruthlessly, unburied. Violence must not so prevail on you that you trample justice under foot! For me too he was once my chief enemy in the army...but though he was such in regard to me, I would not so far

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<sup>150</sup> Finglass, 311, 2017.

<sup>151</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 1319.

<sup>152</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 121-4.

fail to do him honour as to deny that he was the most valiant man among the Argives, of all that came to Troy, except Achilles... It is unjust to injure a noble man, if he is dead, even if it happens that you hate him'.<sup>153</sup>

Odysseus' argument is pivotal for a number of reasons. For one, it defends Ajax's right to burial without necessarily denying his culpability. He still recognises him as 'ἔχθιστος', and, unlike Teucer, does not reject the belief that Ajax should pay homage to his βασιλεύς. Nevertheless, he still acknowledges Ajax as being ultimately deserving of burial. In Lawrence's words, the finale is able to 'celebrate Ajax's martial arete, but, far from vindicating his morality, they contribute to the implicit critique of it by doing much to recommend 'enlightened self-interest' and a more flexible, Odyssean attitude to human relations'.<sup>154</sup> In addition, Odysseus embodies another archetype which complements the heroic temper, defined by Carter as the 'co-operator'. According to Carter, this is 'someone on whose goodwill the hero comes to depend...powerful or influential people' who are instrumental to resolving the conflict. Regardless of whether the hero survives, the co-operator 'is an achiever, and survivor'.<sup>155</sup> They ultimately withstand the tragedy, sometimes even thriving in it, without ever entirely rejecting the hero entirely, however δεινός they may become. Carter's remarks are far from concrete. He himself admits that judging any recurring conventions from 'just seven tragedies spanning the middle and later periods of a sixty year career,' is inherently flawed,<sup>156</sup> much like Knox's own theory. It is still worth acknowledging though, for evidence in favour of it will become prominent while progressing through this thesis.

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<sup>153</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 1332-45.

<sup>154</sup> Lawrence, 115, 2013.

<sup>155</sup> Carter, 170-1, 2005.

<sup>156</sup> Carter, 163, 2005.

There is another intriguing implication to Odysseus' words. He warns Agamemnon of the danger of giving into personal feelings of hatred, and so becoming unjust. His words suggest a parallel between the transgressive actions of Ajax and Agamemnon. Ajax was overcome by his jealousy because he could not let go of his own hatred, of Odysseus, Agamemnon, or Menelaus. This turned him against the community of the army, violating the commonly accepted codes of law and justice. Agamemnon, in denying Ajax burial, risks committing the same crime, ignoring justice and succumbing to bitterness. He is motivated not only by the injustice of Ajax's anger, but by hatred, a desire to 'trample' the man he loathes, and a refusal to seem cowardly. It returns the play back to the central question of the community versus the individual, this time framing it around the βασιλεύς, the man who, to an extent, embodies the law.

By ultimately vindicating and honouring Ajax with burial, despite his transgressions, while dismissing 'the deluded general and his brother'<sup>157</sup> as violators of justice, it poses the possibility of an alternate approach, one that this argument has not yet entirely addressed. If the *Ajax* is indeed indicative of the clash between the values of the ἥρωες and the πόλις, this ending begs the question of whether the real transgressive body is not the lone hero flouting the law, but rather the law itself. Finglass recognises this as a clash between two extremes, each of whom can challenge or alienate a 'wider cross-section of the audience', from the more democratic body, the aristocratic oligarchs and everything in between, not least since

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<sup>157</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 1386-7.

Ajax, Menelaus and Agamemnon are both not only nobility, but royalty.<sup>158</sup> Still, there are further factors to this discussion, and to answer them, one must turn to the goddess who set this conflict in motion.

### **The role of Athena and Ajax's culpability**

So far, this analysis has focused specifically upon the role and characterisation of Ajax himself. It has discussed the play as the study of his actions and his impact on the world around him, and how others respond to him. Despite this, there are other approaches one can take to this play. Most notably, this thesis has so far barely addressed the character of Athena, the goddess of war and wisdom who persecutes Ajax across the narrative. It is she whom Ajax has offended, she who has sworn vengeance, she who is the catalyst for the entire plot. This is a vital point to address, since how any audience understands Athena drastically affects their interpretation of Ajax's sympathy, and, most importantly, his agency. An analysis of *Ajax* as a Homeric play depends largely upon the belief that it is squarely centred upon its protagonist, much like the theory laid out Knox. Placing the thematic focus upon Athena turns the play instead into a tale of the vindictiveness of the gods, one of divine cruelty rather than human flaws. Naturally, this is a wildly different reading than that of an exceptional individual othered by his society. Therefore, it will be important to engage with this alternate approach moving forward.

Indeed, the tragedy undoubtedly begins by placing Athena in the central position of power. The prologue begins with a conversation between Athena and Odysseus. Athena would likely have been placed upon the *μηχανή*, a device by which a

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<sup>158</sup> Finglass, 312, 2017.

character would be elevated above the stage, visually indicating that she is in a position of power over the entire cast, including the titular protagonist. While she overlooks the action from above, Odysseus cannot even see her.<sup>159</sup> She is also the first character to speak, another indicator that it is she who drives the narrative. She narrates the tale of Ajax's deluded attack upon the army's livestock, placing Ajax, from the outset, in a subservient role. Athena places great emphasis on the various way she manipulated him. It is Athena who held him back from his attack, who 'drove him into a cruel trap'.<sup>160</sup> It is a chilling display of Athena's power, and one that draws focus away from Ajax's 'anger on account of the arms of Achilles'.<sup>161</sup> The opening scene revolves not around Ajax's slighted code of honour, his envy and subsequent treachery, but his manipulation and humiliation by Athena. This crucial framing device potentially changes the central thesis of the entire play.

Kennedy discusses the *Ajax* as part of a lengthy study on the changing tragic characterisation of Athena, and how it intersects with Athens' changing role within Panhellenic Greece. She begins by contextualising previous' scholars remarks on Athena's unique place within Athens' civic identity. 'As Hegel so eloquently states, she was the city itself—the spirit that infused and informed every aspect of citizen life...For Hegel, as well as for many other scholars and philosophers, Athena represented moderation, justice and democracy...The city was what it was because its goddess was what she was and this was a relationship the Athenians actively fostered in their art.'<sup>162</sup> However, Kennedy detects a visible attempt within Athenian art to use the Homeric tradition 'to increase its importance in history and to align

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<sup>159</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 14-6.

<sup>160</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 60.

<sup>161</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 41.

<sup>162</sup> Kennedy, 1, 2009.



itself undeniably in the minds of other Greeks with the deeds of Athena and the Athenian (and Salaminian) heroes at Troy'.<sup>163</sup> Tragedy, she writes, is at the heart of this, 'as a public art form that was closely identified with Athens specifically, and performed not only for Athenians but for allies and other foreigners'.<sup>164</sup> In particular, Kennedy's work is instrumental in highlighting two central ideas that are at the crux of this argument; that the characters of the epic tradition, be they human or divine, doubled as powerful symbols of Greek identity and values, and that these figures were malleable enough to change and be re-contextualised within Greece's own fractured or changing ideologies cross the years.

For now, though, consider how Kennedy approaches Athena's role within the *Ajax*. Kennedy examines the 'problematic nature'<sup>165</sup> of Athena, portrayed here not as 'the symbol of true justice' but as an 'unpredictable and destructive figure'.<sup>166</sup> In the process, she poses the belief that it is not Ajax whose behaviour is transgressive, but rather, Athena's. On the contrary, Ajax's most dangerous traits are encouraged by Athena's intervention. 'She aids him in his slaughter of the cattle. She asks all the right questions to elicit his boasting responses'.<sup>167</sup> Likewise, Kennedy questions how extreme Ajax's actions and conduct actually are. She poses that Ajax represents not only the heroic code, but that of 'the Athenian generation immediately preceding Sophocles' audience', the generation defined by 'The Athenian victories at Marathon and Salamis'.<sup>168</sup> This generational reading recontextualises the whole narrative.

Ajax's downfall becomes the destruction of the heroic order and Athens' own pre-

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<sup>163</sup> Kennedy, 7, 2009.

<sup>164</sup> Kennedy, 10, 2009.

<sup>165</sup> Kennedy, 115, 2009.

<sup>166</sup> Kennedy, 117, 2009.

<sup>167</sup> Kennedy, 128, 2009.

<sup>168</sup> Kennedy, 126, 2009.

imperial identity, to make way for its more ruthless position as arbiter of the Delian League: ‘The *archê*, as embodied in Athena, destroys the ethical base for Athenian hegemony because it undermines and corrupts it. The heroes of Salamis have no place in the new regime’.<sup>169</sup> This is also supported by the fact that both Athena’s grudge against Ajax and her role in his madness are ‘not part of the traditional myth’, a matter emphasised since, even in the play itself ‘The chorus, in pondering who might have driven Ajax mad, never considers Athena a possibility’ until the Messenger addresses it.<sup>170</sup> To Kennedy, that suggests that the clash between Ajax and Athena is Sophocles’ own innovation, which marks ‘the death of an idealized Athenian identity rooted in their political system and its revolutionary mechanism of justice—the democratic jury’ vocalising an unease with the direction Athens has chosen as an imperial power’;<sup>171</sup> that in gaining this authority, it may have lost sight with its old codes of justice. Rabinowitz also remarks on this ‘tension’, that ‘at the same time that Athens founded the democracy on the power of the *dêmos*, the freedom of the *dêmos*, it was establishing a claim to rule others.’<sup>172</sup> So much so that even the divine embodiment of those ideals appears warped and frightening.

Kennedy’s argument thereby stands as a rejection of the assumption that the tragedy revolves around Ajax’s mistakes. Kennedy even references and rejects ‘Knox and others’ belief that Ajax’s hubris is the core of the play’s moral crisis.<sup>173</sup> Certainly, stripping Ajax of his agency, and removing the blame from Ajax’s shoulders shifts the focus of the play. It downplays the problematic implications of

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<sup>169</sup> Kennedy, 129, 2009.

<sup>170</sup> Kennedy, 120, 2009.

<sup>171</sup> Kennedy, 118, 2009.

<sup>172</sup> Rabinowitz, 42, 2006.

<sup>173</sup> Kennedy, 128, 2009.

Ajax's actions and makes him a notably less transgressive character within the play's setting. If Finglass has suggested that Ajax's crimes can be perceived differently since he is in violation of a flawed system on a human level, then Kennedy expanding that πόλις to a divine sphere is not especially far-fetched. That being said, the two readings may not be quite as mutually exclusive as Kennedy appears to think. Kennedy still recognises Ajax as a character who is 'δυστράπελος (inflexible/unadaptable)',<sup>174</sup> insistently bound to his code of honour. Even if the tension of the play does indeed revolve more-so around Athena than Ajax, he still stands as an example of the tension between the old codes of heroic order and the current status quo. It still demonstrates how heroic archetypes could be redefined as social symbols to reflect the current anxieties of the day. By Kennedy's logic, Ajax's behaviour is not to be seen as entirely problematic or dangerous. While flawed, he is still somehow tragically admirable, clinging to an idealised set of principles which Athens tossed aside for the sake of imperialistic greed. At its core, Kennedy's reading still imagines this as a struggle between the ἥρωος and πόλις. The difference is that it frames the conflict around the latter more-so than the former. The state is represented not by the people, but by a divine symbol, and the play thereby asks not whether the model of the ἥρωος is outdated, but rather whether it is at risk of being lost. The decline of the heroic code amongst changing social tides becomes a more sombre affair, questioning how the state has changed now.

### **Subversive rejection or sombre farewell?**

Sophocles *Ajax* is a play rooted in the conventions of Homeric epic. The narrative draws heavily from the *Iliad*, exploring themes of κλέος and shame. Much like

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<sup>174</sup> Kennedy, 126, 2009.

Achilles, Ajax is disconnected from the social codes and laws of his community. After being ousted for his transgressions, his determination to redeem his heroic honour sets him at odds with the state, and ultimately leads to his death. Through *Ajax*, one can see that the Homeric archetype remained prevalent within the public consciousness well into the fifth century B.C.E. Furthermore, the archetype of the ‘Sophoclean hero’ implies that the ἥρωες’ recreation on the stage was a common occurrence. Sophocles uses the glorious, yet isolated ἥρωες in the context of the stage to explore the dynamic of exceptional individual in a state that cannot accommodate their mindset. Their unshakable δεινός will is at the centre of the conflict. Despite all of this, *Ajax* ultimately maintains a nostalgic reverence for the heroic tradition. Ajax, for all his violent stubbornness, is a tragic figure. He is victimised by the Athenian embodiment of justice itself, robbed of his own self-control and driven to suicide. Even after death, he is treated with scorn and impious hatred by those in power. The πόλις, on both a mortal and divine level, is just as flawed as he who opposes it, corrupt, cruel and self-centred, losing sight of the old principles by which it once defined itself, a powerful indicator of the contemporary fears within Athens.

Yet still, Sophocles refuses to patronize his audience by simplifying the matter. Sophocles, through the conventions of his writing, demonstrates an awareness of the complexity of the heroic tradition. He recognises that, for all of the reverence it is paid within folklore, the image of the ἥρωες is not without its flaws, which, within Athens’ new democratic state are all the more glaring. The heroic mentality gives Ajax the means to express dissent yet can also be a dangerous form of hubris.<sup>175</sup> Faced with a newly rising empire and a new, much harsher grip on its territories,

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<sup>175</sup> Barker, 13, 2006.

Sophocles uses the *Ajax* to give voice to the anxieties of a city which had gained unprecedented power, and what Athens' new identity would mean both during and beyond the Peloponnesian War. He demonstrates that with 'a painful clash between what we hear and what we see: the "fame" of this best of heroes (1415-17) and the ugly, still-warm black blood in the mortal body of a man who refused to accept time and change'.<sup>176</sup> The play, therefore, is a crucial example of how tragic authors could repurpose the ἥρωες, using its iconography and themes to deliver pointed, and painfully relevant commentary on their current society. With questions and uncertainties piling up as to what Athens had gained and lost, it is small wonder that there was a temptation to look back.

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<sup>176</sup> Segal, 25, 2009.

### **Chapter Three: Heracles-Failed νόστος and the importance of adaptation**

From here, the thesis will move onto a fresh example: the character of Heracles, quite possibly one of the most significant and widely recognised heroes of Greek mythology. Celebration of Heracles ranges from art, architecture and, of course, literature. Heracles is possibly the definitive example of not only Greek heroism but masculinity in general. He is ‘the son of Zeus, a man with super-human strength, unquestionably courageous, whose *andreia* set the standard against which even subsequent generations of heroes measured themselves.’<sup>177</sup> If Ajax’s Athenian identity granted him significance in the context of Athenian art, then Heracles’ portrayals are indicative of the nature the ήρωες on a Pan-Hellenic level. Yet Heracles also provides a unique perspective on the identity of heroes as beings between gods and mortals, as he is one of the few ήρωες to definitively be elevated to godhood and worshipped as such.

Extant tragic portrayals of Heracles come chiefly in two flavours, which Silk calls the ‘saviour’ and the ‘suffering hero’.<sup>178</sup> The former can be seen in the likes of Euripides’ *Alcestis*, the *Prometheus Unbound*, or the more divine alternative in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*. Here, Heracles functions as a supporting character, usually resolving the conflict at the end. Given Heracles’ cultural deification, then it is fitting that he effectively becomes a *deus ex machina*, even in plays like *Alcestis* where he is still technically mortal. The latter, and the more relevant to this discussion, positions Heracles as the protagonist. There are two surviving texts which focus upon him in this manner: Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, and Euripides’ *Heracles*. This

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<sup>177</sup> Kokkini, 60, 2011.

<sup>178</sup> Silk, 4, 1985.

chapter will examine both plays, including Heracles' characterisation, the consequences of both his absence and his presence upon his household, the way the plays explore the implications of his divinity and what this suggests about the place of the ἥρωες in domestic and civic life.

These two plays serve as important pieces of evidence when discussing the ἥρωες archetype for a number of reasons. For one, unlike the *Ajax* these plays are set not within a military camp, but within a πόλις, specifically, the protagonist's own οἶκος, allowing for a much more direct critique of the hero's effect upon their society. Admittedly, most tragedies restrict their setting to a single household. That alone is not exceptional, but even so, these works also have a further notable Homeric influence of their own. They are plays entrenched in the tradition of νόστος, a term used to express the theme of homecoming, especially in the context of a ἥρωες ending their exploits. The theme is most visibly typified in the *Odyssey*, but it also manifests in tragedy. In fact, Lowe argues, tragedy is particularly concerned with νόστοι.<sup>179</sup> The *Trachiniae* and the *Heracles* represent a particular archetype Lowe recognises, where the 'paterfamilias returns from a trip abroad' to encounter some strife at home, which has its roots in 'Ithaka in Odysseus' absence or Argos in Agamemnon's'<sup>180</sup>. Specifically, these plays begin at a point when the hero, absent on some form of exploit, returns midway through only for disaster to strike shortly afterwards. As such, plays in this tradition make for a fascinating commentary on the dual worlds inhabited by the ἥρωες. They mark a return from a world full of violence, the supernatural and the search for κλέος, to one of normality, focused on the city and

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<sup>179</sup> Lowe, 8, 2018.

<sup>180</sup> Lowe, 8, 2018.

the family. And it is striking how, in the genre of tragedy, that transition repeatedly ends in failure and even death.

This chapter will examine multiple facets of these two plays, including how connected, or disconnected, the protagonist is from his οἶκος in each play, how they employ the narrative structure of νόστοι and what they say (both positive and negative) about the relationship between the masculine ideals of ἥρωες, and κύριος. It will conclude by examining the ways in which the conclusions of each of these plays subtly subverts the conventions of both heroism and νόστοι, to deliver a new commentary on the role of these narratives in Attic culture, one which is not only strikingly different from the conclusions seen in the *Ajax* but will only become more prominent as the thesis continues.

### **The absence of the ἥρωες**

Heracles spends much of both plays conspicuous by his absence. The *Trachiniae* dedicates roughly half its lines not to Heracles, but his wife Deianeira. The *Heracles*, too, begins with Heracles absent, completing his final labour in the Underworld, while his household is attacked by Lycus. The plays begin at a point where the characters await the νόστος of the hero, to deliver the οἶκος from its turmoil. Deianeira opens the *Trachiniae* by relating the story of Heracles' latest absence, as she fears the worst.

‘There is an ancient saying among men, once revealed to them, that you cannot understand a man’s life before he is dead, so as to know whether he has a good or bad one. But I know well, even before going to Hades, that the one I have is



unfortunate and sorrowful'.<sup>181</sup>

By placing this immediately at the beginning of the play, Sophocles quickly engages his audience's sympathy. Like the opening scenes of many such tragedies, this exposit the immediate situation and establishes the central conflict for viewers. Yet, Sophocles places this not in the mouth of an overseeing god, as the *Ajax* did, or a minor character like the Sentry in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, but his female lead. There is no disconnect, the audience is at once placed into Deianeira's perspective. Antiquated expectations of gender notwithstanding, this increases their urge to sympathise with her. Deianeira unquestionably loves her husband, perceiving Heracles not only as a spouse, but a saviour. She remembers the advances Achelous once made towards her, so much so that she wished for death 'before ever coming near his bed'.<sup>182</sup> There is, from the outset, a connection between Heracles as a hero, and as a husband. The story of his marriage to Deianeira is one where he arrives 'at the last moment' (much as he does in the *Alcestis*) and conquers the river god,<sup>183</sup> painting this as an act of κλέος. Sophocles even has Deianeira call herself 'the bride he had won'.<sup>184</sup> Even in her wedding, Deianeira is a prize for Heracles' daring. Conflating love and sexuality with possession is yet another facet of heroism with its roots in Homeric heroes and how they relate to women. Achilles insists that he 'loved' his war prize, Briseis, 'with all my heart, though she was but the captive of my spear'.<sup>185</sup> The hierarchical, patriarchal nature of Greek marriage notwithstanding, heroism typically conflates women with prizes or possessions.

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<sup>181</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 1-5.

<sup>182</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 15-7.

<sup>183</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 18.

<sup>184</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 28.

<sup>185</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 336-43.

This troubling implication is then reinforced by the report that the audience receive of Heracles' character. Deianeira compares his parenthood to a farmer 'who has taken over a remote piece of ploughland,' who acknowledges them 'only when he sows and when he reaps'.<sup>186</sup> Admittedly, the metaphor of fathers as farmers is not an altogether rare comparison in contemporary literature. But here, it invites attention to Heracles' negligence. For all of his isolated and self-destructive behaviour, Sophocles still allowed Ajax to share some tender words with his son and establish their relationship.<sup>187</sup> In comparison, Heracles and Deianeira are never on stage at the same time. His disconnect from his household explicitly causes his wife pain.<sup>188</sup> Deianeira also recalls how the family was 'uprooted' from their former home, when Heracles 'killed the mighty Iphitus'<sup>189</sup> a transgressive act which drastically affected the lives of Heracles' family.

In much the same way that the *Ajax* invited its audience to consider how the hero's loved ones suffered in the wake of his violent temper, the *Trachiniae*'s heroine suffers not through a fault of her own, but through the extremes of her husband's heroic lifestyle. Thus, the audience is introduced to two distinct spheres of Heracles' life. The ἥρωας, who wins glory abroad, and the role he takes up once returns home triumphant, the κύριος, the head of the household and the guiding authority figure of his family. From the very outset of his marriage to Deianeira, these two aspects have been in conflict, being both wife and trophy. She suffers the consequences of his adamant, godlike temper. And his lengthy absence in search of κλέος both pains her

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<sup>186</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 32-3.

<sup>187</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 550-64.

<sup>188</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 42.

<sup>189</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 38.

and puts a constant strain on their marriage.

Euripides' play meanwhile, replaces the troubling subtext of *Trachiniae*, with a much more direct threat to oppose the hero's νόστος. Here, Heracles' wanderings leave his οἶκος vulnerable. The play opens with Lycus attacking Heracles' family in Thebes, as he completes his final labour in the Underworld.<sup>190</sup> Much like the *Trachiniae*, the prologue establishes a sense of pathos for one member of Heracles' family, although this time it is his mortal father, Amphitryon. On the one hand, Heracles seems arguably less troubling compared to Sophocles' vision. Whereas the *Trachiniae* used Iphytus' death to demonstrate how Heracles' exploits had damaged his οἶκος, Euripides grounds the hero's search for κλέος in familial attachment though a significant adaptation Euripides makes to the myth of Heracles. Tradition dictates that Heracles undergoes his twelve labours to seek purification for the murder of his wife Megara and their children. In the *Heracles*, the hero underwent his labours before this act. In fact, when the play begins Heracles is embarking on his twelfth and final labour of retrieving Cerberus from the Underworld. Instead, he seeks penance for his father, who killed Electryon and was subsequently banished from Argos.<sup>191</sup> Note the striking contrast. In the *Trachiniae*, Heracles' heroic temper led to the exile of his family. In the *Heracles*, his heroic deeds redeem the transgressions of his father. On the surface, this may seem to challenge any assertion that the philosophy of the ἥρωας is necessarily harmful to the οἶκος or the πόλις.

Yet this is contrasted with the presence of Lycus, who exposes the hero's absence

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<sup>190</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 37-44.

<sup>191</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 15-9.

in a much more direct and perilous manner. Heracles' wife, children and father all await death at Lycus' hands. This takes on further meaning when one remembers England's speculation that Heracles and Lycus, who are never on stage at the same time, were likely played by the same actor. For England, this creates a contrast between the 'base...unscrupulous and calculating murderer' Lycus and 'the noble warrior and affectionate father Heracles'.<sup>192</sup> However, this also means that, whenever Lycus is on stage, the audience is reminded that he is only wreaking this havoc when Heracles is not there to impede him. This impression of Lycus as Heracles' unchecked foil also manifests in their highly contrasting ideologies. Upon entering the stage, Lycus challenges Heracles' reputation both in terms of heroism and of masculinity in general. He claims that while Heracles has gained reputation through vanquishing beasts and monsters, he lacks many common trappings of classical masculinity. Heracles 'has never strapped a shield on his left arm, never faced the spear point'.<sup>193</sup> He expressly scorns the notion of fighting with a bow, rather than 'standing your ground, looking straight at the swift swathe cut by enemy spears, and holding ranks'.<sup>194</sup>

Admittedly, it is easy to immediately discount any of Lycus' remarks as invalid. He is the primary antagonist of the play, is challenged by every other major character, and is ultimately disposed of by the finale. Even his dismissive remarks regarding the bow are challenged at length by Amphitryon.<sup>195</sup> Yet, in scorning Heracles for not acting as a conventional *ὀπλίτης*, he makes an intriguing point. As

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<sup>192</sup> England, 3, 2010.

<sup>193</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 160-1.

<sup>194</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 162-4.

<sup>195</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 198-203.

such, it invites the audience to consider whether Heracles can be called a good citizen. Just as with Menelaus' remarks in the *Ajax*, there remains an ambiguity as to whether, even in the mouth of a character who is outright dismissed as wrong, such remarks may carry an uncomfortable amount of weight. Especially when the ἦρως cannot rebuke such claims since he is missing when needed most.

As the play proceeds, the characters despair over Heracles' absence. Megara, discusses the difficulty of explaining this to their children:

'They fall to questioning me, one from this direction, another from that, saying, "Mother, where in the world has father gone off to, what is he doing, when will he come back?" In their youthful confusion they look for their father. I tell them stories to put them off.'<sup>196</sup>

Likewise, Amphytrion's remarks that it now falls to him to protect Heracles' wife and children in his son's place,<sup>197</sup> assuming the κύριος role in the place of his son. Conversely, Kokkini suggests that it is in fact Megara, 'fearless and determined to protect her honour' who takes on the role of κύριος, only relenting when she reunites with her husband.<sup>198</sup> Either way, they shoulder Heracles' duty. While the Heracles of Euripides is in some ways committed to his family, that troubling disconnect is still manifest. And, in some ways, it is more costly since he is no longer there to save his household from disaster. Megara, for all her love for her husband, becomes still more explicit in her frustration as the play progresses, finally declaring:

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<sup>196</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 74-7.

<sup>197</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 44-6.

<sup>198</sup> Kokkini, 77, 2011.

‘Dearest Heracles, if any mortal words are heard in the house of Hades, I say this to you: your father and children are being killed and I as well, I whom mortals once called happy because of you!’<sup>199</sup>

Just as with Menealus’ condemnation of Ajax, the ἥρωος is openly chastised for their harmful, self-cented philosophy. Heracles fails to be a worthy citizen and κύριος and is criticised for it. The chorus echo a similar sentiment, but their remarks include a new, sinister element to Heracles’ absence. They pity the family for being ‘bereft,’ as they ‘mourn [Megara’s] husband in the house of Hades’.<sup>200</sup> They mourn not because they are about to die, but because Heracles is presumed dead. After all, Heracles spends this portion of the narrative in the Underworld, from which most of the cast believe he can never return. Heracles’ mortality becomes the most powerful symbol of his neglect. The cast, even as they await their murder, mourn their κύριος. As far as they are concerned, he is dead, moreso than they are. This serves as a powerful symbol of just how detached Heracles is from not only his οἶκος from mortality itself.

In short, the two plays both begin with the ἥρωος away from his οἶκος to draw attention to how his heroic mentality reflects his inadequacies as a κύριος. Both plays immediately make the audience question the fundamentals of a ἥρωος and how compatible they may be with the domestic life of an everyday citizen. Like many tragic conventions, this has roots in Homer. The dichotomy of heroism and

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<sup>199</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 490-3.

<sup>200</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 115-8.

fatherhood is explored through Hector's character in Book Six of the *Iliad*. Kokkini succinctly summarises this issue:

'Homer does not hesitate to take Hektor away from the battlefield in order to embrace his wife and pick up and kiss his son... This small scene adds a totally different aspect to the portrayal of the hero as a fierce warrior. Domesticity completes Hektor's image [...]

Hektor goes out to kill in order to protect his son, but when he tries to transfer himself into the domestic sphere he finds that he does not exactly fit in an environment away from the battlefield. The fact that Astyanax is scared reveals a conflict between the roles of the warrior and the father'.<sup>201</sup>

Just as the hero's struggle adjusting to the *πόλις* was a concept Homer established, which was explored at length in tragedy, their inability to adjust to the *οἶκος* became equally pertinent within this genre. And in these two plays especially, that turbulence goes far further than the protagonist's problematic absence.

### **Gendered expectations and disconnect in the οἶκος**

Even outside the immediate concerns of the hero's disappearance, The *Trachiniae* is quick to emphasise many of the less humanistic aspects of Heracles' personality. His self-centredness and violence are on full display and lead to a deeply dysfunctional relationship with his family. The *Heracles*, meanwhile, attempts to humanise its protagonist significantly more, with a more harmonious dynamic with his οἶκος. Yet, even here, there is a worrying disconnect threatening disaster for the household. And

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<sup>201</sup> Kokkini, 71-2, 2011.

much of that is expressed using the expected dynamics of gender within the οἶκος. Like many νόστοι, the plot is defined in part by the dynamic between the κύριος (the husband, father and male authority figure) and the κῶριᾶ (the wife and mother who maintains the day-to-day affairs of the house). Because the plays begin with the characters awaiting the return of their κύριος, they invite the audience to follow and empathise with their κῶριᾶ. In the *Agamemnon*, for instance, Clytemnestra dominates much of the play, while Agamemnon himself takes several hundred lines to appear. In Sophocles and Euripides' *Electra*'s, the titular young woman is the central focus, even though the narrative follows the νόστος of Orestes. Likewise, the *Heracles*, and especially the *Trachiniae*, despite relaying the tale of the archetypal ἥρωος have a significant focus on the female experience. To gauge whether the ἥρωος can ever truly adjust to the οἶκος, it invites the audience to examine all the facets of that lifestyle, including the relationship between genders that were, at that point in Athens, taken as a matter of fact. This requires spending a significant amount of time with the female characters of the play, learning how they relate to the ἥρωος, and whether he can truly be the κύριος they need and deserve.

In the *Trachiniae*, Iole's arrival begets discord within the household, even before Heracles appears. This foreboding manifests as soon as Iole is brought onstage. Deianeira responds to the captured Oechalians with both 'joy' for her husband's 'triumph', and 'a strange pity'.<sup>202</sup> Even knowing that their enslavement is proof of Heracles' victory and of his impending return, she still empathises with his victims. That this young woman has been brought here by Heracles for sexual reasons is naturally ironic and becomes a painful shock to Deianeira. Yet the exact nature of

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<sup>202</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 293-8.



her pity is telling. She calls them ‘homeless’ and ‘fatherless’<sup>203</sup>. Such motifs of the house and the family, imply a contrast between the ideals of the οἶκος and the ἥρωες, even more-so when the truth comes out that Heracles enslaved Iole specifically because he was attracted to her. It is worth remembering that slavery was undoubtedly normalised within Attic culture. The specifics of treatment may have varied from household, but slavery was certainly common, and often included a sexual component. Because so little writings by female authors have been preserved, it is often difficult to discern how ancient women may have felt about the knowledge that their husbands may have other sexual encounters this way.

Nevertheless, the idea was certainly experimented with in folklore and literature. Laertes notably abstains from sex with his slave, Eurycleia, in deference to his wife.<sup>204</sup> Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon is motivated by multiple factors, but one is sexual jealousy for his concubine Cassandra, a notion emphasised by Aeschylus<sup>205</sup> and, especially, Euripides.<sup>206</sup> It is difficult to ascertain exactly the common standards of behaviour here, as Golden discusses. He recognises that there are plenty of examples in ancient texts of fathers accepting children from slave mothers as free and legitimate.<sup>207</sup> Still, he too recognises this anxiety over wives being supplanted by concubines in literature.<sup>208</sup> Thus, he concludes, ‘slavery undoubtedly expanded the range of the family which controlled the *oikos*’. But the full extent of how it affected those relationships is extremely difficult to definitively

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<sup>203</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 300.

<sup>204</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 1.433.

<sup>205</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1438-47.

<sup>206</sup> Euripides, *Electra* 1330-3.

<sup>207</sup> Golden, 146, 2011.

<sup>208</sup> Golden, 148 2011.

judge.<sup>209</sup> Nonetheless, tragic authors were certainly conscious that the logistics of slavery may create tension in a domestic setting, which is significant given the importance of war prizes and possessions to the heroic model.

What is notable within the *Trachiniae* is that this mindset is not exclusive to Deianeira. In the *Agamemnon*, or Euripides' *Electra*, this frustration is only expressed by Clytemnestra. Aeschylus never has another character directly support Clytemnestra's assertion that such jealousy is justified. Euripides, meanwhile, has Electra accuse Clytemnestra of lusting after Aegisthus,<sup>210</sup> but never overtly suggests whether Clytemnestra's anger at Agamemnon for bringing home another woman was understandable. In the *Trachiniae*, every character seems aware that this revelation will pain Deianeira. When Lichas is questioned on Iole's heritage, he avoids the question.<sup>211</sup> Likewise, when the Messenger reveals the truth to Deianeira, he is visibly aware of the implication of his revelation.<sup>212</sup> The issues with the ἥρωος bringing a war prize into the οἶκος are not dismissed as feminine sexual jealousy. Rather, it becomes transgressive, with genuine consequences with all concerned. Even the chorus curse Heracles' 'secret evil'.<sup>213</sup> Deianeira, meanwhile, insists that this is no betrayal: 'Has not one man, Heracles, lain with many women? And never yet has any of them incurred evil speech or a reproach from me'.<sup>214</sup> Among the chorus of women though, she openly expresses her pain, torn between her own fear of being supplanted within her own household, and her desire to maintain her honour

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<sup>209</sup> Golden, 151, 2011.

<sup>210</sup> Euripides, *Electra* 1070-1.

<sup>211</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 317.

<sup>212</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 374.

<sup>213</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 383-4.

<sup>214</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 460-2.

by not appearing excessively angry.<sup>215</sup> Even before an audience of largely male Athenians, Sophocles acknowledges the hero's impact on their domestic sphere without dismissing the emotions of his female characters as irrational. Sophocles feels no obligation to take Heracles' side purely due to his mythic (or religious) history and exposes his actions to genuine critical examination even before he appears on stage.

Euripides' portrayal of Heracles is in some ways more positive, but not without its more sinister implications, even before the brutal finale. Most notably, his return establishes a decidedly different tone compared to the *Trachiniae*. There, the joy Deianeira felt at hearing of her husband's impending return is quickly quashed when she discovers his intentions towards Iole. Here, Heracles' return spells salvation for his family from Lycus. Rather than his arrival being preceded by any embassy or messengers such as those seen in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Heracles' return here is much more abrupt, entering just as Amphitryon despairs over the family's doom.<sup>216</sup> Heracles, therefore, assumes the *deus ex machina* role he plays in works such as the *Alcestis* or *Philoctetes*. Megara even compares his appearance to deliverance from Zeus.<sup>217</sup> Euripides allowing his protagonist to share a peaceful, tender moment with his household changes the atmosphere, also giving Heracles the chance to state his philosophy towards both his family and his heroism.

'Whom shall I defend rather than my wife and my children and my old father?  
Farewell to my labors! It was to no purpose that I accomplished them rather than the

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<sup>215</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 545-553.

<sup>216</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 503-13.

<sup>217</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 521-2.

tasks to be done here. Since these children were being put to death for their father, I must risk death in their defence. What fine deed shall we call it to do battle with a hydra and a lion/ at Eurystheus' behest if I do not prevent the death of my children? In that case, I shall not be called, as I once was, Heracles glorious in victory.<sup>218</sup>

Amphitryon's opening remarks established the idea that Heracles' performs his heroic exploits to help his father. Here, Heracles elaborates that, without his family, those adventures would serve no purpose. It certainly makes a striking contrast to his entrance in the *Trachiniae* in which he swore brutal revenge against his wife amidst his death throes.<sup>219</sup> Furthermore, it is telling that, in this speech, while he celebrates his deeds, he never refers directly to κλέος throughout this speech. Euripides' invites the audience to consider the prospect of a hero carved from the Homeric archetype, but whose motivations are focused upon neither glory nor themselves. Megara discusses a similar concept when telling her children how Heracles planned to pass on the fruits of his labours to them one day:

'To you, my son, your dead father used to assign Argos, and you were going to dwell in the palace of Eurystheus/ and hold sway over fertile Pelasgia. He used to put about your head the lion skin which was his armor. And you, child, were the ruler of Thebes that delights in chariots, and you took the plains of my country for your inheritance—such was the persuasion you worked upon your father—and he lowered into your hand/ the finely wrought club that warded off danger, a gift in pretense only. And to you, my son, he promised to give Oechalia, which he once sacked with

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<sup>218</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 576-82.

<sup>219</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 1039-40.

his far-flying arrows.’<sup>220</sup>

Here again, Megara insists that Heracles primarily acts as a ἥρωος for the sake of his family rather than himself, bestowing his prizes to his children. However, it also highlights the inherent paradox of familial lineage and immortality through κλέος. Padilla elaborates on this struggle. He argues that heroism is an inherently individualistic concept, one where the hero must overcome hardships alone, in pursuit of personal glory to ensure his immortality. ‘But in the domestic setting, a father begets and raises his son as a future replacement.’ The domestic κύριος accepts his own mortality, and seeks preservation not through his own reputation, but through the continuation of his bloodline. ‘The father who participates in both spheres must balance this tension.’<sup>221</sup> Padilla sees Heracles’ failure to achieve this balance as his fundamental character flaw, and the reason for the play’s tragic conclusion. Yet, on the surface, this does not seem to be the case. Rather, Heracles’ ideology in carrying out heroic ἔργα for the sake of his families’ preservation seems like the answer to the dichotomy raised in the *Trachiniae*. Instead of the hero’s absence and pursuit of prizes causing strife in his household, his home and family are his motivation throughout. The prizes that grant him κλέος can instead be bestowed upon to the next generation of the οἶκος. Thus, they need never come into conflict.

Nonetheless, despite this sense of optimism, Euripides’ litters his text with a pervading tension. Already, Heracles’ absence in the first half has placed his family

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<sup>220</sup> Euripides’ *Heracles* 462-73.

<sup>221</sup> Padilla, 281, 1994.

in peril. Yet, even placing that immediate threat aside, other disconcerting elements linger. Megara admits that Heracles ‘would not wish to save these children’s lives if it meant they would be thought cowards’.<sup>222</sup> Thus, a tension is established as to what matters more for these children: their lives, or their reputation. Heracles is a product of the Homeric tradition, one which insists that life matters less than one’s glory. Therefore, for all that Heracles insists that his exploits are carried out for his family’s sake, this remark raises doubts as to whether Heracles could prioritise his family’s safety over their reputation. Admittedly, Megara vocally supports these values. For as much as she loves her children, she concedes that: ‘We must act nobly—this house deserves no less of us’.<sup>223</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that Megara voices these concepts, at a point when she and her children are on the brink of brutal murder, is extremely uncomfortable. While Heracles is, in many ways, a more optimistic take on the relationship between the hero and his οἶκος, Euripides warns the audience that this balance might not be as permanent as one may hope. Lycus’ invasion highlights the fragility of this attempt to balance two very different worlds. While not quite as openly problematic as in Sophocles, the audience experiences a growing awareness that this cannot last forever. Something must invariably give way.

### **A violent culmination**

Sophocles and Euripides both establish a sense of dread as the ἥρωος returns to their οἶκος. The fact that both protagonists take so long to appear demonstrates the anxiety, disorder or even outright violence that occurs without their presence. Even before they do return, both playwrights subtly imply that the current position of the household is troubled or untenable, building up suspense for the pivotal moment

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<sup>222</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 291-2.

<sup>223</sup> Euripides, *Heracles*, 280-7.

when disaster strikes. That moment comes at the climax of both plays, when the moment of περιπέτεια flings the characters into chaos, and the οἶκος is shattered entirely. Through this violent finale, the poet delivers an unflinching final denouncement of the hero's place in the οἶκος or the πόλις, by systematically tearing it away from them.

Euripides' approach is straightforward and uncompromising. After Heracles' return, the play seems to be moving towards a celebratory ending. Heracles has returned from his final labour, one that took him beyond the human boundary of death, yet still he is able to return to his hearth and home and save his family from disaster. In fact, Heracles reveals he returned to Thebes before reporting his success to Eurystheus,<sup>224</sup> implying that he is remaining true to his oath to place his family before his heroism and act on their behalf. The chorus even remark on this significant feat.<sup>225</sup> Yet they also ruminate on the transience of youth, and the harsh, sometimes unfair judgement of the gods. Padilla discusses the troubling implications of this ode. 'Heracles' νόστος suggests that the virtuous can be rewarded with a second youth'. This is a sentiment that sounds pleasant at first but highlights the troubling tension Padilla raised about the generational line. Heroism's fixation upon immortality through reputation risks disrupting the inevitable end of one generation and the beginning of another. Otherwise, one faces a crisis whereby 'heroic excellence gates generational continuity',<sup>226</sup> and Heracles' pursuit of immortality may overcome the need to provide for his children. The joy of the chorus at Lycus' death<sup>227</sup> is immediately followed by the arrival of Lyssa and Iris, which raises

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<sup>224</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 616-7.

<sup>225</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 696-700.

<sup>226</sup> Padilla, 288, 1994.

<sup>227</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 809-14.

several questions about Heracles' resulting madness and how the audience should respond. Most notably, it is unclear how culpable Heracles is in his actions. Much like how placing Ajax's madness in the context of Athena's trance potentially greatly changes the implications of his actions, Heracles' madness is contextualised as the product of the gods' interference. Therefore, does Heracles' violence represent that the hero cannot function in the household or wider community, or the sudden cruelty of the gods, and the unfairness of fate upon mortals? Especially when one remembers Heracles' much more empathetic and concerned attitude to his family, then it feels less like a critique of the heroic model, than of the gods themselves.

To counteract such a reading, however, Euripides' litters the pivotal moment of murder with subtext that creates a chilling link between Heracles' past deeds, and the violence he inflicts upon his family, especially when the Messenger relates the specifics of how it occurred. Heracles, in the depths of delirium, believes he is 'kindling the flame for purification before killing Eurystheus'.<sup>228</sup> He can no longer recognise the difference between his home and family, or finally taking revenge upon the man who subjugated and humiliated him. What follows is a grotesque parody of Heracles' exploits. He marches through the household as if travelling and mimics a wrestling match by himself.<sup>229</sup> This quickly turns from darkly absurd to outright violent, reminiscent of heroic revenge. Heracles believes he is killing Eurystheus' children, and arms his bow against them,<sup>230</sup> the same bow he used to kill so many monsters before, which Amphytrion previously defended. The chorus describe Heracles' 'Gorgon gaze',<sup>231</sup> evoking the kinds of monsters he destroyed.

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<sup>228</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 936-7.

<sup>229</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 952-62.

<sup>230</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 967-71.

<sup>231</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 990.



These allusions reinforce the blurring of the two spheres that Heracles once balanced. The instruments of Heracles' κλέος are now the tools of his family's destruction. The whole display is a twisted parody of a heroic ἀριστεία. Even the interference of the gods can factor into this. While it is difficult to call this a just punishment for any potential wrongdoing of Heracles', since he is not in control of his faculties, it does represent the heroic world he inhabits, one of gods and monsters, encroaching upon his mortal οἶκος and tearing it violently apart. One could even take the analogy of the ἀριστεία further. Where Diomedes was inspired by Athena to overwhelm the Trojans,<sup>232</sup> Heracles is inspired by Lyssa to slaughter his family.

By the time Heracles awakens after his rampage, his beloved home seems unrecognisable. He even believes he is back in Hades' domain,<sup>233</sup> further blurring the lines between his domestic life and the heroic world which removed him from mortal limitations. When he realises what he has done, he stresses this resemblance between his labours and this act of violence, sardonically calling it his 'last labour'.<sup>234</sup> Likewise, Padilla suggests that 'Heracles transforms his weapons from reminders of the slaughter into familial substitutes (1376-85); although he fears that they will torture him, the apparent need for the weapons' protection value causes him to reacquire the weapons as replacements for the children.'<sup>235</sup> The violent, individualistic, godly world of the ἥρωος has invaded and upturned Heracles' life within the οἶκος. The tenuous balance of these worlds is shattered as, to quote England: 'The transition of a husband and a father to a soldier and a killer leaves the

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<sup>232</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 121-43.

<sup>233</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1101-2.

<sup>234</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1279.

<sup>235</sup> Padilla, 297, 1994.

latter unrecognisable as the former.<sup>236</sup> Euripides takes a figure of worship, and exemplar of both κλέος, and the classical concept of masculinity, and, through him: ‘questions the appropriateness of military/heroic fathers as stable caretakers’.<sup>237</sup>

The *Trachiniae* culminates in an equally violent manner, but in this case, Heracles is not the culprit, but rather the victim. Deianeira unwittingly poisons her husband and Hyllus arrives to confront his mother for her supposed treachery. As such, compared to Euripides’ work, where Heracles destroys his household with the instruments of heroism, the theme of the clash between the ἥρως and the οἶκος, although undoubtedly still present, manifests differently here. Heroic motifs still permeate the scene. The poison that ravages Heracles’ body is compared to the venom of a ‘hateful serpent’.<sup>238</sup> This is an extremely pointed allusion, since that is precisely what Heracles is afflicted by; the blood of the Lernean Hydra, which Heracles himself killed and used as a weapon in his wanderings. Note the similarity to the Gorgon motifs in the *Heracles*. In both, the moment of Heracles’ ruination evokes bestial motifs. Papadimitropoulos goes further, suggesting that, in both Sophocles’ and Euripides’ versions ‘bestiality is the common denominator of the forces that cause Heracles’ fall’ whether in Heracles’ animal lust for Iole, or the bestial anger he unleashes upon his wife and children.<sup>239</sup> This is still more intriguing when one recalls Clarke’s remarks on the Homeric ‘beast -simile’ and the destructive impulses of heroic ‘μανία’.<sup>240</sup> Using this simile here, even at a point when Hyllus is not aware of the exact cause of his father’s death reminds the audience that Heracles

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<sup>236</sup> England, 10, 2010.

<sup>237</sup> Padilla, 299, 1994.

<sup>238</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 771.

<sup>239</sup> Papadimitropoulos, 134-5, 2008.

<sup>240</sup> Clarke, 148, 1995.

has been brought down by his own weapon.

Much as the interference of the gods brought the violence of the Homeric world into the household in Euripides, the poison disguised as a love charm allows a trinket of Heracles' heroism to invade his home. In the *Trachiniae* though, it is Hyllus who must cope with these circumstances, while Heracles' destruction, combined with his much harsher, more distant portrayal, implies that he is somewhat culpable for these events. Even in his death throes, Sophocles claims, Heracles inadvertently killed 'the unhappy Lichas, who was in no way guilty'.<sup>241</sup> Though Hyllus says this to condemn Deianeira, it also serves an implicit reminder of Heracles' tendency to harm others (even the innocent) through his actions, just as he did Deianeira. This intermingling of heroic and domestic imagery appears in Deianeira's death as well. Deianeira takes her life in her bedchamber, stabbing herself with a sword. In the conventions of Greek tragedy, a sword is often used as a symbol of masculine, and particularly heroic, values. It is after all, the same weapon used by *Ajax* to end his life in Sophocles' play. Therefore, just as Heracles' homecoming is ruined by part of his heroic past undoing him in the guise of something domestic, Deianeira dies in the domestic space, killed by a heroic object. Likewise, Heracles dies outdoors, while Deianeira dies inside the house, calling to mind the common gender roles of a Greek οἶκος, which is now being violently torn asunder. Despite his ambivalent nature, though, there is a poignancy to Heracles' fate. He reminds the audience of how hard he has strived and fought across the years as a warrior.

'What are your origins, Greeks, most unrighteous of all men, for whom I destroyed

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<sup>241</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 772-3.

myself, ridding you of pests, many in the sea and in all the forests, and now in my agony will no one bring fire or a weapon that can help me?'<sup>242</sup>

Heracles has fought against countless foes, both mortal and monstrous, yet despite (or perhaps because of) this, he now begs for one final act of mercy and cannot even be granted that. Whereas Euripides' Heracles was vindicated, accepted as a guest by Theseus,<sup>243</sup> and ultimately reconciles with his father before departing,<sup>244</sup> Sophocles' Heracles remains remote to the last.

### **Adaptability, enlightenment and learning through suffering**

There is, however, another key factor in the resolution of both these plays. In Euripides' play, Heracles displays a flexibility in his approach to the heroic code that provides a more hopeful note to the ending. The *Trachiniae*, meanwhile, bears a crucial subtextual point, that grants Heracles a sense of enlightenment beyond mortal limits in his last moments.

In the *Heracles*, Euripides provides ample time to witness Heracles' reaction to his crimes. Kokkini argues that the point where this is most evident is when Heracles deliberates over committing suicide. Specifically, Kokkini interprets this as a parallel to Sophocles' *Ajax*, not least since 'they both go mad and attack innocent victims'.

Kokkini, likewise discusses Ajax taking his own life as the culmination of his commitment to the heroic code, and refusal to compromise his honour:

'Aias' reaction is in accordance with traditional *arete* and justified in terms of honour...Aias chooses suicide because he could not have chosen anything else. His

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<sup>242</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 1010-4.

<sup>243</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1398.

<sup>244</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1408-9.

morality is too inflexible and too tied to the heroic *arete* of an older system of values and he cannot adjust to an evolved, more flexible way of thinking; for him this would be a false morality.’<sup>245</sup> On the surface, this all seems in keeping with the interpretations previously given by Knox, Segal and Kennedy. The hero embodies older, more traditional values. His unshakable resolve, and his inability to adjust to the world around him leads to his death. Yet, as Kokkini points out, unlike Ajax, Heracles survives. The key factor is Theseus’ intervention. After learning of the tragedy from Amphitryon, he resolves ‘to share his grief’.<sup>246</sup>

Much of this thesis has demonstrated how focused the ἥρωες is upon the individual. And many of the playwrights of fifth century Athens were evidently aware of this, as were the scholars who have come after. Christ discusses how much of Attic drama revolves around the tension between ‘self-interest’ and how it affects the ideal of a democratic πόλις. To rectify this, Athenian culture encouraged citizens to see their relationship with the state as mutually beneficial, ‘to persuade and, if necessary, to compel citizens to perform their civic obligations’.<sup>247</sup> In tragedy, especially, ‘extreme selfishness’ becomes not only ‘ugly and dangerous to human communities’ but also as ‘not to the advantage of an individual’ as seen through the likes of ‘Jason, Polyphontes, Eteocles, and Polyneices’.<sup>248</sup> Christ’s argument is compelling, and complements the assertions from the likes of Knox or Haubold. Yet, it also places Euripides’ *Heracles* in an interesting position. By the end of the play, Heracles must abandon that focus upon himself, saved not by his unshakable sense of honour, but through his bonds of friendship, or φιλία. Theseus’ words challenge this focus upon

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<sup>245</sup> Kokkini, 99, 2011.

<sup>246</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1202.

<sup>247</sup> Christ, 15, 2006.

<sup>248</sup> Christ, 22, 2006.

the self, by insisting that he can share Heracles' suffering. He reminds Heracles that Theseus himself owes him for saving him from the Underworld,<sup>249</sup> a reminder of Heracles' final labour, his journey to the Underworld to recover Cerberus. Here, Euripides subtly encourages his audience to see this heroic feat not merely as some symbol of κλέος, but as a good turn towards Heracles' friend, deserving of another in turn. It is a rare moment when the ἥρωος is lauded specifically for the help he provides others. It is from this perspective that Theseus urges Heracles not to commit suicide. To do this, he uses the language of heroism:

'Heracles:

I mean to die and to return to the Underworld from which I have just come.

Theseus:

This is spoken like some ordinary person.

Heracles:

You give me advice, untouched by grief yourself.

Theseus:

Is this Heracles the all-enduring who speaks?

Heracles:

This much I have not endured: there must be a limit to suffering.

Theseus:

Is this humanity's great benefactor and friend?

Heracles:

Humanity can do nothing for me: Hera is in control.

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<sup>249</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1221-2.

Theseus:

Greece will not put up with your dying in folly.’<sup>250</sup>

Theseus uses the motifs of glory and reputation to reach a different conclusion to that of the *Ajax*. He perceives self-destruction not as the preservation of honour but as the words of an ‘ordinary person’. Such an act is framed not as honourable or steadfast, but as unheroic, common and even cowardly. And, as Kokkini demonstrates, this is key to the play’s thematic resolution:

‘What really changes his mind is the accusation of *deilia*.<sup>262</sup> He does not wish to be remembered posthumously as a coward (1347-1348) after having gained reputation as Greece’s greatest hero...if a man cannot endure misfortunes, he cannot endure death in battle either (1347-1351)...enduring misfortune then becomes more commendable than dying out of shame. This new approach reveals a shift from older beliefs and creates a distance from the more traditional morality of Aias.<sup>263</sup> As his father did earlier on, Herakles uses traditional [...] notions to revise traditional definitions of manliness, in this case by presenting the possibility of honour retained or regained.’<sup>251</sup>

Here, Heracles is persuaded to do the one thing which should be unthinkable for a ἥρωες; change. Kokkini recognises Euripides willingly altering the traits that define a hero. Knox identified the refusal to yield as crucial to the nature of a hero. It was what drove them throughout the play, what isolated them from their community, and

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<sup>250</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1247-54.

<sup>251</sup> Kokkini, 100-1, 2011.

what often ultimately led to their downfall. They were, by design, rigid, static characters who never truly learned or substantially changed, and that was what made them into δεινός figures that others could not relate to.<sup>252</sup> Heracles' actions in the finale of Euripides' play turns this entirely on its head. The protagonist relents and instead of responding to the advice of others with hostility, he learns from them. This willingness to yield, learn and adapt is what ultimately saves his life. He can now accept Theseus' offer to come to Athens.<sup>253</sup> He has a second chance to be integrated into the πόλις.

England describes this as an ending which stresses the importance of friendship, which can restore normalcy when the family dynamic is shattered.<sup>254</sup> These bonds between mortals are re-emphasised as Heracles bids farewell to his father.<sup>255</sup> What began as a fairly archetypal narrative of the failed νόστος of the hero has transformed into something remarkably different. Heracles attempted to reconcile and balance the two fields of his life, the heroic and the domestic. However, that attempt ultimately ends in failure. The invading heroic world of the gods destroys the sphere of the οἶκος. Yet rather than fulfilling the heroic code to its culmination and taking his own life, Theseus convinces Heracles to adapt. The life of a ἥρωας is re-examined not for what it provides for the individual, but rather for others. Heracles

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<sup>252</sup> Knox, 10-23, 1961.

<sup>253</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1322-3.

<sup>254</sup> England, 12, 2010.

<sup>255</sup> Admittedly scholars are not unified on this. Padilla describes a tendency for modern readings to prioritise the importance of 'acts of human love' in the ending (pg.291). The empathy between the characters enables them to find hope and meaning in their suffering. Padilla takes a 'darker' reading of the play, whereby Heracles acts on 'repressed hostile feelings towards his own sons' (pg.292). This in turn has roots in the corrupt nature of Heracles' lineage, specifically 'Zeus' neglectful absence' and 'Amphitryon's manipulative presence' (page 294). That being said, this approach still represents the flaws of the tradition from which he hails and its incompatibility with civilian life, thereby implying that it needs to change. Where Padilla differs, though, is that he sees no hope for a viable alternative in Heracles' immediate future.



re-defines his understanding of courage and cowardice, and thus preserves his life. Through suffering, he learns to adapt his code of heroism, in a way that resembles the system of mutual benefit between the state and the individual presented by Christ. He comes to better understand the importance of community, and common interest. As Heracles departs for a second chance in Athens, in his final lines he summarises what this terrible experience has taught him:

‘Whoever desires to get wealth or strength rather than good friends is a fool.’<sup>256</sup>

The *Trachiniae* provides its own intriguing reflection on the evolution of heroism. However, rather than providing an overt commentary of the need for heroism to change, it subtly demonstrates the influence of cult on the nature of the ἥρωες, thus changing the lens through which one perceives Heracles’ character and the whole heroic code. A key theme lingering over Heracles’ fate in the play is his impeding apotheosis. Being a member of the Olympian pantheon, he will inevitably ascend to godhood upon the death of his mortal body. While the *Trachiniae* does not portray the moment of Heracles’ ascension, it is a crucial aspect of the plot. When he finally enters the stage, Heracles ruminates on his memory that he received in ‘the grove of the Selli...that at the time that is now alive and present my release from the labours that stood over me should be accomplished’. He realises that this release is not one of happiness, but one of death.<sup>257</sup> Heracles receives no tangible reward for his deeds, not even a quick death. That reward instead comes from his apotheosis, which is only suggested, never truly seen. Papadimitropoulos, however, suggests that

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<sup>256</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1425-6.

<sup>257</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 1166-73.

this is in itself, ‘a personal victory’ for the hero. Once Heracles understands this, his anger towards his wife’s seeming betrayal fades, in fact he never even mentions her by name again. Having received ‘the missing link which permits him to interpret the divine oracles’, he calmly accepts both his death and his ascension.<sup>258</sup> Heracles’ entire characterisation is thus contextualised by his godly inhumanity. To return to Kokkini:

‘Sophocles’ portrait of Herakles focuses on the hero known from the myth who stretches the limits of human physical potential. But in the *Trachiniae*, unlike Euripides’ *Herakles*, he remains (in terms of physical location and interpersonal dynamics), at best divorced from the *oikos*. His relations with his family, such as they are, are in one way or another highly problematic, be it the brutality with which he deals with his son, or the fact that he never comes into contact with Deianeira, thus never sharing with her the same dramatic or domestic space, despite the fact that she is clearly devoted to him’<sup>259</sup>

In the *Trachiniae*, the central dramatic tension is not between two moulds of masculinity, but rather between the realms of mortals and gods. While Sophocles does not shy away from the darker elements of his protagonist, he feels no need to definitively validate or judge the morality of his hero, because he need not be held to mortal standards. For all the harmful impact of his actions, Deianeira and Hyllus never truly condemn him. Even when Deianeira feels her husband has betrayed her, she presents a façade of acceptance, and even in private, her instinct is not to blame

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<sup>258</sup> Papadimitropoulos, 138, 2008.

<sup>259</sup> Kokkini, 61, 2011.

him but rather to win him back. In much the same way that the Greeks would revere their gods, no matter how much they feared them or how cruel they could supposedly be, Heracles is honoured absolutely, no matter what he says or does. In the final scene Heracles provides Hyllus the instructions for his cremation, with a warning that he will curse Hyllus should he fail.<sup>260</sup> Here he plays the role of a *deus ex machina*, instructing the characters and threatening pollution to those who do not comply with his will. Furthermore, he insists that Hyllus should not lament him, ‘without mourning and without weeping’.<sup>261</sup> In his final moments, Heracles distances himself from this final human custom, fully accepting his impending godhood. The *Trachiniae* fully embraces the religious, even cult, aspects of heroism. If the Homeric hero existed between human and god, then Sophocles’ Heracles is a character almost entirely divorced from the former, and now transitions entirely to the latter.

### **The stagnation of the ἥρωος**

In the *Heracles* and the *Trachiniae*, one sees a clash between two worlds. The godly world of heroes and monsters, and the grounded world of the οἶκος. While ancient authors conceptualise these two spheres of the life of the ἥρωος as early as Homer’s *Odyssey*. But Sophocles and Euripides are unflinching in their portrayal of the potential clash between these two walks of life. The ἥρωος and the κύριος were two crucial cultural influences upon fifth century Athenians and men in particular. While the κύριος was a model embodied by the father and thus a common role model in an Athenian nuclear family, the ἥρωος was one immortalised by Homer and other such literary works. This means that Greek boys grew up exposed to two

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<sup>260</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 1193-202.

<sup>261</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 1200.

distinct, often contradictory, models of masculinity. On the one hand, succession and deference to the next generation was the ultimate end goal of all men, on the other, one should revere men who fought primarily for themselves. In essence, they were encouraged both to accept mortality, yet also to chase immortality. Euripides and Sophocles use the greatest of all heroes to explore the fundamental oxymoron of such ideals.

Heracles, especially, stands on the boundary of these two ideals. He is both ἥρωας and κύριος, but also both human and god. Sophocles takes a more remote approach to the hero, emphasising the man's heroic temper and divine nature, divorcing him from his household, and thus encouraging the audience to perceive the dynamic between him and his family not as a man and his home, but as mortals subject to the whims of a fledgling god who need not be held to the same moral standards as humans. Euripides meanwhile emphasises Heracles' humanity. He presents a much more sincere, sympathetic man struggling to preserve his domestic life, but who cannot divorce himself from the heroic world. His dual priorities prevent him from returning when he is needed most, and disaster strikes when the divine framework of heroism follows him home. However, despite these differences, they share a common thread in how they return to common archetypes and conventions of heroic mythology and tragic drama. From the νόστος of the hero, the ambivalence of the gods and the divide between the real and the fantastical world, these devices are repurposed here to explore the moulds of masculinity that Athenians were exposed to and whether they can ever truly co-exist. They stand as one of the most frank criticisms of the connection between the ἥρωας and the πόλις. In order for the heroic archetype to retain its place within Attic culture, it must adapt to better coincide with

the changing concepts of law, the state, family and the common good. To do so, they both end with Heracles being forced ‘to reconstruct the true content of his life, to gain knowledge’.<sup>262</sup> Whether that be through re-interpreting its nature, wholly embracing the cult tradition, and definitively redefining heroes as gods, or by reassessing the traits that define a ἥρως to align with the new order, there is a frank admittance that Athens’ relationship with its mythic tradition must inevitably change.

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<sup>262</sup> Papadimitropoulos, 138, 2008.

## **Chapter Four: Orestes-Revenge, justice and social transition**

So far, this thesis has identified the key influences regarding how tragedy portrayed the concept of heroism. Throughout these chapters, one can see ancient authors problematising how to reconcile the πόλις and the individualised hero. Euripides' *Heracles* and Sophocles' *Trachiniae* each posed two different solutions as to how to reconcile this with Athens' current state. Over the course of the next two chapters, the thesis will take these conclusions, and explore potential thematic parallels in classical tragedy. To that end, this chapter will follow on from the conclusion of Euripides' *Heracles* and explore one of the most influential and prolific works in the genre: Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Comprised of a trilogy (and the only extant example of such) of plays performed consecutively in the Dionysia festival in 458 BCE, the *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi*, and *Eumenides* relate the fate of the house of Atreus, the mythological rulers of Mycenae. Naturally, any attempt to recognise similarities in the themes of Euripides' *Heracles* to this trilogy should not be used to suggest that Aeschylus was somehow influenced by Euripides. On the contrary, Aeschylus' work predates Euripides by roughly forty years. Rather, the purpose of interpreting them in this order during this thesis, has more to do with their thematic relationship as will be elaborated upon here.

This chapter, therefore, will discuss the portrayal of heroism in the *Oresteia*, specifically the role, characterisation, and significance of Orestes in the *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides*. Previous scholarship has already remarked at length on Aeschylus' commentary on the nature of revenge, the dichotomy of classical gender, and the evolution of law and justice. Helm aptly summarises the most common perspective on the trilogy, the transition from 'a society where 'definitions of justice had

previously rested with the individual and his family’ which is ‘fragile and clouded by self-interest and passion’ to one where ‘a jury can broaden the perspective of the judgment and free it from the narrow concerns of the individual’.<sup>263</sup> In particular, the play’s finale has long been regarded as a crucial portrayal of the birth of democracy and judicial affairs, not least since the play ends within Athens itself. However, where this thesis disagrees with Helm especially is that he sees ‘uniqueness’ in Aeschylus’ philosophy that misfortune and suffering spring from ‘impiety’, at least compared to certain earlier poets, like Pindar.<sup>264</sup> Rather, much of the morals that underpin these plays comes from the ideas Aeschylus draws upon from Homer, though not without some drastic reimagining of his own.

Hence, this analysis will cover two key concerns. The first is the play’s Homeric influences and the role that the ἥρωες plays in the codes of justice and revenge espoused within the trilogy. Through this, one can identify the trilogy’s impact on later works. Just as the *Ajax* would do years later, the trilogy adapts the iconography and themes of Homer to discuss the then current state of Athens. Likewise, much like the *Heracles*, the *Oresteia* carves a more human niche for the ἥρωες archetype to embody in this new democratic culture and sought to link this definitively to Athens’ own civic identity.

### **Homeric vengeance and its influence on Aeschylus**

Before discussing Aeschylus’ Orestes however, there is a great deal of context that must be elaborated upon first. Therefore, this chapter will begin by discussing not only Homer’s own depiction of the character, but also how Homeric themes of

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<sup>263</sup> Helm, 52, 2004.

<sup>264</sup> Helm, 29, 2004.

violence and retribution are explored and questioned in the *Agamemnon* before Orestes sets out on his own quest for vengeance in the second play.

Homer's *Odyssey* frequently invokes the myth of Orestes. The council of the gods immediately parallels the plight of Odysseus and of Agamemnon. Here, Zeus uses Aegisthus' crime against Agamemnon to ruminate upon the nature of mortal crime and punishment. To Zeus, Aegisthus stands as proof that 'it is [humanity's] own transgressions which bring them suffering that was not their destiny'.<sup>265</sup> Aegisthus is a disgraceful guest, taking Agamemnon's wife for himself, and murdering Agamemnon in his own home, thereby violating the codes of ξενία. However, as Zeus remarks, such crimes were not his 'destiny'.<sup>266</sup> The narrative defends Odysseus and Telemachus' revenge upon the Suitors because the story of Agamemnon and, by extension, Orestes becomes the precedent. Zeus' opening remarks establish a key code of morality. Evil originates from humans, not the gods, and is repaid with further evil. When one remembers the role that divine influence played over Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Heracles*, it becomes clear how important human agency is to how one perceives the themes of such works. Secondly, human evil is a violation of one's μοῖρα, an unnatural crime, and so the punishment is the fault of no-one but the perpetrator. Orestes' vengeance upon Aegisthus was foretold by Hermes to warn him against committing such a crime.<sup>267</sup> Thus, the hero's vengeance against Aegisthus was a justifiable punishment for such injustice and does not warrant further punishment.

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<sup>265</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 1.33-4.

<sup>266</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 1.35.

<sup>267</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 1.40-2.



Orestes is also invoked as a source of inspiration for Odysseus' son, Telemachus. Athena explicitly urges him to be 'as brave as Orestes'.<sup>268</sup> They are both sons of renowned heroes of the Trojan War, whose livelihood, homes and spouses were coveted by other men. They each find their heroic identity by avenging this dishonour, thus living up to the names of their fathers. Homer establishes Orestes as part of a new generation of heroes, identifies his sense of justice (and its resulting violence) with the heroism of the previous generation, and frames it as an unquestionably right and worthy deed. Much as Homer raised conflict between the hero and their community, the *Odyssey* especially gives them licence to dispense justice against unnatural crimes.

The *Oresteia*, then, is a commentary on executing this form of heroic justice, presenting it not as an unquestioned punishment of ungodly evil, but as a morally complicated process which perpetuates a cycle of violence. This is first established throughout the *Agamemnon*, especially the finale, where the chorus of Argive elders confront Clytemnestra for her brutal act of murder. Clytemnestra, as a defence, compares her crimes to those of her late husband. She deems it a hypocrisy that 'you judge me to have incurred exile from the city, the hatred of the community, and loud public curses; but you didn't show any opposition at all to this man at that former time, when...he sacrificed...the darling offspring of my pangs, as a spell to soothe the Thracian winds. Shouldn't you have driven him from this land in punishment for that unclean deed?'<sup>269</sup> Clytemnestra refers to the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the story of which the chorus relayed in their *parados*.

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<sup>268</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 1.302.

<sup>269</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1412-20.

Homer chose not to establish a wider reason for Agamemnon's murder, beside Aegisthus' lust for his wife or desire for power. Clytemnestra, meanwhile, is given motivations of a much wider scope. Her maternal grief gives her a clear motive, in addition to feeling wronged by her husband's adultery. While these arguments fail to dissuade the chorus, the very act of establishing these motivations blurs the lines of morality. Aegisthus' murder of Agamemnon in the *Odyssey* was a blasphemous, irredeemable perversion of his nature and the will of the gods. In Aeschylus' play, the culprit offers a defence and claims that this is itself, a just act of divinely sanctioned revenge. This becomes more troublesome when Clytemnestra reaches her final defence, as she calls herself the 'bitter avenging spirit of Atreus, the furnisher of the cruel banquet,' who 'has taken the likeness of this corpse's wife and paid him out, adding a full-grown sacrificial victim to the young ones.'<sup>270</sup>

Clytemnestra distances herself from the murder entirely, instead blaming this ἀλάστωρ that haunts the entire household. But it is also blended with a motif that was visible in the previous chapters. Being on the border of human and god as they are, there is a repeated emphasis on the limits of agency for heroic characters. In many instances, the hero is either ordered by a god, manipulated by them, or else directed to some predetermined fate. Therefore, much like Sophocles' *Ajax* or Euripides' *Heracles*, when judging the behaviour of these actions, one must attempt to determine how much control any of these characters truly have over their actions. In Aeschylus, this is arguably still more glaring. Consider what Knox identified as a key convention of Aeschylus. While his plays are still largely character-driven, they

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<sup>270</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1497-1504.

have much more of a sense of history compared to Sophocles' works. The Aeschylean hero is 'an organic part of the larger design',<sup>271</sup> their actions set against the broader 'sweep of history' that brought them to that point. In this case, Aeschylus presents 'a vicious cycle of blood-vengeance, in which a chain of vindictive and murderous acts culminates in matricide...an intricate knot of interrelated deeds, each somewhat determined by a previous act and begetting the next one'.<sup>272</sup> Aeschylus' vision is much wider in the scope than a the heroic drive of an individual.

Key to this chapter will be the following hypothesis: Much like Athena in the *Ajax*, the hero giving up their agency to a divine force that makes them commit atrocities is symbolic of a greater theme. Specifically, the ἀλάστωρ is a metaphor for the heroic temper. The curse that dogs the house of Atreus goes hand in hand with its heroic legacy, and the Homeric philosophy of blood-for-blood. This only ends when they recontextualise their identity within a new social standard.

Multiple scholars emphasise how crucial the compulsion of the gods is throughout these plays. Goldhill described that 'divine frame', be it through rituals, prayers or the appearance of the gods themselves, as 'fundamental to Aeschylus' work'.<sup>273</sup> Dodds, likewise, agrees that the entire trilogy is framed around the 'involvement of human divinities'.<sup>274</sup> More specifically, it presents various characters as being subservient or tempted by the divine, raising questions as to where the guilt for their actions lies.

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<sup>271</sup> Knox, 4, 1961.

<sup>272</sup> Scapin 146, 2020.

<sup>273</sup> Goldhill, 67, 2004.

<sup>274</sup> Dodds, 26, 1960.

That cyclical violence driven onwards by the gods applies not only to Clytemnestra, but her husband too. On the one hand, the chorus portray Agamemnon as caught between the will of Zeus and the spite of Artemis. ‘...logic may assure us that Agamemnon at Aulis can neither have made a choice nor have incurred any intelligible guilt...’<sup>275</sup> Yet Dodds urges readers not to overlook his own decision process, as ‘we see the King go through all the motions of a man in the act of choice... The considerations which influence him are purely human, and surely he believes himself to be making a choice between them; for he does not know that he is an agent of Zeus’. Likewise, he insists not to overemphasise the importance of the “harness of necessity” in this process. Being unaware of the grander divine scheme around him, Agamemnon believes he has full control of his decision, yet still he chooses infanticide, convincing himself that it is his only option, to pursue the glory and vengeance of the war. ‘...the man who wears such harness has indeed lost his freedom, but the man who puts it on might have refused to do so... by making the wrong choice Agamemnon placed himself in the power of the *alastor*’<sup>276</sup> the influence of the heroic temper itself. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra may be manipulated by wider forces but ‘The ἀλάστορ is a temptation and ‘*sylliptor* (accomplice)’, not a compulsion’.<sup>277</sup> Put simply, Dodds perceives the characters continually doing deplorable things out of the assumption (or, more cynically, excuse) that they have no choice, because the system of values espoused by the Homeric world which Aeschylus adapts, is too narrow to allow for anything else. It is much like the god-given madness in *Ajax* and *Heracles* that led heroes to commit

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<sup>275</sup> Dodds, 26, 1960.

<sup>276</sup> Dodds, 27, 1960.

<sup>277</sup> Dodds, 27, 1960.

atrocities but elevated to an almost systemic level across this household, throughout every generation.

Yet as a curse, the ἀλάστωρ is also consistently in line with heroic values. The sacrifice of Iphigenia was a stepping-stone to Agamemnon's war with Troy. Agamemnon's choice is a dilemma of his 'moral responsibilities' as 'a father and general'.<sup>278</sup> Agamemnon needed to pacify the gods, and to travel to Troy, where he could fulfil his heroic duty, both in terms of revenge for his brother's slighted honour, and of the κλέος of battle. Destroying Troy would both allow him to exact retribution for the abduction of Helen, but also to satiate his 'enthusiasm for the glory of the expedition'.<sup>279</sup> Iphigenia dies, in part, for the sake of the heroic code.

And Agamemnon's association with the heroic mindset, and the troubling implications of that, recur upon his entrance. During the carpet scene 'Agamemnon chooses dangerous glory as he did at Aulis...He treads upon the substance of the house (as he killed his own daughter) and on the blood of all his victims'.<sup>280</sup> Agamemnon has given into the ἀλάστωρ, and repeated the mistakes of his father, committing atrocities in the name of Homeric honour. This leads Clytemnestra acts like a ἥρωος to exact her own Homeric vengeance in kind. Goldhill neatly summarises the ambiguity this raises, particularly regarding the idea that morality can be narrowed down to the will of Zeus. 'The response to the central act of regicide debates the involvement of men and gods in the event, sets up different ways of killing, different ways of attributing causal factors'.<sup>281</sup> Homer presented

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<sup>278</sup> Lawrence, 88, 2013.

<sup>279</sup> Lawrence, 88, 2013.

<sup>280</sup> Lawrence, 85, 2013.

<sup>281</sup> Goldhill, 70, 2004.

violence as a simple, uncomplicated tool of justice. Aeschylus is willing to muddy those waters.

These factors are too complex to accommodate Homer's view that evil is deviation from the gods' will and can be easily punished. Because much as Agamemnon has both pursued heroism and performed an atrocity at the same time (both enforcing and violating the gods' will) Clytemnestra has committed both an ungodly crime and avenged a different transgression in one swoop. This paints a complex and inherently cyclical picture of violence within the *Oresteia*. Violence continually begets violence, and while some actions have more justification than others, it will invariably lead to the next. Indeed, as the play concludes, the chorus scorn Aegisthus by voicing their hope that Orestes will return, to restore justice.<sup>282</sup> This not only segue-ways naturally into the plot of the *Choephoroi* but also indicates that the chorus cannot conceive of any solution other than to see murder answered with murder. The heroic temper, and its limited conception of justice is rooted into the fabric of the *Oresteia*'s world on both a human and divine level, a curse masquerading as an ideal.

### **Orestes the Homeric avenger**

This means that when the narrative shifts to Orestes' perspective in the *Choephoroi*, the audience is challenged to perceive the central conflict in a very different context, one that allows Aeschylus to question the right of the ἥρωες to retribution. If Orestes' revenge in the *Odyssey* is placed in the context of νόστος, and the re-establishment of order, the *Choephoroi* takes a wildly different approach. At first the play seems to begin with the unambiguous stance that vengeance is necessary to restore order to

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<sup>282</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1667-9.

Argos, much like Homer suggested. Electra establishes this in her invocation to Agamemnon.<sup>283</sup> She believes that it would be right for the usurpers to die for what they have done. This is moral enough to warrant ‘blessings from below’ while their enemies deserve only ‘evil against them’. Retribution is godly and just, much as Orestes’ νόστος was in Homer. But therein lies a worrying implication, one that will persist across the play. Electra’s prayer also hearkens back to many of the same motifs as Clytemnestra’s prayers in the *Agamemnon*. Much like her mother, who begged Zeus for strength in her quest for vengeance,<sup>284</sup> Electra invokes the gods and the code of justice. Aeschylus encourages his audience to see that the parallels between the violence that tore this family apart many years ago and that which will do so again now.

Thus, long before Orestes enters the stage, Aeschylus entrenches his narrative in the tradition of revenge that was so prevalent in heroism while subtly sowing doubt as to its validity. Aeschylus associates these themes of justice and retribution with both his protagonist and his antagonist, a fact that only becomes clearer in the *Choephoroi*, once the audience is introduced to Orestes himself. Originally, Orestes is certain that his vengeance is divinely sanctioned and unquestionably moral. The opening lines of the play come in the form of Orestes praying to Hermes, swearing to fulfil his oath of vengeance.<sup>285</sup> Upon being reunited with Electra and the Chorus, he makes this still clearer. ‘The mighty oracle of Loxias will assuredly not betray me’,<sup>286</sup> he remarks. Far from fearing that committing matricide may curse or pollute him in some way, Orestes is certain that choosing not to act would warrant

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<sup>283</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 142-8.

<sup>284</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 973-4.

<sup>285</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 1-5.

<sup>286</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 269.

punishment. He relates how the oracle warned him of the ‘catastrophes’ he would undergo should he ignore Apollo’s order to punish his father’s murderers.<sup>287</sup> As Conacher writes, this warning is ‘clearly designed to indicate the weight of supernatural compulsion on the prince and so to exonerate him, in advance, from the unnatural deed of matricide’.<sup>288</sup> Orestes is already aware of the Furies, having been warned of this too by Apollo’s oracle.<sup>289</sup> Yet the characters remain convinced that any retributive violence they perform is justified or at least, their only option, no matter how heinous the act, or far reaching the consequences. Like the heroes that came before them, they can only match an atrocity with another atrocity.

Orestes’ Homeric values can be seen in more than just his attitude to revenge. His grief and lamentation for his father is also entrenched in Homeric concepts. As Orestes and Electra stand before their father’s tomb, he voices his sorrow that Agamemnon could not have died at Troy. ‘You would have left behind your glory in your house, given your children a life in which all would turn to look at them in the streets, and had a tomb heaped high with foreign soil, an easy burden for your house to bear—’<sup>290</sup> This stands as one of the most overt Homeric homages in the play, seeming to directly reference the thought process of Odysseus in Book Five of the *Odyssey*. As Odysseus is stranded in Poseidon’s storm, certain of his own death, he wishes for the same fate Orestes wishes for his father, to die at the height of the Trojan War.<sup>291</sup> Thus, Aeschylus entrenches his young protagonist in the values of the Homeric tradition. He establishes Orestes as a character committed to the honour of

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<sup>287</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 270-5.

<sup>288</sup> Conacher, 107, 1987.

<sup>289</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 283-97.

<sup>290</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 347-53.

<sup>291</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 111-3.



himself and his bloodline, who will oppose ‘Violence...with violence, justice with justice’,<sup>292</sup> who places these ideals over the value of life, including his own. Once he has taken Clytemnestra’s life as recompense for Agamemnon’s degradation, he would be content to die.<sup>293</sup>

At first, the chorus see nothing wrong with Orestes’ mindset. They are horrified at the state of the household, polluted by Clytemnestra’s actions<sup>294</sup> and certain that Orestes’ νόστος will be the solution to this bloodshed; that homecoming and revenge will restore the οἶκος, as it did in the *Odyssey*, both for Odysseus, and even for Orestes himself. After the siblings undergo the purification ritual and prepare to enact their plan. Orestes swears the chorus to secrecy while ordering his sister back inside the house.<sup>295</sup> In doing so, he is re-establishing the regulations of the οἶκος, bringing his home and city back to normality, both in terms of his influence over the people as a noble, and in terms of household gender roles. However, by contextualising this moment as he has, Aeschylus urges the audience to see the subtext which his characters do not; that Orestes is not so different from his would-be-victims, and that he is not restoring normality but merely perpetuating a cycle.

This truth only really resonates with Orestes at the conclusion of the play. In order to dissuade him, Clytemnestra reveals one of her breasts, a cultural symbol of the maternal bond, and one that incidentally exists in Homer.<sup>296</sup> There, it was used to signify that Hecuba was ignoring his mother’s pleas to save himself to face Achilles,

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<sup>292</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 461.

<sup>293</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 343-8.

<sup>294</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 47.

<sup>295</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 579-84.

<sup>296</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 22.83.

effectively betraying his family for the sake of his honour. Orestes too will disobey his mother for the sake of his heroic duty, not by ending his own life, but his mother's. And yet, here, despite his earlier resolve, Orestes hesitates, and turns to Pylades for advice.<sup>297</sup> The true horror of this act dawns on him and weakens his resolve. In this moment, Orestes is placed in the same position of his father, unable to contain his horror at this monstrous act of blood-murder, yet, believing himself obligated by the gods, making the conscious decision to proceed.

After Orestes regains his composure, an *ἀγών* breaks out between the mother and son, which highlights the troubling similarities between the two.<sup>298</sup> This passage draws upon many of the motifs from Clytemnestra's defence in the *Agamemnon*. Most notably, she draws upon the motif of 'Destiny' to justify her previous actions. As she did in the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra urges others to consider her act of murder in the context of a wider history, and of the curse upon the house of Atreus. In the process, she distances herself from the act. Yet, she points out the injustices that she feels forced her own hand. She compares Orestes' experience of being abandoned and 'ignominiously sold', by likening that to her own experience in marriage. Both characters feel they have been treated dishonourably in a way that violates 'Decency'. The passage strengthens the parallels between the transgressive violence of Orestes and Clytemnestra. Even if the audience were to discount Clytemnestra's defence out of hand, that only makes Orestes' similar predicament and decisions more unsettling.

That parallel becomes clearer once Orestes returns to the stage after the murder. He

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<sup>297</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 899.

<sup>298</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 910-8.

is brought out from the house on the εκκύκλημα, the bodies of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra at his feet. The scene is strikingly similar visually to the finale of the *Agamemnon*, where Clytemnestra also stepped out with the bodies of her two victims. Orestes, driven by the same values that drove both of his parents, has repeated their atrocities. As Scapin ruminates, from as early as the *Agamemnon*, conflict in the trilogy comes not from the ‘clash of different world-views’. Instead, it comes from different perceptions of ‘the same conception of Justice, one that is “intolerable”, the “punishment of a crime by worse crime”’.<sup>299</sup> That one ‘conception’ Scapin identifies can be traced all the way back to the opening remarks of Zeus in the *Odyssey*, that when one violates the flow of destiny, they bring any violence inflicted upon them by the ἥρωες upon themselves. The worldview Homer proposed is too narrow to accommodate the family’s individual experiences, and too punitive to allow any of them to live. Even now that he appreciates the horror of what he has done, Orestes seems desperate to maintain his composure. Still he insists that his mother ‘contrived this hateful device against her husband, when she had borne the weight of his children beneath her girdle’, calling her a ‘moray-eel or viper’, who ‘would make a man rot by her mere touch...May I never have such a wife as that in my house: I would sooner die by the gods’ hand, childless!’<sup>300</sup>

Even so, for all his apparent bravado, he urges the chorus to spread out the net that was used to kill Agamemnon as a tribute to Apollo ‘so that he may one day appear for me in a trial, to testify that I was justified in pursuing this killing of my mother’.<sup>301</sup>

Orestes tries to publicly justify his actions to the people and the gods, but his

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<sup>299</sup> Scapin, 190, 2020.

<sup>300</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 1004-6.

<sup>301</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 986-7.

insistence betrays a lack of confidence in what he has done. That same change in attitude can also be seen in the chorus. As Orestes leads Clytemnestra into the house, their ode conveys their support for what is about to happen. They liken this to the collapse of Troy. Paris faced ‘grievous punishment’ for violating the laws of *ξενία*, and abducting Helen. Now the house of Atreus has received Justice at the hands of a ‘twofold lion’, one ‘sped on his way by the words of god’.<sup>302</sup>

Yet, once it is done, there is a sombre undertone to their ruminations. They remark that this was all the doing of ‘she who delights in underhand fighting, crafty-minded Revenge’ who was spurred on by ‘Justice breathing deadly wrath against the enemy’.<sup>303</sup> Their willingness to describe revenge as ‘underhand’, to compare it to the tragic and morally complex fall of Troy, creates a troubling notion that something is decidedly wrong throughout the whole affair.<sup>304</sup> That comes full circle when, seeing Orestes emerge with the bodies, they cannot help but express their horror at Clytemnestra’s fate: ‘Aiai, aiai, for these sorrowful deeds! You were done away with by a loathsome death—ah, ah!— and for him who remains, suffering is coming into flower!’<sup>305</sup> Their previous assertion that Orestes’ *νόστος* would somehow restore order has been replaced by abject horror at what the reality of that vengeance entails.

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<sup>302</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 935-41.

<sup>303</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 946-59

<sup>304</sup> Admittedly, critical attitudes to this ode are not uniform. Vidal-Naquet draws upon this same passage in his study of sacrifice and hunting motifs throughout the trilogy. He suggests that, in contrast to Clytemnestra, who murdered her husband in a twisted parody of a sacrifice, Orestes is deliberately characterised as both ‘a hunter and a warrior...the apprentice-adult and apprentice-warrior who must use guile before adopting the hoplite code of battle’. (Vidal-Naquet, 154, 1988). Thus, he sees nothing wrong with Orestes’ use of guile, or the chorus remarking upon it. Rather, he is simply an amalgamation of these two codes of combat, succeeding ‘by treachery which is not treacherous’. (Vidal-Naquet, 155, 1988). Indeed, it is important to remember that scholars do not uniformly assume that all the parallels between Orestes and Clytemnestra are negative. However, Vidal-Naquet’s judgement seems at odds with the many sinister implications this thesis has recognised across the play. Orestes’ revenge is treated with too much ambivalence in multiple aspects to regard him with this much nobility. If anything it makes Orestes state as a good man unfairly punished even more evident.

<sup>305</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 1007-9.

Orestes echoes that same horror himself. The audience witnesses him in a moment of half-lucidity, yet already his ‘mind is almost out of control and carrying [him] along half-overpowered, and Terror is near [his] heart’. In his last moments before he is overwhelmed by the curse of the Furies, Orestes again attempts to desperately convince the chorus ‘it was not without justice that I killed my mother’. He repeats the refrain that Loxias’ oracle ‘told me that if I did it I would be free from guilt and blame’. He claims that he would face a still worse punishment should he fail, so much so that ‘no archer could reach that height of suffering’.<sup>306</sup> And indeed, if one were to look to Homer’s Orestes, there is precedent for the youth to believe this. But Aeschylus does not offer him that same happy ending. Orestes, even as his mind is slipping away as his mother’s dying curse takes hold, clings to these motifs of justice that he and Electra bonded over as they prayed for purification, the same ideals, moreover, that his father espoused before slaughtering his kin, and that his mother spoke of as she herself stood over two corpses. As Orestes catches sight of the Furies and flees, the chorus are left to ruminate on what has transpired. On the one hand, the despotism of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is officially over, and they congratulate Orestes on this.<sup>307</sup> Yet, even though what Orestes has done is by many metrics god-fearing and right, they cannot shake their dread:

‘What first began it were the sad sufferings of him who devoured his children; the second time the victim was a man, a king as, slain in his bath, there perished the man who led the Achaeans in war; and now again, thirdly, there has come from somewhere

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<sup>306</sup> Aeschylus, *Choepori* 1022-33.

<sup>307</sup> Aeschylus, *Choepori* 1044-7.

a saviour —or should I say, death? So where will it end, where will the power of Ruin sink into sleep and cease?’<sup>308</sup>

The chorus’ words vocalise the key theme of the entire trilogy: the cycles of violence that perpetuate themselves beyond the mistakes of mortals. They list these past atrocities in such a way that emphasises not only the repeated patterns of violence across history, but that each time, it happens in a way that is harder to say is good and just. The first people to begin this cycle were Atreus and the first victim, Thyestes. Atreus set this cycle in motion by doing something monstrous and inhuman. The implication, therefore, is that one could justify any reciprocation as just. The second victim they list is Agamemnon, who was a ‘man’ and a king. Rather than de-personalising him, this description acknowledges Agamemnon as human and even a noble. For as much as the *Agamemnon* dwelt on the ambiguity of the titular character’s actions, the chorus do not think of him as an inhuman monster who deserved his fate. Finally, they dwell on Orestes, not a monstrous child-killer, nor a flawed complex man, but rather a ‘saviour’ who acted in the interests of the gods. As Lawrence discusses, Orestes is a ‘decent man confronted with a morally problematical situation’.<sup>309</sup> Thus the supposed saviour now flees alone, horrified and polluted. It is much harder now for them to see any real justice in this heroism, as it has spread to someone who is, in their eyes, innocent and morally righteous. They are not in the grip of Justice, but of ‘Ruin’, and they end on a question, no longer having faith that things can ever end well.

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<sup>308</sup> Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 1068-76.

<sup>309</sup> Lawrence, 98. 2013.

Here, the audience is faced with the uncomfortable truth. This is not a case of flawed people committing inhuman crimes and being punished by heroes as Homer thought. Rather the system those heroes maintain is flawed. Orestes performed the act that his contemporary structures of morality would insist is correct. Yet that leaves him cursed, implying that the structures that instructed him are themselves wrong. When Clytemnestra and Orestes spoke of justice behind their actions, they were deluded, because the world around them was itself contradictory. Scapin describes how the characters, especially the chorus of these plays, perceive the family with the 'traditional outlook of cosmic justice and Zeus' will'. However, this is 'problematized' by the 'intimate and relativistic perspectives of single and group characters' who, despite their individualistic, limited perspectives, justify their actions with 'universal utterances about justice, time and necessity'.<sup>310</sup> The chorus of *Agamemnon* hoped that justice would eventually prevail. Now, the chorus of the *Choephoroi* must accept the world they live in is so twisted, that there is no guarantee of justice. Epic justice can no longer be seen as the solution that restores the status quo, because that order is itself corrupted. Something has to change.

### **The Furies: the curse of cyclical violence**

That change manifests in the *Eumenides*. The themes of Homeric revenge, corrupt structures and cycles of violence are encapsulated in the chorus of titular monsters, also known as the Furies. Before their *parados*, they are described to the audience by the Pythian oracle. They are a 'band of women', wingless and 'utterly nauseating', now sleeping having pursued Orestes to Delphi. She then corrects herself by referring to them not as women, but as Gorgons, or Harpies.<sup>311</sup> This description is

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<sup>310</sup> Scapin, 170, 2020.

<sup>311</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 35-42.

intriguing for numerous reasons. For one, the Furies, though they are agents of the gods, are compared to the monsters which were once conquered by heroes. It is easy to correlate the Furies to the cursed, inhuman nature of the *ἀλάστωρ*, that reduces noble people to monsters. More than that, however, they embody the warped Homeric systems of justice. They, like the code of revenge which birthed them, are products of the heroic world.

It also intrinsically links them to Clytemnestra. They were born from the curse she placed on her son with her dying breath, it is her spirit that urges them to action, thus beginning the play's *parados*. Even here, in this passage, the language with which they are described invokes Clytemnestra. Just as the Chorus of the *Agamemnon* saw her not as a woman, but a monster in the shape of a woman, the Furies are twisted beings who to the Pythia appear somewhat feminine but cannot be called as such. Thus, through this motif, Aeschylus depicts the Homeric code of revenge as inherently monstrous, a system which strips individuals of humanity in such a way that they cannot exist within a *πόλις*. That isolation is also described by the ghost of Clytemnestra, who bemoans that even amongst the shades of the Underworld, she is 'shunned in dishonour', taunted for her transgressions, and unable to evoke any divine sympathy for her support. Despite having been 'slaughtered...by matricidal hands', even when her very death is a crime against the natural order, still none of the gods are 'wrathful on her behalf'.<sup>312</sup>

The heroic isolation of Homer's Achilles, and the many tragic heroes he inspired, can be seen here, both in the wandering exile, Orestes, and the outcast among the

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<sup>312</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 95-102.



dead, Clytemnestra. Heroic justice did not restore their civilisation, it merely pulled them apart from it. Conacher calls the prologue the *Eumenides* the ‘nadir’ of the trilogy, ‘a point of absolute zero, whence the hero’s fortunes can only improve’. That ‘nadir’ is expressly because of the old codes that brought the characters to this point. If the old order of blood for blood, and the heroes role in enforcing it, still pertains, as it has throughout the trilogy, then there seems no hope of alleviating the unending reprisals, of lifting the curse from the house of Atreus.<sup>313</sup>

The Furies *parados* upon awakening is also extremely enlightening. When they realise Orestes is gone, they are enraged. They declare: ‘He’s slipped out of the net—the beast is gone!’<sup>314</sup> Their words notably recall imagery and motifs from the first two plays. They allude to a net much like the one Clytemnestra used to ensnare Agamemnon. Goldhill discusses how these similarities between Clytemnestra and her husband, especially as regards their ‘lack of honour in death’, further stresses the repeating cycles of this family, as the chorus now seek to trap Orestes within the same nets which ‘enveloped’ his father.<sup>315</sup> It is also intriguing that they see Orestes as bestial, decrying him as a θήρ, couching their grudge against Orestes in motifs rooted not only in Clytemnestra’s mindset, but also in the Homeric world as a whole. One need only recall Clarke’s remarks on Homer’s use of bestial imagery. Much like Clytemnestra and Orestes before them, they too insist that they act on behalf of justice. They are disgusted that the gods would stand by ‘the man who attacked his mother!’<sup>316</sup> Likewise, they later insist that they will never attack an undeserving victim. ‘We believe we practise straight justice:’ they claim, ‘against him who can

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<sup>313</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 141.

<sup>314</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 147.

<sup>315</sup> Goldhill, 214, 2009.

<sup>316</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 153-4.

display clean hands there comes no wrath from us' but against transgressors, they have 'final authority as avengers of blood'.<sup>317</sup>

However, their reasoning proves contradictory, as seen in their argument with Apollo:<sup>318</sup> The Furies' definition of justice and of blood-guilt is limiting to the point of hypocrisy. Apollo's question is a very clear allusion to Clytemnestra, a woman who slayed her husband. Yet the chorus dismiss the question, because violating the bonds of marriage is not the same as those of blood. Apollo chastises them for such reasoning. Marriage, is after all, the province of Hera, the queen of the gods, and to so belittle the concept of marriage is an affront to her. Justice is just as much a 'sentinel' to marriage as to any oath or blood tie.<sup>319</sup> The Furies' motivation is hence not truly in keeping with the laws. On the contrary they are hypocritical, sophistically warping the meaning of justice to justify torturing their victim without needing to answer for the crimes of the woman who set them on this task. Their accusation that Apollo is treating Orestes' matricide with more leniency than Clytemnestra<sup>320</sup> has a grain of truth, yet they too are guilty of the same. The Furies embody the final, twisted state of Homeric justice which has brought the characters to this point. Much like how the 'beast-simile'<sup>321</sup> made Achilles seem less human, the Furies are animalistic, even monstrous beings that invade the boundaries of civilised society. They are driven ostensibly by the code of retribution, but they quickly appear self-serving and hypocritical. In that sense, they represent a challenge

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<sup>317</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 311-20.

<sup>318</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 210-4.

<sup>319</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 216-7.

<sup>320</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 222-3.

<sup>321</sup> Clarke, 148, 1995.

of the *Odyssey*'s model of Homeric heroism, driven more by their own individualistic values and wounded pride than the common good.

That is not to say they have no place within this world. When Apollo dismisses the Furies from Delphi, he does not claim they should not exist at all. Rather, they 'belong where there are head-chopping, eye-gouging judgements and slaughters, where eunuchs are punished by the destruction of their children's seed, where there is mutilation of extremities and stoning, and where men moan with long and piteous cries after being impaled under the spine'.<sup>322</sup> The Furies' form of punishment is not completely unwarranted, but they have lost perspective through their spite towards Orestes. The Furies are not without comprehensible morals. Violent as they are, they still 'embody the civilising force of the protector... Their concern, continually, is with Justice... in its broadest sense'.<sup>323</sup> They are not an inherent evil that must be destroyed, but if this narrative is to end well, they must be reformed, much like the value system they represent.

### **Athena and the evolution of heroic justice**

That role of pacifying these creatures is ultimately taken on by Athena. She enters having come 'from the Scamander, where I was staking my claim to the land which the leaders and chiefs of the Achaeans had apportioned to me entirely, absolutely and for ever'.<sup>324</sup> Aeschylus has Orestes' trial and acquittal coincide with the beginning of Athena's patronage of Athens. This stresses any connection Orestes makes to Athens across the play, but also presents this ordeal as something of a test for Athens. It will

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<sup>322</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 186-90.

<sup>323</sup> Mitchell-Boyask, 27, 2009.

<sup>324</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 398-9.

fall to the court of Athena's new order to resolve this system, proving its capabilities by finally putting this generation-spanning curse to rest. Athena's impartiality and professionalism is emphasised from the outset. She is at first alarmed by the grotesque appearance of the Furies, before reminding herself not 'to speak injuriously of another, when one has no cause to blame him',<sup>325</sup> and so interrogates both Orestes and the Furies accordingly.<sup>326</sup> She is not overwhelmed by her fear of the Furies, and so is sure to hear out their claims, immediately establishing herself as a fair judge of this ordeal.

From this position of impartiality, Athena makes a rather biting criticism of not only the Furies, but of the Homeric attitude in general. She remarks that they are 'more concerned to have a reputation for justice than to act with justice.'<sup>327</sup> The importance of reputation, so much so that it arguably overshadows any sense of absolute morality is a matter that has not escaped Homeric scholars. Athena not only notices this extremely external sense of performative ethics, but actively criticises it. The terms she lays down for the trial also mark her values out as different. As Macleod notes, the chorus' ethos is 'disturbing' because it 'strikes not only the offender but his whole city', much as Achilles victimised all of the Achaeans for the deeds of their leader. Here, Clytemnestra subjugates the Argive people through her revenge, while Orestes is forced to abandon his city for fear of polluting them. Epic justice is rooted in the one, yet inevitably harms the many. Such a system is incompatible with the Athenian πόλις. Instead, 'Only the doer is to be punished, if anyone is; and [Athena] refuses a justice which consists simply in both parties'

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<sup>325</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 413-4.

<sup>326</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 408-10.

<sup>327</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 430.

swearing an oath: the case must be heard on either side'.<sup>328</sup> This sets her apart from the Homeric world and its values, a fresh perspective to evaluate an issue that the world's systems cannot resolve.

The methodology of the final judgement is significant. Athena orders that 'these men to cast a vote in accordance with their honest opinion'.<sup>329</sup> The trial bears a significant resemblance to the structure of an Athenian court, as scholars such as Mitchell-Boyask have recognised. From the oaths given by witnesses, the 'arguments and presentation of evidence' and a final 'verdict by ballot, without discussion', the scene 'follows these parameters and offers a credible Athenian proceeding', albeit one shortened to 'the cross-examination of the murderer and his witness Apollo'.<sup>330</sup> Even the final judgement in which the jury are evenly split on Orestes' guilt is emblematic not only of Athens' justice proceedings, but also why Homeric retribution was so limiting by comparison. Half of the jury 'recognizes compulsion's role in Orestes' actions. The other...sees the urgency in preventing matricide.'<sup>331</sup> Their indecision mirrors Athena's remark that 'The matter is too great for any mortal who may think he can decide it'.<sup>332</sup> With her tie-breaking judgement, Orestes is acquitted, and the curse upon the household comes to an end. Once again, one sees the correlation between the trial of Orestes and the foundation of Athena's new order. Athena makes a final declaration to the people of Athens:

'I counsel my citizens to maintain, and practise reverently, a system which is

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<sup>328</sup> Macleod, 134, 1982.

<sup>329</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 674-5.

<sup>330</sup> Mitchell-Boyask, 101-2, 2009.

<sup>331</sup> Mitchell-Boyask, 102, 2009.

<sup>332</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 470.

neither anarchic nor despotic, and not to cast fear completely out of the city; for what mortal respects justice, if he fears nothing? If, I tell you, you righteously fear an august body like this, you will have a bulwark to keep your land and city safe such as no one in the world has, neither among the Scythians nor in the land of Pelops. This council, untouched by thought of gain, reverend, quick to anger, a wakeful sentinel for the land to protect those who sleep, I hereby establish.’<sup>333</sup>

It is not difficult to suggest that Athena’s remark to these ‘citizens’ applied just as much to the watching audience in the Theatre of Dionysus as to the characters on the stage. Having established herself and her patron state as a force of law and authority in the primal world of myth by acquitting Orestes, Athena creates an exemplar for the watching Athenians of what they wanted their state to be, urging them to continue to strive to portray what was seen on stage. This becomes still more relevant when one considers when the play was performed, Dodds ruminates on how scholarship has explored the *Oresteia*’s portrayal of justice in relation to Ephialtes stripping the Athenian Aeropagus of judicial power, in essence stripping away power from the aristocracy. While Dodds warns about limiting one’s perspective on the play too narrowly, he does point out that such a change was a drastic step for Athens’ new order. ‘[Aeschylus]’ country had just passed through the greatest internal revolution since Cleisthenes, and had just embarked on the greatest foreign adventure she had ever undertaken’. If *Ajax* used heroic archetypes to explore what Athens had become at the height of its power, the *Oresteia* thus conveys the twofold

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<sup>333</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 696-706.

hope and trepidation of a new Athenian order, one with a radical perspective both on the system of law, and Athens place in wider Greece.<sup>334</sup>

The passage is one of the most explicit examples of a practice recognised by Kennedy. She discusses the use of ‘the pan-Hellenic myths of Homer’ to bolster Athens’ historic legacy, and, by 454 B.C.E., to ‘justify the dominion they now claimed in the Aegean’.<sup>335</sup> Moreover, ‘the image of the goddess Athena was a fundamental element in the creation and maintenance’ of ‘Athenian civic identity...and imperial identity. Her image was consciously used as a focalizer for Athenian patriotism and identity. Any connection made between the goddess and the city/archê forces us to recognize and consider the way in which her image was utilized by the Athenians in their self-promotion and self-definition.’<sup>336</sup> Before making his departure, Orestes swears an oath that ‘no helmsman of my land, well equipped with arms, will ever come bringing war against this place’. Rather they shall ‘always honour their obligations to this city of Pallas by fighting at its side’, and thus be ‘favourable’ to Athens in turn.<sup>337</sup> Tzanetou explores how Orestes’ plight ‘typifies the contrast between the weak and outraged suppliant and his powerful inimical pursuers’. By becoming Orestes’ ‘*hegemon*’<sup>338</sup> Athens becomes a ‘protector of the weak and defenseless’.<sup>339</sup> Their reward for sheltering the hero and inducting him into this new code of civilisation and justice, is that Orestes ‘will ensure Athens’ military superiority against her foes in perpetuity’.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Dodds, 264, 2007.

<sup>335</sup> Kennedy, 7, 2009.

<sup>336</sup> Kennedy, 9, 2009.

<sup>337</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 762-74.

<sup>338</sup> Tzanetou, 37, 2012.

<sup>339</sup> Tzanetou, 34, 2012.

<sup>340</sup> Tzanetou, 33.2012.

The evolution of civilisation from beyond the archaic is thus reimagined in the rhetoric of both the heroic world so prominent in the Dark Age, and the Athenian imperialism of the classical. Athens' authority over its territories goes hand in hand with its law courts, not least since said territories were expected to implement such systems into their own πόλεις., 'exporting her judicial system just as they exported their democracy...*Eumenides* contributes to this identification of Athens with the courts, thereby strengthening the connection between Athens and democracy.'<sup>341</sup> The Homeric world now reflects completely different worldviews and intent.

And yet, this social transition is twofold. The final conflict of the play is not the trial scene but the argument between Athena and the outraged Furies. The chorus, outraged, continue to invoke Justice as they lament their dishonour: 'What shall I do? I am a laughing-stock. I have suffered unbearable treatment at the hands of the citizens!'<sup>342</sup> Furthermore, they voice their rage in strictly heroic terms, a powerful force disgraced by mockery. They also blame the citizens as a whole for their disgrace. If one recalls the αἰδώς of Sophocles' *Ajax*, the similarities are intriguing. Ajax too was disgusted at the thought that his enemies might be laughing at him in his ruination.<sup>343</sup> In response to Athena's offer to be inducted into Athens, they repeat their refrain word for word, indicating that they have ignored her words outright.<sup>344</sup> Arguably, they demonstrate the single-minded stubbornness that Knox saw as so crucial to a single minded δεινός hero. As the very embodiment of the structures of

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<sup>341</sup> Kennedy, 22, 2009.

<sup>342</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 784-90.

<sup>343</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax* 380-2.

<sup>344</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 869-80.



the Homeric world and its code of revenge, they are much harder to sway than any one mortal. They are the final problem, the last impediment to reform.

Ultimately though, Athena is successful. They agree to become ‘the guard-post of the gods, the protector of their altars, the delight of the divinities of Greece’.<sup>345</sup> Like Orestes, they accept a position of deference to Athens, rewarding Athens’ enlightenment with their servitude. Orestes and the Furies represent the twofold transition of the ἦρωϛ into the Athenian structure. However, it is arguably the Furies’ acceptance, not Orestes, that is the ‘crucial choice’ of the play. While much of the trilogy involved characters making terrible, violent choices because they believed they could do little else, it falls to these supernatural beings to make the last decision; not ‘a choice between evils, but a choice of Good, and one made by deathless beings, not by transient mortality’.<sup>346</sup> That final point, that the resolution comes from an immortal entity, rather than a human one, is especially significant. The cursed tradition of retributive justice must be curbed at both the individual and structural level. The Furies are that structural symbol. They embody the heroic code but contorted by generations of atrocities into something monstrous. Ending the curse of the house of Atreus goes beyond punishing Orestes, or any individual, for that matter. And so, the spirit of vengeance is transformed into something pure, communal and, inherently Athenian. The root of the problem has finally been cured, and the true nature of Justice has been validated.

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<sup>345</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 918-9.

<sup>346</sup> Taplin & Billings, 161, 2018.

## Social commentary through literary subversion

For as venerated as this mythology was throughout art and culture, there seems to have been an awareness from many playwrights that the ethical standards of such a world view may not be wholly complicit with the state Athens had developed into after reaching the height of its power in the aftermath of the Persian War. And that such a disconnect may change the relationship Athens had with its cultural legacy. The *Oresteia* provides not only a critique, but a solution. Using the trilogy to explore the heroic code and its attitude to violence and vengeance, the play presents its characters as trapped in a world which places the mantle of dispensing justice on individuals. Being displaced between gods and humans as they are, the ἥρωες becomes the agent to upkeep the moral codes of the gods, most notably dealing punishment to wrongdoers. That retribution is deserved because the victims have diverged from their μοῖρα, an unnatural offence warrants an unnatural punishment.

Unlike Homer, however, Aeschylus argues that being the servant of the gods does not absolve someone of guilt, the factors that drive human behaviour are too broad to exercise such simplicity. Over the course of the *Agamemnon*, and the *Choephoroi*, the audience watches these restrictive codes of retribution push its characters to do monstrous things. For as much as they speak of Justice, they cannot conceptualise it in any way that does not force them to repeat the same transgressions, dooming them to suffer in turn. Their compulsion at the hands of gods and Furies and the household ἀλάστωρ embodies this limitation. These scions of heroic, yet cursed bloodlines stand on a boundary of human and divine that obliges them to resort to violence, harming their own πόλις in the process.

The *Eumenides* brings this to a close in a way that validates Athens especially. By projecting its values of fifth century democracy into this much earlier time, Athens was able to reconcile this lengthy tradition with its new order, celebrating how far its own culture had come. It is easy to dismiss this practice as an almost shameless piece of propaganda from a hubristic state on the cusp of unheard-of levels of power. Nonetheless, in the context of this thesis, it is a truly fascinating approach. Across Panhellenic Greece, this lengthy tradition of mythology became a crucial part of self-definition for each city state. Athens, having risen to dominance after the Persian Wars, was keen to indulge in this practice, yet had evolved in such a way that the values of its πόλις were often incompatible with the world Homer's oratory codified. The solution became to position Athens itself as both the centre of cultural evolution and a kindly authority welcoming people from other, weaker states, forging alliances in the process. In the *Oresteia*, the city becomes a bastion of enlightened reason and true justice, mythologising itself as the hub of the cultural transition from archaic to classical Greek society, while also reinforcing its own Panathenaic rhetoric in the process. It is this approach to its own legacy that will codify how tragic playwrights portrayed heroism going forward in this thesis, even as Athens' power began to wane...

## **Chapter Five: Oedipus-Isolation and apotheosis**

So far the thesis has explored how the hopes and anxieties of a new socio-political order are super-imposed upon the world of Greece's shared cultural heritage. Clearly, transforming the heroic tradition into something contemporary, and inherently Athenian, was far from uncommon. Among those many adaptations, one of the most intriguing, especially as a counterpoint to the *Oresteia*, is Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. First performed at the Dionysia in 401 B.C.E, after Sophocles' death in 406 B.C.E, it is the final extant play from the playwright, and quite possibly his final work (though that is still mere speculation). That is even more remarkable considering that the setting of Colonus was the same δῆμος which Sophocles originally called home, so there is a temptation to read a strong nostalgic element within the play's setting. As Kelly points out, it draws heavily on the suppliant tradition found in the *Children of Heracles* and the *Suppliant Women*.<sup>347</sup> Meanwhile, Currie observes that its importance 'for the interpretation of hero cult' gives it strong links with the *Trachiniae*, as well as thematic parallels to the *Ajax*.<sup>348</sup> It bears fascinating parallels to Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. Both follow a protagonist of heroic lineage, now exiled from their πόλις for their past transgressions. 'The man once shunned and abominated by all, god and man alike, for his atrocious crimes of incest and patricide is in the end embraced, protected, and honored by the Athenians and awarded by the gods themselves with everlasting well-being.'<sup>349</sup>

Intertextual links aside, this narrative seems fairly standard, and it is certainly common to see these generic parallels between plays and the poetry they drew from.

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<sup>347</sup> Kelly, 76, 1972.

<sup>348</sup> Currie, 338, 2012.

<sup>349</sup> Ahrens Dorf, 65, 2014.

Foley and Arft observe out patterns like the ‘Return, Rescue, Wedding, or Siege of City’ were themselves repeated formulas as far back as the Epic Cycle, each with their own differences, in terms of ‘principal characters, geographical contexts, political alliances, and any other story-specific details’ but with a very visible formula.<sup>350</sup> After all, this thesis has already observed the how the formula of νόστοι poems can manifest in tragedy in the third chapter. Genre conventions aside, there a handful of key differences that make *Oedipus at Colonus* a wildly different text from the *Eumenides*, as a response to the heroic mould, what it says about the relationship between ἥρωες and πόλις and what message it imparts about the state of Athens itself.

While the *Eumenides* strove to (at least somewhat) resolve the uncomfortable ambiguities of its trilogy, Sophocles revels in that uncertainty and that of the Sophoclean hero in general. The conclusion of the play, even more-so than the *Trachiniae*, demonstrates the influence of hero-cult on Greek culture, redefining Oedipus’ transition not just from a Homeric hero to an Athenian one, but also from a mortal to a chthonic guardian of the city. Lastly, the *Oresteia*, at the outset of a new golden age optimistically positioned Athens as a site of cultural evolution, redefining its relationship with the heroic tradition. The *Oedipus at Colonus*, developed in an Athens worn down by war, its order fatigued by warfare and tarred by public disgrace is the product of an exhaustion with the values of Periclean Athens and uses the heroic world to grapple with Athens’ now-fraught relationship with nobility, justice and democracy. It is therefore especially indicative not only of the hero’s relationship with the democratic πόλις (and how that relationship may have continued to change once that democracy began to decay), but also the role tragedy

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<sup>350</sup> Fantuzzi & Tsagalis, 86-7, 2015.

played in ‘political discourse... capable of reaching a mass audience in a single setting’.<sup>351</sup>

### **The shamed exile**

Oedipus enters the narrative not as a ἦρωες at the pinnacle of his glory, but an exile, entirely remote from the πόλις, exempt even from the basic expectations of ξενία, a staple of Hellenic culture. ‘Who on this day shall receive Oedipus the wanderer with scanty gifts?’, he asks allowed. ‘I ask for little, and I get even less, but for me that is sufficient...’<sup>352</sup> His unnatural crimes of parricide and incest are too extreme to allow him to ever be accepted among any civilised people, a fact he is painfully aware of. In that sense, the plight of Oedipus not only resembles Orestes, but also, as Wilson recognises, Ajax. Both men are famed individuals who ‘attained the status of a popular figure of cult’,<sup>353</sup> but also ‘are invariably blind to the havoc they leave in their wake’.<sup>354</sup> In the *Eumenides*, the *Ajax* and the *Oedipus at Colonus*, the protagonist is introduced in the aftermath of some shameful act or revelation that ousted them from society. As in Homer, isolation is a core facet of heroism, and it continues to haunt these men throughout their life. As Hesk points out, Oedipus’ narrative is defined by how he responds to that same isolation. ‘It asks its audience to assess whether his angry curses and their terrible consequences are justified in the face of the harsh treatment meted out to him by his own kin’.<sup>355</sup>

Oedipus’ encounter with the Peasant not only establishes the setting, but also offers some false hope to the wandering exile. While immediately defensive at the

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<sup>351</sup> Wilson, 188, 1997.

<sup>352</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 3-6.

<sup>353</sup> Wilson, 176, 1997.

<sup>354</sup> Wilson, 179, 1997.

<sup>355</sup> Hesk, 173, 2015.

fact that Oedipus has stumbled onto sacred ground, he acknowledges Oedipus' nobility and bids him to stay until he can be questioned further by the men of deme.<sup>356</sup> As he waits, Oedipus prays to the Eumenides, and the audience learns what has brought him here. Much like Orestes, he has been led here by Apollo. Like Heracles, he has been promised that he will receive 'the goal of my long-suffering life', a goal that will see him discarding humanity and ascending to godhood. In doing so, he will be 'bringing advantage by my settlement to those who had received me, and ruin to those who had sent me, who had driven me away'.<sup>357</sup> Immediately, the audience comes to understand what Oedipus wants. He is a man who has seen both the heights of heroism and the depths of disgrace. All he desires now is closure, a sense that his suffering had some purpose. And the Peasant's response offers him hope. However, that is almost undone in the *parados*. The chorus prove harder to convince. They are furious that 'a wanderer, not a native!' has trespassed on the ground of the Eumenides' whom we are afraid to name'.<sup>358</sup> They are frightened and disgusted by his blindness,<sup>359</sup> yet are not without pity, allowing him to move off this sacred ground and question him further. Again, Sophocles dangles a thread of hope that Oedipus may still be accepted. Once Oedipus' name is revealed, however, that moment of empathy is replaced with horror and revulsion, and the chorus immediately order him to leave.<sup>360</sup>

In this devastating moment, it seems that Oedipus will never truly rejoin a πόλις. Like Ajax, he has been forced to accept that scorn and rejection strikes noble men

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<sup>356</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 75-80.

<sup>357</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 84-94.

<sup>358</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 124-33.

<sup>359</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 150-2.

<sup>360</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 226.

the hardest. Disgrace will pursue him wherever he goes. The notoriety the ἥρως craves is now the greatest obstacle to Oedipus' happiness. As he acknowledges this himself: 'What help comes from fame, or from a fine reputation that flows away in vain?'<sup>361</sup> To drive home further how Oedipus' heroism has divorced him from other people, the chorus even call him δεινός: 'He is terrible to see and terrible to hear!'<sup>362</sup> This is the same word the chorus used to describe their fear of Sophocles' Antigone,<sup>363</sup> the same word that Knox identified as emblematic of the loneliness of the Sophoclean hero,<sup>364</sup> so fervent in their drive that others cannot understand or relate to them. The self-centred mindset of the hero inevitably leads to ostracism. While he is dogged by his former disgrace, he will never find the rest he seeks. The result is a more abstract metaphor of the conflict of the *Eumenides*. Oedipus is haunted not by physical manifestations of his past transgressions, (or as some scholars argue, representations of his mental state) but by the memory and shame they bring. The only way to put an end to that past is to face it, to defend his actions and confront the people he left behind. It is this desire for an end, as well as the struggle with one's past, which will drive Oedipus' character throughout the rest of the play.

### **Confronting the past and heroic ascension**

Immediately after Oedipus appears to have somewhat appeased the citizens, he faces another stark reminder of his past through Ismene's arrival. She brings the dire news that Eteocles and Polyneices have begun fighting for the throne, torn apart by 'an evil rivalry to grasp at dominion and at royal power'.<sup>365</sup> With 'a new marriage

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<sup>361</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 258-9.

<sup>362</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 141.

<sup>363</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone* 471-2.

<sup>364</sup> Knox, 23, 1961.

<sup>365</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 371-3.



and friends who will bear arms with him',<sup>366</sup> Polyneices intends to take revenge on Eteocles and claim Thebes for himself. On three levels, this revelation carries a painful significance for Oedipus. Firstly, it is a reminder of the damage the actions of a hero cause for people around them. Oedipus passed the 'ancient ruin of the family', down to his children, nearly depriving them of their inheritance entirely. Secondly, it suggests that the self-serving heroic temper is now manifesting in these young men, desire for power turning them against each other, and turning Polyneices against his former people after having been shunned (again, the parallels to Achilles and Ajax are glaring). Thirdly, this has turned them not only against each other, but against Oedipus himself. Creon, his brother-in-law, now comes in search of Oedipus: 'So that they can establish you near the Cadmean land, where they can control you without your entering its bounds.'<sup>367</sup> This is the final proof of both Oedipus' detachment and how far gone his sons are in their own spiralling. There is no longer any love for, or duty to, their father. Oedipus himself believes as such, 'seeing that when I their father was so shamefully extruded from the land they did not prevent it or defend me, but I was uprooted and sent away by them and was proclaimed an exile!'<sup>368</sup> He is merely a pawn in the political schemes of others, called back when he is useful but never truly accepted.

Afterwards, Oedipus is asked to regale the tale of his suffering by the chorus, who wish to hear this 'widely spread'<sup>369</sup> tale for themselves, yet another example of how inescapable Oedipus' past truly is. However, this also gives Oedipus a chance to tell his story for himself, and not merely be pursued by rumour. Oedipus is certainly

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<sup>366</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 378-9.

<sup>367</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 399-400.

<sup>368</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 427-30.

<sup>369</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 518.

keen to frame himself as the victim. The exchange between himself and the chorus is fractured and hesitant, often unable to get more than a few words at a time out of the old hero. It is the chorus who have to piece together that Oedipus murdered his father, and when they do, Oedipus declares: ‘Woe! You have struck me a second blow, anguish upon anguish!’ Considering how much other tragic heroes actively drive the plot, then it is intriguing how Oedipus’ account places himself in the passive role of the victim. This is a motif he reprises later. In his own words, he is the ‘victim of the power that sent me mad, but according to the law I am clean! It was in ignorance that I came to this!’<sup>370</sup>

Oedipus’ logic in his defence is intriguing to say the least, and the question of its validity has been a source of controversy amongst scholars. Wilson, particularly, warns against ‘being seduced into accepting the judgements that Oedipus renders for on himself’.<sup>371</sup> And this an important point to address when one compares this play to the *Eumenides*. Because much like that earlier play, the hero’s defence, and the rumination upon his actions is an important step to his reintegration into the πόλις. It is the test that determines that the people of Colonus, and by extension, Athens, can accept him. And this is further complicated by the fact that, even if the other characters accept him, it is extremely unclear if the audience would. Ahrens Dorf discusses the more optimistic interpretation that Oedipus’ defence is unambiguously accepted. ‘Interpretations of *Oedipus at Colonus* have generally tended to conclude that Sophocles means simply to celebrate the “apotheosis”...and “transfiguration”...of the pious Oedipus’.<sup>372</sup> Likewise, Knox observes, ‘The gods of

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<sup>370</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 545-8.

<sup>371</sup> Wilson, 18, 1997.

<sup>372</sup> Ahrens Dorf, 49 \*2, 2009.

Sophoclean tragedy, the most remote and mysterious creation in all Greek literature, here show their respect for the hero in unmistakable terms... to Oedipus, who suffered most and longest, they give, in the death he longed for, immortal life and power'.<sup>373</sup> Perhaps, then, Oedipus is accepted by the gods, but not by the citizens. He is elevated to godhood not to become a guardian of the people, but because he cannot exist amongst them. For Wilson, for instance, Oedipus' arguments must be unconvincing to better service the overarching theme, that 'Oedipus cannot become a citizen, for he cannot be so tamed... If Oedipus can exist in the polis at all, he must do so on the fringes...'<sup>374</sup>

All of these matters, Oedipus' displacement, his need for rest and acceptance, come to a head in the two confrontations which serve as the play's climax: Oedipus' meetings with both Creon, then Polyneices. These scenes allow Oedipus to come to terms with his actions, and fully assert himself and side with his new πόλις. However, it also portrays the fearsome 'heroic temper' that isolated him from his home in the first place, thereby raising doubt as to whether he can ever truly adapt. When he first arrives, Creon offers a false display of ξενία to his erstwhile king and brother-in-law. Inviting Oedipus home, he asks him to 'let me persuade you and yield' since 'your home city should in justice be revered more, since she reared you long ago.'<sup>375</sup> Even without Ismene's warning, Creon's rhetoric should raise troubling implications to the audience, To Wilson, it indicates that Creon, and Thebes as a whole, do not comprehend the true nature of the πόλις:

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<sup>373</sup> Knox, 162, 1964.

<sup>374</sup> Wilson, 98, 1997.

<sup>375</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 757-60.

‘They assume that the polis, and certainly their own polis, is a fixed piece of land, symbolized in tragedy for all time by the massive walls and the seven gates. They believe that, if Oedipus, living or dead, can be planted near enough to the fixed border that they can keep an [...]\_eye on him, he will be under their power but not in their land.’<sup>376</sup>

His state rule is jealously protective, territorial and controlling. He contrasts ‘the ideology of Athenian piety, openness and compassion towards foreigners’, seeking not to welcome a stranger in, but to keep a former friend (not to say ruler) trapped.<sup>377</sup> Creon’s false promise risks pulling Oedipus back into the very shameful past he seeks to escape, which Van Nortwick sees visually represented on the stage, Creon’s ‘leftward movement across the stage’ representing the ‘dark pull of Oedipus’ Theban past...to be counterbalanced by the rightward tug of Theseus. And in the middle of the skene, the mysterious consummation that beckons from the grove.’<sup>378</sup> Yet there is another layer to this discussion that comes through in Oedipus’ anger. Much like Achilles and Ajax, Oedipus’ exhibits the heroic temper. He has, been wronged by Creon and his own sons and now refuses aid as a form of revenge: ‘You shall not have that, but you shall have this, my vengeful spirit ever dwelling here; and my sons can inherit this much only of my country, enough to die in!’<sup>379</sup> That places Creon’s earlier words in a troubling light. He asks Oedipus to *μολεῖν*, to ‘yield’, something Oedipus will never do.

For as wrong as Creon’s attitude regarding the state is, or how purposeful or

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<sup>376</sup> Wilson, 123-4, 1997.

<sup>377</sup> Tzanetou, 114, 2012.

<sup>378</sup> Van Nortwick, 91, 2015.

<sup>379</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 787-90.

manipulative his words are, there is a grain of truth here. Oedipus is still angry and revenge driven, like many Sophoclean heroes. Even his ‘spirit’ will exist not to protect the people of Colonus but continue being ‘vengeful’ towards his estranged family. Creon’s other faults do not make that observation any less pertinent. Before the characters and audience have the chance to truly consider this prospect, however, Creon turns violent and seizes Antigone, unambiguously positioning himself as the enemy of both Oedipus and the chorus. Attention turns to the immediate prospect of stopping Creon, and away from any worrying implications about Oedipus himself. As Oedipus himself phrases it, the deliberate evil of Creon’s actions is a more terrible prospect than the crimes he performed in ignorance. Neither his incest nor parricide ‘shall prove me to be evil’, or at least as much so as Creon.<sup>380</sup>

It is not until the sisters are safe that Oedipus faces his son. Polyneices arrives at the temple of Poseidon and supplicates.<sup>381</sup> In fact, as Harris identifies, it is these two supplications, Oedipus to the city, and Polyneices to his father, that frame the work’s overall structure, while also providing ‘an effective set of contrasts’. This manifests on multiple levels, that of ‘public’ and ‘private’, as well as one being successful and the other a failure.<sup>382</sup> Oedipus in his anger, at first has no interest in honouring his ‘hateful’ son’s plea.<sup>383</sup> It seems that Oedipus’ anger and wounded pride at his son’s misdeeds risks taking him beyond the limits of acceptable behaviour, refusing to offer basic *ξενία*. After all, as Theseus points out, ‘his suppliant posture’ should ‘oblige’<sup>384</sup> Oedipus. It takes the combined pleas of Theseus and Antigone to

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<sup>380</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 982-90.

<sup>381</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1156-9.

<sup>382</sup> Harris, 2012, 297.

<sup>383</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1177-8.

<sup>384</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1179.

persuade him to so much as hear Polyneices out. When Polyneices enters, what becomes immediately striking is how much his plight resembles his father's, something he points out: 'You and I both live on the charity of others, since we have a fate that is the same; and the tyrant at home, woe is me, delights in mocking us both together.'<sup>385</sup> Like Oedipus, his fate has been cursed, and as such, his former family and state have rejected him, reducing him to a wandering stranger. He has come to Colonus as a suppliant, ousted from his home by a family member. In his offstage attempts to muster a war effort against Eteocles, he has exhibited a 'heroic temper' that led him to transgress and attack his own πόλις in revenge. Even now, he remains set on vengeance.<sup>386</sup>

Oedipus, however, has no patience for Polyneices' plight. He argues that Polyneices has no right to seek pity for his exile, when 'You are the one, villain, who...drove away your own father here, and made him cityless, wearing such clothes as these, which now you weep when you behold, now that you stand in the same turmoil of troubles as I.'<sup>387</sup> Strikingly cruel an attitude for a father this may be, it does recall the words of the chorus: 'Fate punishes no man who is avenging what he has first suffered, and deception that matches other deceptions'.<sup>388</sup> In that sense, Oedipus' behaviour is an act of heroic retribution, punishing Polyneices for his own crimes. Hence, he curses his son to 'fall, polluted by bloodshed.'<sup>389</sup> And indeed, as Harris suggests, Oedipus rejects his son 'for a good reason...Polyneices in effect is seeking the private help of his father in order to harm his country's public good'.

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<sup>385</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1336-9.

<sup>386</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1329-30.

<sup>387</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1354-9.

<sup>388</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 229-30.

<sup>389</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 173-4.

There is certainly merit to assessing this play as instructing its audience in ‘the right and wrong ways to supplicate’.<sup>390</sup> However, considering the parallels in the lives of these two men, it is hard not to see it in a more unsettling light. Kinder readings like this risk overlooking how much Oedipus himself has moulded his son to this point. Following this final dismissal, Polyneices departs, his final argument with Antigone establishing once and for all that he too will refuse to yield. His stubborn inflexibility has reduced him to a δεινός outcast just like his father, with his fate culminating in his impending death, albeit one in battle. Oedipus is not only a remote individual, but his son inadvertently follows that harmful example.

Despite confronting his past, Oedipus seems to never truly move beyond it. For as much as Polyneices’ plight resembles all that Oedipus has undergone, Oedipus himself has not changed much in old age. He is still quick tempered, stubborn, and ferocious. Meanwhile, the finale sees Oedipus transcending his mortality, an event that the audience does not see and which the Messenger can only vaguely explain.<sup>391</sup> Oedipus’ final moments on stage are marked by the thunder of Zeus. Here, he exhibits the divine knowledge that divides him from everyday humans. He knows at once that ‘the end of life that was prophesied has come upon this man’, without feeling any need to explain how he knows this, even to his daughters.<sup>392</sup> Like Heracles in the *Trachiniae*, he effectively becomes a *deus ex machina*, dictating the play’s aftermath to the watching mortals, (albeit as a chthonic entity) promising ‘protection stronger than many shields or spears brought in from outside!’, but insisting that in return, he must ‘not ever reveal to any human being either where it is

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<sup>390</sup> Harris, 297, 2012.

<sup>391</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1579-82.

<sup>392</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1472-5.

concealed or the region in which it lies...'<sup>393</sup>

According to the messenger, Oedipus then bids his daughters to swear loyalty to Theseus, somewhat resembling Orestes promising fealty to Athens. Yet still, unlike Orestes, he does not make the oath himself. Antigone and Ismene do so on his behalf.<sup>394</sup> There again one sees that level of distance. Oedipus is 'taken away with no lamentations, and by no painful disease, but, if any among mortals, by a miracle',<sup>395</sup> removing him from human customs one last time. Antigone expresses frustration at her father's remoteness in death: 'you wished to die in a foreign land, but you died thus, far from me!'<sup>396</sup> Unable to see even their father's tomb, the girls return to their own fate in Thebes where more pain awaits them. One last time, Oedipus, like many ἥρωες, leaves suffering for others in his wake.

It is a not uncommon interpretation to read *Oedipus at Colonus* in the context of the growing practices of hero-cult. The play revolves around two powerful cities who both intend to keep a dying hero marked out as unique by the gods, on their land, to be the site of his final resting place. Kowalzig, takes such a stance towards the play. She points to the finale as 'more than two hundred lines detailing orchestrating Oedipus' transition into the realm of the dead, filled with a wealth of ritual detail, and ending with a set of instructions given by Oedipus to Theseus about how Athenians should treat the tomb'.<sup>397</sup> And indeed, 'Creating for oneself such a hero in wartime was evidently a worthwhile and relevant undertaking'.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1522-5.

<sup>394</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1631-5.

<sup>395</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1663-5.

<sup>396</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1713-5.

<sup>397</sup> Kowalzig, 82, 2006.

<sup>398</sup> Kowalzig, 85, 2006.



Kowalzig's assessment of Oedipus' journey as one 'carefully delineating and defining the circumstances, motives for, and functions of, his integration into the Athenian heroic spectrum'<sup>399</sup> is not all too far removed from this thesis' own assessment of Euripides' *Heracles* in particular.

And yet, one encounters a problem. Considering that this play ends with Oedipus ascending to godhood, becoming a guardian of not only Colonus but all of Athens' territories, he does not seem to have undergone any kind of enlightenment. He has not set aside his values and embraced a new code of justice as Orestes did. He is just as unwavering in his goal to remain free of his Theban relatives' control, as he was to uncover the truth of the Theban plague all those years ago. It creates a striking contrast with the ending of the *Eumenides*. Oedipus, it seems, does not become a god because, like Orestes, he is being integrated into the new πόλις. Rather, like Heracles in the *Trachiniae*, his apotheosis seems like an admittance that he cannot join the communal state. He embodies such a raw emotional extreme that he can only exist in this state on a cult level. Even though Oedipus' daughters accompany him off stage, they are not privy to the full knowledge of his fate. They are not even able to touch him, as he makes this last journey 'with no guide to lay a hand on me'.<sup>400</sup> Oedipus guards knowledge that he will not share with 'any of these citizens', even his own children.

To Kelly this is what makes the ending hopeful. Oedipus is indeed 'cutting himself off from his family and original community', but that 'translation from private

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<sup>399</sup> Kowalzig, 85, 2006.

<sup>400</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1521.

individual to public property'<sup>401</sup> allows Oedipus to abandon the self-centred mindset of the ἥρωας and become more concerned with how he can serve others. In that sense, it resembles the conclusion of Euripides' *Heracles*. Currie's perspective, while perhaps more ambivalent in some ways, still sees the 'distance' between the hero and his family, and hence 'the audience', is a price paid to bring 'the hero and the community or the hero and the gods closer'.<sup>402</sup> Nonetheless, the implication persists that Oedipus can only benefit others by discarding his identity in full. Additionally, it must be asked how much Oedipus really joins the community after this. Even as a cult hero, Oedipus is not an impartial presence, nor does he swear allegiance to the city as a whole like Orestes did. He reveals the full truth only to Theseus, a fellow exceptional man like himself. He renounces (and is renounced by) the wider populace. He does not serve others, as Kelly, suggests, but rather serves only the one man he deems worthy. He is less 'public property' and more-so Theseus' property. And this is largely because the result of a city ravaged by warfare, and a disgraced democracy on the verge of collapse.

### **The decline of democracy**

The social context of Athens which shaped the *Oedipus at Colonus* differs wildly to the *Eumenides*. Specifically, this is a play formed in the final years of the Peloponnesian War. How long Sophocles spent writing the play is unknown, but the believed performance date of 406 B.C.E would place it two years before Athens' surrender. Even so, Sophocles would have had more than enough time not only to recognise that Athens was on the brink of defeat, but also that 'the great experiment in democracy had shown pervasive, enduring, and ultimately irreparable structural

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<sup>401</sup> Kelly, 84, 1972.

<sup>402</sup> Currie, 343, 2012.

flaws'. Wilson discusses how this may have shaped Sophocles' decision process: 'The slow metamorphosis from the Delian League to the Athenian Empire (a process encapsulated and incorporated and immortalized in the Melian Dialogue), the recklessness of the demagogues, the debacle at Syracuse, the flirtation with oligarchy in 411, and the disgraceful behaviour of the demos toward the generals in the aftermath of Arginusae exhibit the pathology'.<sup>403</sup> The play marks not the thrill and trepidation of a new age, but the downfall of that same era. That sense of exhaustion, cynicism and sorrow marks the tone of the entire play. This is not the story of a hero being inducted into the civic code of democratic Athens, but rather, of Oedipus' failure to enter into that πόλις, so instead he is elevated to something else. Now Oedipus' apotheosis itself does not inherently portend the doom of the πόλις. The *Trachiniae* has a very similar ending after all, and it could instead be perceived as merely being indicative of the growing influence of cult, as was argued in Chapter Three. In fact, Kelly argues that Oedipus becoming a chthonic cult hero, is what makes him 'a typical hero'.<sup>404</sup> His fate does indeed correspond with the formula of the cult tradition, as has been addressed earlier.

What truly marks the *Oedipus at Colonus* as a much more sombre affair is the characterisation of the chorus and their interaction with Oedipus. Sophocles sets the tone for this from the very first scene, the meeting with the Peasant. Colonus as a setting is many things in this play. It is a place with great personal significance to his author, as well as 'a boundary between the world of the Olympians and the Underworld'<sup>405</sup> (as evidenced by the ending) Deferring to Athens, Colonus is thus

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<sup>403</sup> Wilson, 9, 1997.

<sup>404</sup> Kelly, 82, 1972.

<sup>405</sup> Markantonatos, 220, 2002.

‘ruled by the king in the city’.<sup>406</sup> As a subsumed territory, it is ‘a miniaturized, condensed Athens’.<sup>407</sup> And any criticism of its πόλις applies to both parties. There is no attempt to inject the democratic system into the ancient world, as with the trial scene in the *Eumenides*. Instead, the Peasant ‘expressly denies that the people have political power...Sophocles virtually starts his play with an explicit denial that Athens is a democracy’.<sup>408</sup> Certain scholarship has described the chorus as relatively active. Ahrensdorf points out that ‘It is only the Athenians who protect Oedipus and his daughters from the lawless violence of Creon...who ensure that justice is done here...Athenians are the only beings we see who benefit Oedipus’.<sup>409</sup> Likewise Markantonatos calls the chorus: ‘fearless defenders of Oedipus’ safety against the brutality of Creon, to the point of preventing the exit of the Theban aggressor with their bare hands’.<sup>410</sup>

However, many of these arguments greatly overestimate the chorus’ impact in the play. On the contrary, in general, the chorus remain strikingly ineffective, even by the standards of Attic tragedy. Despite the Peasant earlier declaring he would leave Oedipus’ case up to the citizens, they proceed to defer the case in turn to Theseus. They lack the agency to make any decision or take any action for themselves, leaving any judgment entirely to their king. As Wilson notes, that weakness extends even to the moment when ‘Creon seizes Antigone’. Oedipus pleads for them to take the role of ‘lords of the land’: To take direct action, ‘to display some power, some capacity, some nobility that they denied to themselves in their dispute with the

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<sup>406</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 67.

<sup>407</sup> Lawrence, 2013, 356.

<sup>408</sup> Wilson, 192, 1997.

<sup>409</sup> Ahrensdorf, 69, 2014.

<sup>410</sup> Markantonatos, 28, 2007.

protagonist.’ Yet ‘they do no more than they did against an equally determined Oedipus. They can only cry for help’.<sup>411</sup> Even as Oedipus prepares to be taken away by the gods, Oedipus insists that Theseus be present for him to swear his oath of protection to Athens. The chorus respond by frantically calling for their king.<sup>412</sup> While he bids the chorus farewell fondly, he still calls them ‘ξένων’<sup>413</sup> (a term which in this context can mean both ‘hosts’ and ‘strangers’). Evidently he still does not consider himself to be one of them, and they respond in kind.<sup>414</sup> He came to them as a strange, terrible, unknown man, and while they respond to his plight with empathy, he leaves the same way. As Tzanetou discusses, ‘One of the heavily debated questions in Sophocles’ Oedi[...]pus at Colonus...is whether Oedipus becomes a citizen in Athens or not.’<sup>415</sup> And while there is certainly much more nuance to the discussion of Athens’ attitude to any foreigners, enough so to make reaching any definitive conclusion difficult, the final scenes doubtless make a troubling impression that, this time, Athens has failed to truly induct Oedipus into its fold, and so exhibit the ‘ideology of Athenian piety, openness and compassion towards foreigners’.<sup>416</sup>

Oedipus’ apotheosis, therefore, has a very different context to the *Trachiniae*. There, Sophocles presented it with a great deal of sympathy for the domestic πόλις through Deianeira. The framing encouraged the audience to perceive Heracles’ failure to co-exist in his community to be less a failure of the πόλις, but moreso an inevitability of his own nature. That element is still certainly at play, but this

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<sup>411</sup> Wilson, 194, 1997.

<sup>412</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1492-9.

<sup>413</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1552.

<sup>414</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1562.

<sup>415</sup> Tzanetou, 114-5, 2012.

<sup>416</sup> Tzanetou, 114-5, 2012.

ineptitude of the chorus leads the ending to feel more like Oedipus is consciously rejecting that society.<sup>417</sup> As Van Nortwick phrases it, the play is more concerned with ‘the need to transcend the tensions and struggles...that dominate so much of ancient Greek culture’.<sup>418</sup> Oedipus does not so much adapt to the community as bypass it entirely. The role Oedipus takes on in the πόλις is a distant one. As a cult hero, he is debatably even more remote and less human than he was at the start of the play. Yet he is perfectly content with this. He dismisses any desire to be a more involved part of the community, and contentedly gives up his humanity, family and any real human contact.

Like many tragedies, the *Oedipus at Colonus* portrays a struggle between an isolated ἥρωος and a wider community. But perhaps more than any other, it rejects any faith in the πόλις. The plot revolves around a handful of great men while others can only watch. This is not because they have failed to integrate into that community, but rather, because that πόλις is not worth joining. Power remains solely in the hands of individuals, not with the people.

### **The hero as social critique:**

More than any play analysed here so far, the *Oedipus at Colonus* is indicative of how the ἥρωος archetype could be moulded to adopt the thoughts and anxieties of a whole new social context. Shaped as it is by the decline of Athens in the final days of

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<sup>417</sup> It is worth remarking that not all scholars are so pessimistic towards the ending. Kelly believes that such views are rooted in an overly ‘post-colonial’ perspective, and that modern scepticism towards imperialism leads to a temptation to see the same within Athenian playwrights. Kelly points out that Athenians took a very ‘pragmatic’ attempt to maintain their order. Ultimately, Kelly writes, Oedipus still becomes a protector of Athens. For all of the hero’s inhuman remoteness, ‘the greatness of Athens endures’ (Kelly, 1997, 106). While Kelly is correct to point out that regarding any Athenian tragedy as anti-imperialistic is questionable, it seems limiting to suggest Sophocles was incapable of seeing Athens’ recent struggles in the war effort or voicing the anxieties that would bring.

<sup>418</sup> Van Nortwick, 111, 2015.

the Peloponnesian War, the *Oedipus at Colonus* explores the end of an era through the lens of the exiled ἥρωας. The setting of Colonus means that Sophocles ‘can in vivid terms relate his affection for his native deme’, implementing ‘the mythological associations of Colonus with Theseus and Perithous’.<sup>419</sup> All the while, Athens itself is ‘lurking ever prepotent on the horizon...the seat of the king and the locus focus of political and moral authority’,<sup>420</sup> and the two locations remain intertwined in their representation of the πόλις. Oedipus, like many heroes before him, is a character with a fierce heroic temper. He has carried his resolve and pride both into his exile and well into his old age. He seeks to find a new community where he can peacefully end his days.

But between the terrible reputation of his legacy and actions, the pressure from his former citizens who wish to pull him back and rob him of agency, and the distrust of this new community, he ultimately fails to be inducted into the new Athenian πόλις, and instead transcends humanity. He confronts his past and renounces his old community. But in doing so, he only reveals how alike he is to his enemies, casting whether he has ever truly learned or grown beyond that point in his life into doubt. He is still technically a part of the πόλις in a remote role as a cult hero, but only because his temperament and status forbids him from dwelling amongst humans. The play acts as a hybrid of cult ‘heroization’ and that of tragic narrative. The result is an ‘ambivalence’ towards the ascension of a cult hero, ‘a mixed blessing for the person concerned’ and ‘outright catastrophe’ for their loved ones.<sup>421</sup> Through such melancholy, it exudes a cynicism towards the will of the people, the ideals of

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<sup>419</sup> Wilson, 26, 1997.

<sup>420</sup> Wilson, 91, 1997.

<sup>421</sup> Currie, 342, 2012.

democracy, and the very Athenian state. It revolves around a handful of great, flawed men, rendering all others impotent. It implies that: 'All are not heroes or leaders.

Perhaps all should not be.'<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Wilson, 199, 197.



## **Chapter Six: Theseus-How to create a democratic hero in Athens**

Now comes the culmination of many of the concepts addressed in this thesis. The conventions of classical heroism manifested in Homer, while literature from the archaic period onwards continued to develop these themes and concepts in different genres and mediums. Fifth century tragedy often repurposed the heroic narrative to reflect contemporary themes and issues. Across multiple plays, the ways these archetypes were implemented were not only extremely varied but often highly critical. The *Ajax* places the Homeric dichotomy of the communal state versus the heroic individual on stage, scrutinising the matter closer than ever before. The *Trachiniae* and the *Heracles* take that clash into the domestic sphere, portraying the disconnect between an uncontrollable, godlike individual and his inability to exist within the public or private spaces of communal life. The two plays offer two different solutions to this problem, but both are centred around changing one's understanding of the term ἥρωες. Through the *Oresteia*, one saw a more realised version of the themes raised in the *Heracles*. The heroic icon is reformed into something more socially and politically compatible, positioning Athens at the hub of social change. The *Oedipus at Colonus* portrays a similar narrative. However, being influenced by a much more dour and pessimistic social climate, the depiction of the ἥρωες has more in common with the *Trachiniae*. The hero rejects and transcends the Athenian πόλις and instead becomes immortal.

Across each of these chapters, one can discern several key points. The ἥρωες is an extremely versatile literary archetype that can be applied to many different concepts and situations. However, the civic ideology of fifth century Athens has evolved in such a way that many of these themes and messages are simply no longer relevant.

This means that the common conventions of these characters are often altered or observed from a new perspective to tell new stories more applicable to this social context. And the character who arguably best encapsulates this change is Theseus, the mythological king of Athens.

There are many reasons why it is Theseus, more than any other hero, who embodies the re-interpretation the heroic model underwent in Attic tragedy. For one, he is perhaps the most inherently Athenian. While other heroes are somewhat connected to Athens, Theseus' Athenian heritage is central to his identity. Like Ajax, (possibly more-so) Theseus gave Athens its own foothold in the heroic world, and a legacy within the epic tradition it could celebrate and so bolster its own cultural heritage, united behind 'their national hero par excellence'.<sup>423</sup> Furthermore, like Ajax, he is a strictly mortal figure. Unlike the demigod Heracles, whose fantastical position means he is not 'amenable to the process of sanitization and domestication which is necessary for a national representative', Theseus makes for a more relatable Athenian figure, 'a reflection of something close at hand and attainable in some measure for every Athenian'.<sup>424</sup> His victory over the Minotaur notwithstanding Theseus' most recurring opponents in myth were the 'human enemies of travellers'. Doubtless, 'the handsome Athenian *ephebos* who could crush foes by skill'<sup>425</sup> made for a much more personal aspiration for young Athenians. Furthermore, as king, he is also a cultural embodiment of Athens itself, its strength, its legacy and its ideology.

And that is all especially intriguing given how deeply flawed Theseus is in the

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<sup>423</sup> Shapiro, 169, 2012.

<sup>424</sup> Mills, 5, 1997.

<sup>425</sup> Davie, 25, 1982.

mythological tradition. While Theseus had many admirable traits to his name, as the one who slew the Minotaur, thus becoming ‘a civilizer and also the liberator of his people’,<sup>426</sup> he is also the man who abandoned his lover on a remote island, an act Catullus would later immortalise, inadvertently caused his father’s death through his negligence, and violated the territory of the gods themselves in his failed attempt to abduct Persephone. Virgil would go on to condemn Theseus to Tartarus for these transgressions<sup>427</sup> (yet another example of how differently these narratives could be received in a different social context). As such, while it is fitting that Athenian tragedy would choose to uplift one of their own representatives, it was not done without significant reinterpretation. In Mills’ words, ‘the Theseus who appears as a representative of Athens before an audience of Athenians and foreigners blots out any other, less praiseworthy images of Theseus’ including ‘the treacherous and impious abductor of early myth’.<sup>428</sup> Instead, tragedy presents him as what shall hereafter be dubbed ‘the democratic hero’.

This final chapter will explore Theseus’ role in multiple tragic works, some of which have been touched on previously, such as Euripides’ *Heracles* or Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, and others which have not, like Euripides’ *Hippolytus* or *Suppliants*. Each of these plays will be assessed much like the previous chapters, exploring Theseus’ characterisation, and relationship to the πόλις. Special attention will be played to how any conclusions drawn from these findings correlate to, or differ from, the arguments of prior chapters. Therefore, this chapter will also serve as the culmination of this thesis. In short it will argue that the evolution of the hero in

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<sup>426</sup> Mills, 16, 1997.

<sup>427</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* 6 617-8.

<sup>428</sup> Mills, 10, 1997

tragedy, the process through which democratic Athens recontextualised these myths and their characters, is best represented through the tragic portrayal of Theseus.

### **Heroic democracy**

Theseus' tragic depiction makes for an intriguing dichotomy because he embodies two seemingly different ideals. He is the ruler and established monarch of Athens, yet at the same time he repeatedly embodies the ideals of democracy. This can be seen most overtly in Euripides' *Suppliants*, where Theseus is unambiguously 'the representative of the city of Athens the mouthpiece for certain modes of thought and behaviour which belong to the idealized Athens of the *encomia*'.<sup>429</sup> The *Suppliants* poses Theseus as an embodiment of Athens' most celebrated ideals and rhetoric. His characterisation is a stark contrast to the deeply flawed conduct of Thebes, and despite being king, he advocates for the will of the people, embodying a fictionalised harmony between monarchy and democracy. In many ways it is a more direct, uncomplicated version of the narrative which the *Oedipus at Colonus* would later so thoroughly subvert. Athens takes the image of the ancient ἥρωες and repurposes it to celebrate their identity and their ideology. Whereas several of the previous plays pointedly demonstrated that the epic ἥρωες was not compatible with a democratic πόλις without significant adaptation and reform, the *Suppliants* portrays that reform in action, by recasting the hero into a pillar not of individualism, but of guardianship and communal living, a crossroad between two different eras and codes of living.

When the herald arrives in Athens to demand the return of Adrastus, he enters an argues with Theseus which descends into a debate over the ways a city might be governed. From the outset, Theseus refuses to acknowledge the Herald's description

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<sup>429</sup> Mills, 87, 1997.

of himself as the city's 'master'.<sup>430</sup> Rather, he insists: 'The city is not ruled by a single man but is free. The people rule, and offices are held by yearly turns: they do not assign the highest honors to the rich, but the poor also have an equal share'.<sup>431</sup> Euripides here does not necessarily portray the fifth century πόλις on stage, as his audience would recognise it. Instead, he codifies the mythic world to better resemble the world they knew. That is not necessarily unique. Kelly observes that tragedy typically 'avoided stories too close, spatially or temporally, to the world of their audience'.<sup>432</sup> In the same vein, even when celebrating the democratic ideals of Athens, Euripides keeps that level of distance, synthesising a fictionalised system that combines the mythical archaic Athens, with the classical Athens. This is simultaneously both a city ruled by the people, and by a king, two seemingly incongruous ideals working harmoniously.

At first, the Herald cannot understand the existence of such a society, dismissing Theseus' city as one ruled by an ὄχλος or 'rabble'.<sup>433</sup> He raises the objection that the citizens may not be qualified to become leaders. '...how can the common people, if they cannot even make a speech properly, know the right way to guide a city? It is time, not haste, that gives superior learning.'<sup>434</sup> For instance, he claims, a farmer, regardless of any level of education or intelligence, cannot divide time and attention evenly between the private concerns of their profession, and their public duty to the city. The Herald's argument rooted in ideals of class hierarchy and oligarchy. It insists that different people, whether because of their social status or their

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<sup>430</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 399.

<sup>431</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 403-8.

<sup>432</sup> Kelly, 22, 1972.

<sup>433</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 411.

<sup>434</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 420-2.

experience, are suited to their different roles, so a communal system of government is inherently flawed. And these criticisms were not unfamiliar to Athens. Plato, particularly, seemed to believe in people of different social classes having virtues that made them suited to ‘one proper and peculiar occupation’, along with a superior class of ‘guardians’<sup>435</sup> rather than giving people an equal political voice. And, for as much as Athens clung to the rhetoric of democracy, it had its own sharp disparity between social classes, and lines of gender and race complicated the matter further. Realistically, Athenian democracy only applied to wealthy Athenian-born males and was not without detractors for one reason or another even at its apex.

The Herald dismisses Theseus’ rule as the product of sophistry. He proudly states that in Thebes there is ‘no one to fool the city with flattering speech and lead it this way and that to suit his own advantage’.<sup>436</sup> Thus, he implicitly accuses Theseus of the same crime, using eloquence as a mask to introduce ideas the Herald sees as foolish at best, and dangerous at worst. Yet Theseus remains firm, turning the same accusation of manipulative rhetoric on the Herald, mockingly calling him ‘practitioner of words’, who ‘loves to speak elaborately’.<sup>437</sup> Theseus then delivers his own criticism of a system of one-man rule: ‘There is nothing more hostile to a city than a tyrant. In the first place, there are no common laws in such a city, and one man, keeping the law in his own hands, holds sway. This is unjust’.<sup>438</sup> These words would certainly carry weight in Athens, a city who ousted their own tyrant rulers in 508 prior to the Kleisthenes reforms of 508 B.C.E. And that disdain for a system dependent upon the flawed judgments of one man can be seen in other contemporary

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<sup>435</sup> Plato, *Timaeus* 17d 1-4.

<sup>436</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 410-1.

<sup>437</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 426.

<sup>438</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 429-32.

plays (including plays involving Theseus, as this thesis will come back to). Most notably, Antigone mockingly describes how tyranny enjoys the ‘power to do and say what it wishes’.<sup>439</sup> While the current democratic regime was not exactly unanimously celebrated in its day, doubtless such words from Theseus would have found favour with plenty of watching citizens.

This entire scene is emblematic of the thought processes of the fifth century being retroactively applied to the epic world. The characters ‘use the language of contemporary politics and political thought, and the speeches contain many commonplaces of the oligarchy-democracy debate: [...] Theseus’ picture of the tyrant as murderous, paranoid and sexually rapacious...is a stereotype born of democratic orthodoxy’.<sup>440</sup> Admittedly, there is some debate as to how conscious playwrights were of the full extent of this. Mills warns against overemphasising this, as ‘the democratization of the mythical polis is a natural result of the thought patterns of the period’.<sup>441</sup> Likewise, ‘The king-democrat of tragedy arises not from contemporary political models, but from a mixture of tragic conventions and the traditions concerning Theseus, Athens and democracy’.<sup>442</sup>

While it is true that the question of authorial intent is inevitably a murky field, Mills is perhaps too cautious in suggesting that playwrights were unconscious of this process. Take Theseus’ remarks on the nature of “Freedom...Who has a good proposal and wants to set it before the city?” He who wants to enjoys fame, while he

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<sup>439</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone* 505.

<sup>440</sup> Mills, 120-1, 1997.

<sup>441</sup> Mills, 101, 1997.

<sup>442</sup> Mills, 103, 1997.

who does not holds his peace. What is fairer for a city than this?’<sup>443</sup> This seems too specific to be merely coincidental. What Theseus voices is, potentially, the solution to the dichotomy that heroic conduct has faced since Homer: how to reconcile one’s own desire for immortality through glory, with personal obligations to one’s family, friends or comrades. Homer’s Achilles and Sophocles’ Ajax both desired to be λαμπρός, by which drove them to betray their comrades-in-arms and desert their loved ones by embracing death. Theseus, however, suggests people are incentivised to serve the state because they stood to benefit from it. With a change in perspective, there need not be any discord between the heroic legacy and the democratic πόλις. Because coming up with good ideas, creating a name for oneself within the development and glory of Athens, is itself a form of κλέος. Fame can be achieved not only as a warrior, but as an innovator. Social reform and love for the state become heroic traits worthy of renown and celebration. Davie, likewise, recognises that ‘little or no embarrassment was felt by classical writers over the question of Theseus’ monarchic status. There seems to have been little difficulty in combining the concepts, ‘Theseus the hero-king’ and the ‘Desire to glorify Athens and her democracy’ to produce the (to us) anomalous figure of Theseus the democratic monarch’.<sup>444</sup> Such fifth century texts could potentially even be ‘a precursor fundamental difference between king and tyrant as types of monarch’ that Plato and Aristotle discussed.<sup>445</sup> Instead of setting κλέος and the πόλις in conflict, the πόλις now embraces and welcomes κλέος as a facet of itself.

### **Hospitality and heroism**

Placing this much reverence upon Athenian values means that Theseus stands for

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<sup>443</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 438-41.

<sup>444</sup> Davie, 31, 1982.

<sup>445</sup> Davie, 32, 1982.



other aspects of Athens besides democracy. He also becomes a stand in for Athens' imperialism and the dominant, even paternal attitude it took to the territories it subordinated in the Delian League. In the *Oresteia* this manifests through the ξενία offered to Orestes and his subsequent loyalty towards Athens. Theseus repeatedly serves the same purpose in tragedy, welcoming exiles and outsiders into Athens, passing judgment on them and earning their fealty, uniting Panhellenic Greece under the Athenian πόλις. Theseus symbolises the control Athens exercises over its territories, and how it portrays that as an unambiguous positive.

Much of the narrative of the *Suppliants* poses Theseus with the challenge of how to treat a deeply flawed individual who comes to him seeking hospitality. Aethra, moved by pity for Adrastus and the chorus of grieving women, sends for Theseus, and poses the choice that Theseus will have to make: 'that either he will remove from the land the distress they cause or discharge his duty to the suppliants by doing an act of piety toward the gods'.<sup>446</sup> The play is explicit that Athens alone may take action and aid the Argives because of the strength of its πόλις. 'Sparta is savage and devious in its ways, and the other states are small and weak' Adrastus explains, 'It is your city alone that could undertake this labor. It looks on what is pitiable and it has in you a good leader who is vigorous'.<sup>447</sup> The overt critique of Sparta is highly deliberate. Since the play debuted in 423 B.C.E., still in the first phase of the Peloponnesian War, two years before the Peace of Nicias, this is indicative of how directly Athenian tragedy could reflect the thoughts and anxieties of the time in a way that borders on propagandistic.

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<sup>446</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 36-9.

<sup>447</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 187-92.

This frames the preliminary conflict of the play as something of a moral test for Theseus. Will he be able to exercise the appropriate ξενία towards these foreign strangers? This is complicated when Theseus hears the full story. It becomes clear that Adrastus is far from blameless. He has tampered with the cursed fates of the sons of Oedipus, even betrothing his daughter to Polyneices, after he voluntarily exiled himself from his home city. In a short-sighted political marriage, Adrastus has mixed ‘unjust bodies with just’ and interfered with the affairs of a tainted bloodline, bringing disaster upon his own πόλις. These ‘moral complexities surrounding the Theban’s refusal to bury the dead’ drive most the first half of the plot, testing Theseus with this ‘familiar and enjoyable component of tragedy’.<sup>448</sup> Much like Athena in the *Oresteia*, Theseus meets a tainted, transgressive individual, and must decide whether such a man is deserving of ξενία. At first, Theseus is reluctant, since Adrastus stands in violation of the very principles of Athens. Theseus insists that Athens thrives by keeping its citizens within the middle class ‘keeping to the discipline that the city establishes’. The poor are a threat because, if they feel their voices are not heard, they might be ‘deceived by the tongues of wicked leaders’ who exploit their frustration. The rich are both ‘useless’ and dangerous, since by ‘always lusting for more’ they risk upending the order out of greed.<sup>449</sup> Theseus here reprises the formula of tragedy of calling for moderation, in the face of excess, a sentiment previously seen in Pindar.<sup>450</sup> Overly high status only means a more devastating fall, and extremes of emotion are uncontrollable. Hence a modest life of comfort and a stable mind is ideal. Thus, Theseus sees Adrastus’ short-sightedness and greed as

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<sup>448</sup> Mills, 88, 1997.

<sup>449</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 238-49.

<sup>450</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 11.52-3.

incompatible with his city's ideology, and so his first instinct is to turn him away.

Such issues are a complex matter in ancient mythology. On the one hand, ξενία is a fundamental code of classical ethics, a practice governed by Zeus himself, yet there is precedent for turning away people deemed cursed or tainted in a way that makes them dangerous. Aeolus turns Odysseus away in Book Ten of the *Odyssey* for this very reason.<sup>451</sup> Nonetheless, Sydinou is highly critical of Theseus' outlook believing he learns and grows from by the end of the play. Sydinou calls 'Theseus' confident theorizing in regard to what constitutes wisdom...irrelevant'. The primary concern is not the moral judgement of Adrastus' actions. Rather it is 'the recovery and the proper burial of the corpses of the Seven, prohibited so far by the Thebans'.<sup>452</sup> In fact, Theseus' logic is not that far removed from that of the Herald. Despite their different political leanings, both characters assert that they are not obligated to follow Pan-Hellenic law, be it regarding hospitality or the burial of the dead, on the grounds that 'conventional wisdom' would scorn Adrastus' actions.<sup>453</sup> Theseus thus begins as a well-intentioned but misguided ruler, who nearly commits a grave error by closing his doors to an outsider. By the end he 'will have to learn by suffering'. The harsh experience of combat against the Thebans grants him a better understanding of the laws of the gods and his role in preserving them, both in his own πόλις and beyond.<sup>454</sup> Hence his previously discussed argument with the Herald is not just a display of democratic idealism, but a fundamental step in Theseus' growth.

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<sup>451</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* 10.72-3.

<sup>452</sup> Sydinou, 159, 2016.

<sup>453</sup> Sydinou, 160, 2016.

<sup>454</sup> Sydinou, 161 2016

As Mills remarks, this decision ‘is too important for him to take it by himself’.<sup>455</sup> Much like Athena in the *Oresteia*, a true democratic leader recognises when a problem is too complex for one ruler to solve and opens the matter up to the people. In the *Suppliants*, that role is played by Aethra. Despite Adrastus’ errors in judgment, she warns her son that in neglecting the will of the gods he might ‘meet with disaster’. Having been moved by the plight of the chorus, she urges her son to take the action that ‘brings you honour...to use force to compel men who are violent and deprive the dead of due burial to grant it, preventing them from violating what all Greece holds lawful. It is the decent observance of the laws that holds together all human communities.’<sup>456</sup>

Aethra’s solution additionally uplifts the position of Athens. By withholding the Argive’s dead, Thebes have violated laws and customs that apply to all of Greece, not just one πόλις. That she compels Theseus to act suggests that Athens is itself a Panhellenic guardian and avenger, enforcing the common good (or at least what Athens considered to be such) across Greece. This role, furthermore, is something that would honour the city.<sup>457</sup> Likewise, when Theseus replies in agreement, he echoes a similar sentiment: ‘By many glorious deeds I have demonstrated to the Greeks that my custom is always to be a punisher of the wicked’. Likewise, he recalls the Homeric philosophy of αἰδώς. ‘What will my enemies say about me when you, who bore me and would naturally be worried about me, are the first to urge me to undertake this toil?’<sup>458</sup> The language of heroism, of bold action taken in search of fame, is thus contextualised into a more communal context, one that endorses

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<sup>455</sup> Mills, 101, 1997.

<sup>456</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 301-14.

<sup>457</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 306.

<sup>458</sup> Euripides, *Suppliants* 339-45.

Athens' own position in the Delian League. Theseus is the 'democratic hero' in that he wins κλέος for his whole city, as well as himself. Hospitality, communal welfare, imperialism and heroism, are all intertwined concepts.

This same attitude can also be seen in Euripides' *Heracles*. Theseus' appearance raises many of the same themes as the *Suppliants*. Previously, this thesis has ruminated on how this play's ending subverts the formula of heroic myth. Heracles is encouraged not to die to preserve his glory, but instead to avoid disgrace by living. Theseus emphasises the way that Heracles has, through his past glories, not only won κλέος for himself, but also saved the people of Greece. Heroism is re-evaluated for what it offers the people, not how it solely benefits the legacy of the individual. However, this chapter will focus not on Heracles' character, but on Theseus himself. For the king of Athens raises many questions about ξενία, taboo and forgiveness. Furthermore, much like the *Suppliants*, the play positions Athens as the parental figure who is uniquely placed to offer such ξενία and take not only other heroes, but also other city-states, under its wing.

Theseus arrives only in the final scene of the *Heracles*. As stated previously, his appearance is something of a *deus ex machina*, but it also is surprisingly reminiscent of his characterisation in the *Suppliants*. Theseus arrives with military aid, having heard of Lycus' takeover and intending to offer his support to Amphitryon.<sup>459</sup> Here again, Athens is bestowed a unique level of authority. This πόλις, and this one alone, is entitled to intervene in the affairs of others. Likewise, Theseus is driven by φιλία, determined to repay his obligation to Heracles, who 'once rescued me from the

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<sup>459</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1163-8.

Underworld'.<sup>460</sup> Here again, Theseus is both a democratic and a Panhellenic hero, concerned both with the affairs of his fellow Greeks, and the reciprocal good he and his comrades can do for each other. The shift from individualism and glory is apparent not merely from Heracles' change of mind, but rather from the very moment Theseus enters.

Theseus' role here calls to mind the mediating position Odysseus held in the *Ajax*, to the point that one might even consider him another one of Carter's 'co-operator' figures. The entire finale is arguably less the story of Heracles consciously changing the nature of the ἥρωες, and rather the story of Theseus, coming to 'share in [Heracles'] grief',<sup>461</sup> and to induct him into both his state and his worldview as an act of 'goodwill'.<sup>462</sup> The heroic world is one where 'no mortal is untainted by fortune, and no god either', where all beings, even the gods, exist in a 'sinful state'.<sup>463</sup> Theseus, 'articulates the unnaturalness of combining war with children when he responds to seeing the victims: "children do not stand near the spear"'.<sup>464</sup> Rather, he speaks to Heracles on much more human terms. As Stafford points out: 'Theseus here makes no mention of Herakles' apotheosis, and quite explicitly places him after his death in Hades'.<sup>465</sup> Theseus acknowledges Heracles as a hero but not at the expense of his humanity. He recognises the ugliness of the heroic world, urging Heracles to leave it and 'come with [him] to the citadel of Pallas Athena',<sup>466</sup> to the new order of Athens.

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<sup>460</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1170.

<sup>461</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1202.

<sup>462</sup> Carter, 170, 2005.

<sup>463</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1314-5.

<sup>464</sup> Padilla, 290, 1994.

<sup>465</sup> Stafford, 236, 2010.

<sup>466</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1323.

Theseus' ξενία is also closely integrated with this new perspective of communal heroism. He will 'cleanse [Heracles'] hands from this taint and give you a home and a portion of my wealth'.<sup>467</sup> The gifts he 'received from my fellow citizens for killing the bull of Knossos' become the source of his ξενία for Heracles. This will culminate in him, like Oedipus, being put to rest in the city and honoured as a cult hero. Furthermore, the act of worshipping a man as godlike as Heracles provides the citizens with 'fair renown'.<sup>468</sup> Theseus' arrival demonstrates how Athens positioned itself against the heroic world to drama. It is enlightened, entitled, even obliged to inject itself into that world and exercise authority over the various states. Furthermore, because its system of morality has advanced the self-centred search for κλέος, it can judge those who are still beholden to such ideals. Theseus' position is not uncritical, but it is ultimately welcoming. He perceives the flaws of the heroic world, and how incompatible its ideals and nature are with what Athens has become. Likewise, he can see how this results in flawed people like Adrastus and Heracles. As Athens' representative he judges of the heroic world, deciding what aspects to reject and which to welcome. It is not difficult to see Athens determining its own relationship with its legacy through narratives like this, including how it reframed these myths to better serve its current regime. The message is evident to the point of borderline propagandistic. However, drama was as much about problematising as it was about propaganda, and plenty of plays were all too willing to critique the ugly aspects of both the tragic Theseus, and the Athens he embodied.

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<sup>467</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1322-9.

<sup>468</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* 1331-5.

## Dismantling heroic democracy

Such a tendency to portray Athens as an authority routinely leaves Theseus in the role as the judge, embodying Athens not only as paternal figure and receiver of suppliants, but also its code of justice. In both the *Suppliants* and *Heracles*, Theseus is forced to make a choice as to whether a social outcast deserves forgiveness, whether they pose some threat to his city, and whether they can be inducted into his city in good conscience. What makes this even more intriguing, is that in plays with a more pessimistic, some might say deconstructive, outlook this image of Theseus as judge is scrutinised or challenged. The *Oedipus at Colonus* and the *Hippolytus* throw this into sharp relief, the former questioning whether any city that places such importance on the verdict of one man can truly be called democratic. The latter takes a still darker turn, positing whether any one man can truly be trusted to make such a judgement, as human error leads to appalling disaster.

In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, Theseus appears roughly five hundred lines into the play and, at first glance, seems to be playing the role of hospitable leader and agent of democracy as in other plays. He enters and explains that he has already heard ‘from many in time past of your bloody destruction of your eyes’<sup>469</sup>. Moved by pity for the exile he asks ‘what request of the city and of me you have come to make...?’, As in the *Heracles*, Theseus is not frightened at the prospect that the man he is addressing is unfortunate or cursed. Rather he declares: ‘you would need to speak of a terrible fortune indeed for me to turn away from it!’<sup>470</sup> Indeed, while this thesis saw parallels in the *Heracles* to Carter’s theory of the tragic ‘co-operator’, Carter himself

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<sup>469</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 551-3.

<sup>470</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 560-1.



cites Sophocles' Theseus directly as an example of this archetype in effect.<sup>471</sup> Tzaneou interprets this scene more positively as depicting Athens' Panhellenic alliance with other city-states, one which 'casts the relationship between the Athenian king and the suppliant as an idealized alliance between the two heroes, based upon consent and reciprocity... by invoking the ties of ...spear alliance...between the two cities'.<sup>472</sup> What makes this so troubling however, is how embellishing Theseus' glory undermines the democracy of the Athenian πόλις, It positions Theseus as a definitively above and apart from the chorus. The Peasant does not recognise Oedipus when first they meet, and it was only when Oedipus revealed his identity that the Chorus knew who he was. Theseus, however, is perceptive and informed in ways that his citizens are not, recognising him at once. There is also a disconnect in his attitude towards Oedipus compared to the chorus. The Peasant and the chorus are instinctively wary of a foreigner disturbing sacred ground. Faced with the prospect of offering the man ξενία, both earlier parties chose to defer the decision to someone else, the Peasant left it up to the chorus, the chorus leave it to their king. If the *Oedipus at Colonus* does indeed render the chorus entirely impotent, to voice a scepticism with democracy and the rule of many, then this is extremely telling.

Even Theseus' reasoning for accepting Oedipus speaks to this individualisation of his character. Theseus acts not out of any wider principle of ethics, or for the good of his city, but out of empathy towards a man who reminds him of himself: 'I have not forgotten that I myself was brought up in exile, as you were, and that in my exile I

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<sup>471</sup> Carter, 161, 2005.

<sup>472</sup> Tzaneou, 121, 2012.

struggled against such dangers to my life as no other man has met with; so that I would never turn aside from helping to rescue any exile such as you, since I know that I am a man, and that I have no greater share in tomorrow than you have'.<sup>473</sup> Carter refers to this speech as proof of Theseus' archetypal goodwill. 'Even before he has the chance to hear first hand what advantage there will be for Athens in harbouring Oedipus, he holds sympathy for the hero as his motive'.<sup>474</sup> What Carter unintentionally points out is how this downplays Theseus' concern for his own people. Theseus and Oedipus have equal shares to any other man 'in tomorrow' may seem democratic in spirit but is strictly personal. From one exile to another, he can understand Oedipus on a level that others, including the Athenians, cannot. Sophocles' Theseus is a great man with struggles 'no other man has met with'. In fact, his ability to respond to suffering while 'unlike Oedipus,' expressing 'no anger whatsoever regarding his sufferings' and rather derive 'education' from them, elevates even above his fellow ἥρωες,<sup>475</sup>

It is this special attention to Theseus' achievements, his uniqueness, his κλέος, that marks out his portrayal in the *Oedipus at Colonus* as so thoroughly undemocratic. Theseus makes decisions without the input of his citizens. He takes charge and saves Antigone from Creon when others are powerless to stop him. He and he alone, is entitled to learn the secret of Oedipus' resting place. Theseus is effectively a tyrant, at least in the antiquated sense. He is an unchallenged despot with absolute authority, both over the play and the narrative. While not without its optimistic aspect, as Theseus still 'benefits himself and his city by winning the protection of the gods in

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<sup>473</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 562-8.

<sup>474</sup> Carter, 170, 2005.

<sup>475</sup> Ahrens Dorf, 74, 2009.

return for granting Oedipus sanctuary'<sup>476</sup> the *Oedipus at Colonus* undermines the democratic element, by narrowing the scope. Only a handful of great men (Theseus, Oedipus and to a lesser extent, Creon) are allowed to meaningfully drive the plot forward. Power is placed back solely into the hands of the Sophoclean hero.

Ironically, despite its much earlier performance in 428 B.C.E. Euripides' *Hippolytus*, in some ways, takes these concepts one step further. The *Oedipus at Colonus*, for all its cynical opinion of the masses, maintained a positive portrayal of Theseus, if anything it was too positive, in a way that undermined the wider populace. Euripides' Theseus in the *Hippolytus* is much more akin to the Heracles of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, a man largely disconnected from the domestic sphere of his οἶκος. Chaos and disorder unfold in his absence. When he finally arrives, he responds with short-sighted violence and poor judgement, and ends the play rebuked by the gods and lamenting his own mistakes. It is a starkly different portrayal of Theseus, and indicative of how far Euripides was willing to push this symbol of Athens.

The more sinister implications of Theseus' leadership and judgement are arguably under-explored by scholarship. When Theseus is remarked on, he typically surfaces as part of the discussion of the play's themes of knowledge and secrecy, or the divide between gods and humans. In Ebbott's words, this is a play where 'The questions of what is true and how to judge the words of another,' are in a conflict where 'they are a matter of life and death'.<sup>477</sup> Lusching, for instance, points to Theseus' 'ignorance',

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<sup>476</sup> Ahrensdorf, 79, 2009.

<sup>477</sup> Ebbott, 116, 2017.

entering the narrative more than halfway through as he does, as the trait that ‘separates him from us and from the chorus with whom we share knowledge and in a way complicity or at least involvement in what has happened and been made known’, but that argues that aside from his absence from the narrative, he is no more driven by ‘ignorance and haste’ than any other character in the play.<sup>478</sup> However, such studies say little about the danger of placing such a level of political and divine power in the hands of such ignorant men.

For more than half of the play, Theseus is entirely absent from Troezen. However, from Aphrodite’s introductory prologue, the seeds of doubt are subtly sown as to his characterisation. For one, the reason for his absence is part of his ‘year-long exile from his home’ as a result of ‘fleeing the blood guilt he incurred for the murder of the Pallantidae’.<sup>479</sup> From the outset, Euripides’ Theseus is morally transgressive. His blood-guilt estranges him from both his city and family. Theseus is still the king of Athens in the continuity of his play. But between the geographical difference and Theseus’ behaviour, it immediately establishes the play as distinctly ‘un-Athenian’. The play is removed from the physical setting of the Athenian πόλις, but also from the civic mindset. Even remembering Kelly’s remarks about the distance playwrights and ancient authors establish between Athens and the dramatic realm, the *Hippolytus*’ prologue removes Theseus from the πόλις, the οἶκος and any code of Pan-Hellenic ethics. If nothing else, it is a noteworthy departure from the *Suppliants*.

Aphrodite also states that, these flaws notwithstanding, Theseus unquestionably

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<sup>478</sup> Lusching, 87, 1988.

<sup>479</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 34-6.

commands power here. She foretells the play's ending, that Hippolytus will die because of Theseus, killed by 'curses the sea lord Poseidon granted him as a gift.'<sup>480</sup> Certainly, one could argue, as Nikolsky does that the prologue frames Aphrodite, not Theseus, as the true threat. It is after all 'her assessment' which 'frames the entire drama'.<sup>481</sup> Nonetheless, Theseus is undoubtedly being set up alongside Aphrodite as having his own share of godlike sway over the resulting calamity. Here again, tragedy isolates heroes from humans through deification. Euripides has both Theseus as a king with an inordinate, inhuman level of power, and cast doubt over his responsibility to wield it.<sup>482</sup> Immediately after Phaedra's suicide is discovered, this aspect comes full circle. Theseus returns and shows genuine grief for Phaedra,<sup>483</sup> yet also inadvertently calls attention to his own absence. He enters the stage wearing a garland in celebration of his successful journey to seek cleansing from the oracle. Upon hearing of her death, Theseus cries 'Oh! Oh! Why then is my head crowned with these plaited leaves since my mission to the oracle has ended in disaster?'<sup>484</sup> and tosses his garland aside. The sincerity of Theseus' horror is juxtaposed against the stark reminder of his absence while his οἶκος fell apart.

In the same vein, Theseus' reaction to Phaedra's final message displays his failure as a judge. Now believing that his own son has raped Phaedra and driven her to

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<sup>480</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 43-6.

<sup>481</sup> Nikolsky, 22,2015.

<sup>482</sup> That being said, there are interpretations which are less critical of Theseus. Mills observes that the extant *Hippolytus* is a rewritten version of a lost play. In the original version, she writes, Theseus was 'a philanderer who had gone on a dangerous mission to abduct the queen of the underworld. In the second play, he is on a safer and more virtuous journey to an oracle...this virtuous journey helps to sanitise him, as does his passionate grief over his wife's death' (page 74). It is true that Euripides could have used the prologue to establish Theseus as far more unsympathetic than he actually did. However, while Theseus' goal is 'virtuous', it is only undertaken because of his own blood guilt. By comparing to the lost original, Mills arguably does not give the more problematic elements already there in the surviving version enough credit.

<sup>483</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 846-51.

<sup>484</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 806-7.

suicide, Theseus swears vengeance, and uses one of the three oaths to Poseidon that Aphrodite mentioned during the prologue. The audience and the chorus are fully aware that Theseus is mistaken and is punishing an innocent man, as well as a blood relative. To use such a gift from the gods so recklessly on a false charge is undoubtedly a terrible lapse in judgment, even if it is carried out in ignorance and misguided grief. Euripides makes Theseus' failure especially public. Although his prayer is directed towards Poseidon, Theseus calls all the citizens to hear.<sup>485</sup> Everyone, the chorus included, witnesses this grievous mistake first hand. The chorus are rightly horrified and urge Theseus to reconsider: 'For you will learn in time that you have made a mistake. Take my advice!'<sup>486</sup> Theseus entirely ignores this, and recklessly pursues his current course. Theseus is both a well-respected king and privy to a level of divine power no other mortal possesses. Yet he wastes this power on a short-sighted decision. Even Artemis rebukes Theseus for his rashness:

'Do you know that you were given by your father three curses certain of fulfilment? One of these you took, base man, to use against your son when you could have used it against an enemy. Your father, the sea lord, kindly disposed as he was toward you, granted what he had to grant seeing that he had promised. But in his sight and in mine you are proved base since you did not wait either for confirmation or for the word of a prophet, you did not put the charge to the proof or grant to Time the right to investigate it, but more rashly than you ought you let loose this curse upon your son and killed him.'<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 884.

<sup>486</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 891-2.

<sup>487</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1313-24.

Much of the rest of the play is ambiguous regarding whether Theseus' behaviour was excusable. Artemis claims that 'Ignorance acquits your mistakes of baseness',<sup>488</sup> and echoes a similar sentiment when she converses with Hippolytus. The two agree that the whims of the gods, Aphrodite in particular, have destroyed Theseus as well, with Hippolytus, even as he dies, voicing his pity for the father who caused his death.<sup>489</sup> Scholars point out that same moral confusion. Far from critiquing Theseus, Nikolsky argues that 'The only character actually deserving of condemnation is Aphrodite whose evil was the main cause of all the misfortunes'. To Nikolsky, the play is more concerned with the pointlessness of flinging accusations at fellow 'victims of misfortunes' in a world where people are the puppets of gods. In such an unfair world, 'condemnation and unwillingness to forgive wrongdoings are...erroneous...ruinous'.<sup>490</sup> And, certainly, as Goff points out, one could just as easily criticise Hippolytus for his 'insubstantial' defence. Perhaps, when faced with such 'essential emptiness',<sup>491</sup> Theseus makes what would seem to be the most logical judgement. After all, 'how could we expect him to react differently when confronted with his wife's suicide?'<sup>492</sup> As witnessed time and again, the role of the gods, and how it limits the agency of heroes, even in their worst crimes, is itself a recurring tragic theme, continually complicating questions of justice and morality, and can greatly affect how an audience judges the ἥρωες. This is equally true of Theseus.

However, the text is littered with repeated suggestions that, ignorance aside, Theseus' actions were wrong. As Theseus confronts Hippolytus over his supposed

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<sup>488</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1336.

<sup>489</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1403-5.

<sup>490</sup> Nikolsky, 22, 2015.

<sup>491</sup> Goff, 100, 1990.

<sup>492</sup> Ebbott, 115, 2017.

crimes, and publicly banishes him, Hippolytus cannot help but recognise how improper this is. Theseus does not ‘wait for Time to give evidence about me...?’ or ‘examine my oath and sworn testimony or the words of seers...’ or even hold a trial.<sup>493</sup> This is the same point that Artemis emphasises later. Theseus has not simply acted with limited information. He has flouted the standard procedure of justice. Mills recognises the ‘language of lawcourts, which underlines how unjust a ‘trial’ is in which the sole judge asserts the defendant’s guilt and only afterwards attempts to prove it’.<sup>494</sup> Admittedly, the anachronistic tragic world blurs the lines between its mythologised Bronze-Age setting, and its fifth century time of conceptualisation. But Hippolytus implies that the Troezen of the play relies on some form of court-system. There is some sort of judicial procedure at play, more at least than individualised codes of revenge. Even as king, it seems Theseus ought not bypass these systems. He has recklessly performed a miscarriage of justice not only by the standards of fifth-century Athens, but by those of the fictional setting. Theseus’ failure is evident on multiple levels. As a citizen, he is already guilty of murder and thus seeks purification. As a κύριος, this absence has left him blind to the complete ruin of his household. As a king and judge, Theseus has publicly flouted the codes of the law, in such a way that has caused the death of an innocent man. Thus, he has proven unworthy of the power he commands, both as a king and demigod.

The Theseus of the *Suppliants* and the *Heracles*, plays which themselves were written by Euripides, enforced Athenian standards of justice and hospitality, even in the archaic heroic world. They showed a man who was willing to receive even

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<sup>493</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1051-6.

<sup>494</sup> Mills, 75, 2002.



flawed transgressive men, even if in the *Suppliants* it was necessary for him to learn and grow into that role. The Theseus of *Hippolytus*, by contrast, judges an innocent man unfairly, costing that man his life. Even with Artemis disavowing him of blame, such an unflinchingly negative portrayal of a hero who was in many ways a symbol of Athens, is jarring to say the least.

### **Adaptation and the malleability of archetypes**

From this discussion, one can see many of the concepts discussed across this thesis converging in these dramatic portrayals of Theseus. The ‘unusually civic-minded champion of the Athenian people’ best known for ‘punishing the wicked’.<sup>495</sup> now represented synthesis of the heroic traditions of wider Greece and the specific concerns of the Athenian πόλις. He is a noble, well-respected ruler who obtains fame, eliminates monstrous and barbaric threats to Greece, and thrives as Athens’ king. Yet such heroic conventions are reinterpreted in a manner more in keeping with Athens’ democratic ideology. In the *Suppliants*, Theseus’ rule blends the ideals of monarchy and democracy, prioritising the needs of his people and state above all, never setting his desire for κλέος against the needs of his πόλις. They become harmonious forces, encouraging watching Athenians to see the state’s glory as their glory, and vice versa. In turn, Theseus represents the Delian League and Athens’ dominance within it. The narrative formula of the *Oresteia*, and Athens’ position as an arbiter over the rest of Greece is revisited repeatedly. Much like Orestes’ supplication, the reception of Adrastus, Heracles and other such men indicate Athens’ idealised view of itself as a force for democratic justice across Greece, a view that entitled them to exercise authority over other Pan-Hellenic territories. Even

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<sup>495</sup> Anderson, 169-70, 2009.

in the *Suppliants*, where Theseus' more isolationist starting point requires him to learn, by the end of the play he willingly inducts strangers into the πόλις and intervenes in the affairs of other less morally upstanding states. The *Suppliants* presents a wider code of morality to which all Greece is beholden, giving Athens a unique prerogative to mete it out. In many ways, Athens' judge persona doubles (intentionally or otherwise) as a metaphor for the way Athens treated heroic myth in general, embracing the parts they appreciated, and rejecting or reconditioning the aspects they did not, but always from the perspective that their society and moral code, was better and more advanced than the one which came before, and that they were thus positioned to make such judgments through their democratic hero.

But even then, this portrayal was far from homogenous, and that represents the second key point of both this chapter, and this thesis as a whole: Heroic characters were extremely malleable and could be remoulded (sometimes drastically) to service the message and themes of any given play, sometimes in ways in keeping with the ideals of the state, sometimes not. The *Oedipus at Colonus* and the *Hippolytus* both cast some degree of scepticism on the image of the democratic hero. Sophocles places Theseus on a pedestal, emphasising his singular authority in Athens by disempowering the chorus and other characters. His heroic kinship with Oedipus elevates him to a pseudo-divine status, granting him empathy and knowledge which other, lesser people are denied. Conversely, Euripides tears down the idealised image of Theseus. His role as a noble king, ally of democracy and judge of character are all called into question by his much harsher, less competent portrayal, which itself has much more in common with the earlier, more typical heroes of drama and of epic. His absence from the chaos of the play's first half resembles the openings of the

*Heracles, Trachiniae* or *Agamemnon*. His abuse of the gods' power to exercise his own poor, self-centred judgement elevates him to the level of these more godlike heroes, stripping him of relatability and absolving him of human moral obligations. If the *Oedipus at Colonus* deified Theseus by emphasising his superiority, the *Hippolytus* does so by recalling the uglier aspects of classical religion and heroism, making Theseus a short-sighted and tyrannical figure of fear.

Where the plays differ is in their attitude to democracy. The *Oedipus at Colonus* was born out of a cynicism to the ideal, after years of scandal and exhaustion through warfare. While still positioning Athens positively compared to its Pan-Hellenic peers, it exudes a cynical opinion of the masses, and places power back in the hands of a few exceptional men. Conversely, despite its much harsher characterisation, it is arguably the *Hippolytus* that treats Athenian democracy more favourably. For all of Theseus' faults, his failings are never positioned in a way that reflects badly upon Athens. Rather, they come from his decidedly 'un-Athenian' behaviour. Even the setting of Troezen helps to distance the play from Athens and its values. The *Hippolytus'* Theseus seems less an indictment of democracy, and more of the idealisation of the democratic hero. It reduces Theseus to the level of any other hero and, moreover, any other tyrant. He is no better than Homer's Achilles, selfishly abusing his divine power, no better than Sophocles' Creon who abused his kingly authority to exercise his spite. The *Hippolytus* therefore emerges as a decidedly pro-democratic play by its staunch aversion to monarchy, even that of a man many Athenians idolised.

Drama found its voice by bringing these celebrated stories and characters onto the

stage, but it established its identity through its bold new perspective. Theseus is the final piece of the puzzle, encapsulating how Athens understood the heroic tradition in relation to what it had become, how it represented that dynamic on stage, and how playwrights would all too willingly dissect it to extrapolate new meaning, continually pushing tragedy forward as a genre. Anderson even directly acknowledges the difference between the ‘calm and benevolent proto-democratic’ Theseus of the *Suppliants*, and the ‘rash and unjustified Theseus’ of the *Hippolytus*, to demonstrate how ‘Greek myth, shaped and reshaped by generations of creative artists, rarely entertained a one-sided or static moral picture of any major hero for long’.<sup>496</sup> The evolution of epic to tragedy, archaic to classical, monarchy to democracy, isolationism to imperialism, can be seen perhaps nowhere more clearly, than in Theseus.

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<sup>496</sup> Anderson, 172, 2009.

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to compare the representation of heroism in classical tragedy and epic poetry. It has discussed their characterisation, the relationship these ἥρωες share with the πόλις around them and what this conveyed or implied in the process. It recognised when this most notably echoed or differed from the character archetypes found in Homer and explored the potential authorial intent of playwrights in these homages or adaptations. The thesis also scrutinised the paradox that lies at the heart of tragic heroism; the recurring focus on exceptional yet flawed individuals, in plays conceived and delivered in a communal democratic πόλις.

It began with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, defining the ἥρωες as members of the social elite, elevated above the common people, sometimes even to a divine level. Desire for immortality through κλέος is their primary concern, intertwining themes of glory and death. This drive is focused firmly upon the individual, regularly placing them in conflict with those around them. The ἥρωος is not bound by social conventions, and acts on their personal desires even to the detriment of their peers, leaders and communities. The *Odyssey*, despite a degree of experimentation, mostly maintains this theming. The further one moves away chronologically from the composition of oral epic, the more one can see certain authors in different genres becoming more questioning and critical of the worldview and attitudes embodied in Homeric epic.

The more Athens flourished and developed its own identity throughout the classical era and beyond, the harder it became to reconcile it with the concepts of Homer, works developed in a completely different time and social context. This was

also clear in the rise of hero cult, being built upon a definition of a hero that is simultaneously extremely similar and wildly different to the Homeric interpretation. The result is no shortage of factors that played into the literary development of choral odes and tragic drama, and what thoughts may have been in the minds of watching Athenians during the City Dionysia. Homeric epic was simultaneously a pivotal aspect of education, and a crucial influence upon the evolution of other literary genres. Yet, it was also the product of a different, older era, one that was in some ways incompatible with the democracy Athens had become. Monarchism, individualism and isolationism had been replaced by communal interest, imperialism and Pan-Hellenism. And the playwrights, performers and audience alike were aware of this.

This disconnect between the ἥρως and the πόλις occurs in each play examined here. The *Ajax* reprises the *Iliad*'s conflict. Ajax's downward spiral into envy, shame and eventual self-destruction mirrors the anger of Achilles. However, Sophocles changes perspective to his immediate social circle; the grieving brother, the destitute concubine and son, and the helpless soldiers. Ajax is a remarkable but uncontrollable man, and his actions have far-reaching consequences beyond himself. Sophocles demonstrates what makes this heroic extreme so problematic in the fifth century, while contemplating why this would still resonate with audiences despite the cultural barriers. For as complex and troubling as Ajax is in the play, Menelaus and Agamemnon's vindictive oligarchy and punitive justice makes the audience question whether the state Ajax opposes is one worth following. This is further complicated by the cruel manipulation of Athena which drives the entirety of the plot. Turning the patron and symbol of Athens into a vengeful puppet master who robs Ajax of all

agency potentially re-contextualises the entire play. The *Ajax* presents the struggle of the πόλις and the ἥρωας as a cultural clash of old values versus new, yet with no clear answers to which of these two is ultimately right.

Dramatic portrayals of Heracles are just as, if not more, confrontational with the life and ideals of the ἥρωας, particularly in the two extant plays in which he is the protagonist, the *Trachiniae* and the *Heracles*. In both, the hero's absence, and the turmoil that unfolds without them, is a critical part of the conflict. The ἥρωας is portrayed as unfitting to play the role of the domestic κύριος. Sophocles, even more-so than in the *Ajax*, distances the audience from the hero, encouraging the audience to empathise with his wife, Deianeira,. These members of the domestic sphere suffer and (in Deianeira's case) die, because of Heracles' self-centred negligence and lack of empathy. Bringing a war prize into the domestic οἶκος as a concubine is a violation of boundaries, with disastrous repercussions for all concerned. In Euripides' *Heracles*, meanwhile, the hero is much more sympathetic, more concerned with his family's wellbeing. He modifies his heroic code, acting on behalf of the family rather than his κλέος. However, this places him in an untenable position between two mutually exclusive lifestyles: The glory-seeking life of a hero, even with that change in perspective, cannot reconcile with the οἶκος, which necessitates consistency, and is eventually bequeathed to the next generation. The former is too remote, too violent, too close to the turbulence of the gods. Even when Heracles returns, he brings the more dangerous aspects of the heroic world with him, and that ultimately destroys his family. If the role of the ἥρωας is to retain cultural relevancy, it must be looked at with a fresh perspective. This comes either in the form of cult worship, cutting heroes off from the πόλις and giving them a role more

akin to gods, or by re-evaluating what the term means to begin. Theseus' intervention and Heracles' change of heart calls for a new kind of heroism, one based on communal spirit, mutually beneficial relationships between the state and the individual. And Athens becomes the catalyst of this new perception of the heroic world.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* demonstrates the issues heroism presents when implemented into the code of justice. Whereas the *Odyssey's* protagonist serves as the arbiter of the gods' justice, dispensing retribution against those who had violated their *μοῖρα*, Aeschylus problematizes placing such a burden on flawed human individuals. Epic justice is built upon too narrow a scope to be a stable law system, creating a cycle of reciprocal violence where characters punish acts of evil through equally reprehensible means. From Agamemnon, to Clytemnestra to Orestes, the cycle continually plays out, the monstrous curse of the *ἀλάστωρ* serving as a metaphor for the human and divine constraints that bind them to this path. The *Eumenides* meanwhile, ends this cycle through the advent of democracy. Here, Athena, the symbol of Athens, takes the role of judge out of the hands of one man, bestowing it in the hands of a divinely sanctioned collective better qualified to ruminate on the complex moral factors that govern the play's world. With Orestes' acquittal, the *ἥρωος* is cleansed, rehabilitated and welcomed back into the *πόλις*. The Furies, the monstrous twisted embodiment of the heroic world, are not rejected, but instead reformed. As Athens was rising to power within Greece in the aftermath of the Persian War, Aeschylus portrays that optimism of entering a new era on the stage. It is a play that speaks to the transition from archaic to classical heroism, the way Athens co-opted these myths to reinforce its new political identity, and the way that



heroic archetypes and stories could be repurposed into new meanings and social contexts.

This last point can be seen especially in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. Drawing on the anxiety of the final days of the Peloponnesian War, it repurposes the framework of the *Eumenides* to convey a vastly different message. Much like Orestes, Oedipus comes to the Athenian territory of Colonus as an exile. His shame is rooted in his heroism, his nobility blotted out by a disgraceful revelation, the terrible peril faced by one who follows the heroic code. Like Orestes, he comes hoping to find acceptance. Unlike the *Eumenides*, though, there is no jury of gods. Rather, the people of the state are incompetent and indecisive. When Creon, both the embodiment of Oedipus past, and of Athens' political antithesis, pursues Theseus, the chorus are powerless to protect their guest from his enemies. They fail as citizens, judges and hosts. Oedipus, meanwhile, is never truly rehabilitated into the πόλις. He remains bound by the same heroic temper as before and, much like Heracles in the *Trachiniae*, through his apotheosis he takes on a more remote role as a figure of cult worship, because there is no other place for a man like him in Athens' state. In his final years, Sophocles, seemingly disenfranchised with his city and the rhetoric of Athenian democracy, reverses Aeschylus' innovation, taking power out of the hands of the people and back into the hands of the heroic βασιλεύς, Theseus, the man who acts as the true solution to the play's conflict.

This choice is especially pertinent since, elsewhere, Theseus embodies how Periclean Athens adapted the Homeric world to suit its own ends. He depicts the qualities that Athens best wanted to see in its citizens, a way for it to share in the

heroic world and develop its own claim to fame. Theseus in the *Suppliants* speaks in defence of democracy and validates the rule of the people. Even when he stumbles, he seeks the advice of his peers and grows through communal learning. While he is at first slow to open himself and his πόλις up to others, his newfound wisdom leads him to intervene in the plight of the Argives. Theseus thus encapsulates Athens' Panhellenic imperialism. Just as the *Eumenides* gave Athens the unique moral high-ground to judge Orestes, they alone are qualified to punish the actions of the Thebans. In the finale of the *Heracles*, Athens is the only πόλις equipped to judge Heracles in the wake of his actions. And bringing Heracles into the Athenian fold reflects gloriously on not only him, but them as well. Thus, when playwrights adopted a more critical stance toward the Athenian state, this 'democratic hero' became the ideal model to subvert. The *Oedipus at Colonus* uses Theseus' heroism to critique Athenian democracy, elevating Theseus on a pedestal which gives him all the power in the narrative. He alone can welcome Oedipus and empathise with his plight. He alone can save Antigone from Creon or learn the secret of Oedipus' resting place. It is an aristocratic, almost oligarchic message, giving political power to the few, not the many, representing the cynicism toward democracy shaped by years of decline and public shame during the Peloponnesian War. Conversely, the *Hippolytus*, while much less overtly critical of the democratic order, condemns bestowing the political, even divine power of the democratic hero, upon a deeply flawed man such as this version of Theseus. Theseus as a democratic hero in drama was seemingly a recognisable convention, which Euripides and Sophocles, in these last two plays, deliberately chose to modify to their own ends.

This thesis has charted how drama adapted the defining aspects of the Homeric

ἥρως and has explored how this birthed entirely new archetypes, tropes and devices, which would themselves be re-evaluated in later years. Classical tragedy, in short, is one of the best representations of artistic evolution. Art and media is invariably the product of a culture and it will nearly always somehow reflect those values and worldviews. Likewise, when that art becomes part of an established tradition it will in turn inspire new artists and writers. Even so, those cultures will inevitably change. Public opinion and social ideology will, and should, grow and evolve. At some point that progress will reach the point that those early works, for all their influence, will become somewhat problematic in a time and place far removed from the one that birthed them. Aspiring artists must then choose; to abandon these works as no longer compatible with the world as it now is, to embrace it uncritically, or to scrutinise the work, exploring what is still relevant and what is more questionable. This exploration will in turn give rise to new innovations, inspiring new adaptations as the years go by. This is just as relevant to the world of criticism as of creation. Critical scholarship of Classics likewise explores the dissonance between the beliefs of these antiquated societies, and those of twenty-first century Western society. However, that discussion is necessary so that these foundational works can live on with new meaning. Criticism and re-evaluation is key to evolution, and this fact is just as true of Greece in the fifth century, as of the world today.

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