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ANCIENT GREEKS AND SUICIDE IN THE TRAGEDIES: SOPHOCLES' *AJAX*¹ AND EURIPIDES' *HERACLES*²

Abstract: This paper analyzes attitudes towards suicide in ancient Greece as presented in Greek tragedies. Although suicide as a social phenomenon was a common motif in various ancient plays, the focus here will be on two tragedies, Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Heracles*, in which suicidal tendencies motivated by a loss of honor are most clearly depicted. In these plays, the two heroes are faced with a dilemma: choosing between an honorable death or a life spent in shame. In accordance with the ideals of his creator and the strict heroic code, Sophocles' *Ajax* decides to commit suicide. Euripides' *Heracles*, however, broken and devastated, chooses life by relying only on himself and his friendship with Theseus.

Keywords: suicide, Ajax, Heracles, Sophocles, Euripides, solitude, the Peloponnesian War, self-reliance, friendship, Theseus.

1. Introduction

Ancient literary, historical, and philosophical sources show that, despite of being full of vigor, cheerful, and devoted to life, the Greeks never denied a man his right to choose to live or to die of his own free will.³ Although suicide was an act directed against the gods, in Greek society of the fifth century B.C.E., and even earlier, it was a

¹ The beginnings of this research can be found in Maričić 2009: 15–22.

² The passages from Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Heracles* quoted in the present paper are from Sophocles, *Electra and Other Plays, Ajax, Electra, Women of Trachis, Philoctetes*, translated by E. F. Watling, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth-Middlesex, 1973, and Euripides, *Medea and Other Plays, Medea, Hecabe, Electra, Heracles*, Translated with an Introduction by Philip Vellacot, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth-Middlesex, 1971.

³ For a complete account of all instances of suicide in ancient literary and historical sources, see: Hirzel 1908: 75ff, 243ff, 417ff.

frequent phenomenon.⁴ Suicide was a means of avoiding death at the hands of the enemy, and Spartan suicidal heroism in battle was the most common form of altruism.⁵ Many women committed suicide after the tragic deaths of their children or husband either as a sacrifice due to unrequited love, which left an indelible mark on both Greek mythology and Greek tragedy,⁶ Pythagoreans condemned suicide for religious reasons, or more precisely, out of fear of committing sacrilege.⁷ For Philolaus, it was a crime committed not only against the human body (σῶμα) but against the human soul (ψυχή).⁸

Passages in Plato's and Aristotle's works indicate that their position regarding suicide was based on legal rather than ethical principles.⁹ In *Nicomachean Ethics*,¹⁰ Aristotle regards suicide as a crime against the community, although he does not specify the nature of this crime nor does he demonstrate any concern for individual well-being. First in *The Phaedrus*¹¹ and later in *The Laws*,¹² Plato states that suicide is disgraceful, yet he recognizes some exceptions to this principle: when suicide results from an extreme and unavoidable personal misfortune or shame caused by participation in utterly unjust activities.¹³ Only suicide committed under these circumstances can be excused, but, according to Plato, it is otherwise an act of cowardice or laziness undertaken by individuals too delicate to manage life's vicissitudes. In this regard, the case of Socrates is particularly instructive.¹⁴ Having been found guilty of impiety and corruption of Athenian youths, Socrates was given the opportunity to decide his own punishment.¹⁵ He could probably have avoided death by choosing to go into exile; however, this would have resulted in the loss of Athenian citizenship. Socrates thus opted for the death penalty, thereby remaining faithful not only to his teaching of civic obedience to the law but also to his values and beliefs. With the circumstances of Socrates' death in mind, Plato insists that taking poison as a means of carrying out the death penalty is not an act of suicide but rather one of martyrdom.¹⁶ Unlike

⁴ On suicide in ancient Greece, see Garrison 1991: 1–34; Dover 1974: 168–169; Van Hooff 1990; Bremmer 1983: 91–104.

⁵ Isocrates, an Athenian orator, essayist and rhetorician, starved himself to death in despair after the battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C.E., in which Greek independence was lost and Philip II of Macedon became the master of all of Greece. Demosthenes, a famous orator, after the defeat of Athens in the Lamian War in 323 B.C.E., escaped to a sanctuary on the island of Kalaureia, where he was later discovered by Archias, a confidant of Antipater. He committed suicide before his capture by taking poison from of a reed by pretending he wanted to write a letter to his family. See Ps. Plut. *Isoc.* 838; Plut. *Dem.* 29. On suicide in Spartan society, see: Hdt. 7. 104, 134, 231–232; Xen. *Hell.* 4. 8. 38–39. Cf. David 2004 : 25–46.

⁶ Xen. *Hell.* 6. 4–7; Diod. 5. 55; Hyginus *Fables* 166, 243; Paus. 1. 18. 2; 9. 17.1; Plut. *Thes.* 20.1; Apollon. *Arg.* 1.1063–104; Eur. *Supp.* 1015–1020, 1065, 1070–1071; Eur. *Alc.* 15–27, 33–36; Soph. *Ant.* 1220–1, 1301; Soph. *Trach.* 920–930. For more about the suicide of women in ancient society, see: Arjava 1996; Faber 1970.

⁷ Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorae* 86, Diels-Kranz 58c, vol. I, 465. 5–6. Cf. Plat. *Laws* VI, 773e. See also Cooper 1999: 520–521.

⁸ Naiden, 2015: 92.

⁹ On moral attitudes towards suicide through the ages, see: Battin 1982. Cf. Adkins 1960.

¹⁰ Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1138a5–14.

¹¹ Plat. *Phd.* 60–63c.

¹² Plat. *Laws* IX, 873c.

¹³ *Ibid.* 873c–d.

¹⁴ Plat. *Apol.* 29–30. Cf. Frey 1878: 106–108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 26.

¹⁶ Plat. *Phd.* 115.

Plato, Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher, in *The Discourses*, approves of the desire to end one's own life if it has become overly difficult and painful.¹⁷ At the same time, he characterizes an act of suicide not motivated by any reason at all as shameful destruction, because no higher goal is supported or achieved by it.¹⁸ All of these attitudes correspond to two principles, shame and honor, which are in opposition to one another and derived directly from an individual's relationship with the moral values of his time.¹⁹ Due to a sense of honor or disgrace, many Greeks were driven to put an end to their lives, as has been recorded by historians²⁰ and is evident in nearly all cases of suicide depicted in Greek plays.²¹

2. Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Heracles*

The rise of the Athenian Empire and its collapse after the end of the Peloponnesian War not only brought distrust and destruction but also challenged the entire system of moral values.²² It comes as no surprise that, during this period, there are numerous examples of death by suicide from all over the Greek world. At the same time, the motifs of bravery, cowardice, shame, and honor became common in the works of Sophocles and Euripides. In Sophocles' seven extant tragedies, Ajax, Haemon, Antigone, Jocasta, Eurydice, and Deianira all die by suicide. Oedipus asks for a sword, and the chorus²³ wonders why he did not use it.²⁴ Philoctetes tries to commit suicide on stage but is forcefully prevented. Electra begs anyone in the house to slay her ('for, death will bring me joy').²⁵ In Euripides' tragedies, Phaedra in *Hippolytus*, Evadne in *The Suppliant Women*, and Jocasta and Menoeceus in *The Phoenician Women* all die by suicide. Euripides abandons the common view of his time, while Sophocles supports it. Thus Euripides' Iphigenia says: 'To see this sunlight is for us all dearest love! / Below is nothing; and to wish for death, madness.'²⁶ In all these plays, suicide is presented as a sublime act that comes as a response to the pressures the victim has been exposed to. Of all these plays, two tragedies particularly stand out. They present the fates of two Greek heroes who disgrace themselves while experiencing a

¹⁷ Epict. *Discourses* 1. 24. 20; 1. 25. 18; 2. 6. 17–19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 2. 15. 4–12.

¹⁹ Plato and Aristotle make a clear distinction between acceptable and unacceptable suicide, which for them meant a distinction between honorable and cowardly suicide. The punishment for these must vary according to motives and circumstances. If an act of self-destruction was motivated by cowardice, love suffering or laziness (Ἀργεία δὲ καὶ ἀνανδρίας δειλία) – Aristotle uses the word μαλακία to describe the character of such a person – it is a dishonorable act and as such deserves nothing but condemnation and punishment. Plat. *Laws* 761a 1–2; Plato. *Symp.* 182d 3–4; Plat. *Phd.* 259a 2–3; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 3.111ba 12–15. Cf. Garrison 1991: 13, 15–19; Stalley 1983: 144.

²⁰ Hdt. 7. 220–221; Xen. *Hell.* 2. 3. 56; 6. 4–7; Plut. *Them.* 22. 2; Thuc. 1. 138. 4–5; Plut. *De mul. vir.* 249.

²¹ Katsouris 1976: 5–26.

²² Tzanetou 2012: 67–73.

²³ Soph. *OT* 1368: Χορός: οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως σε φῶ βεβουλεύσθαι καλῶς; κρείσσων γὰρ ἦσθα μηκέτ' ὢν ἢ ζῶν τυφλός.

²⁴ Segal 1995. Cf. Loraux 1991.

²⁵ Soph. *Phil.* 1000: Φιλοκτήτης: κρᾶτ' ἐμὸν τόδ' αὐτίκα πέτρα πέτρας ἄνωθεν αἰμάξω πεσόν. See Henry 1974: 3–4; Soph. *El.* 820: “πρὸς ταῦτα καινέτω τις, εἰ βαρύνεται, τῶν ἔνδον ὄντων: ὡς χάρις μὲν, ἦν κτάνη, λύπη δ', εἰ ζῶ: τοῦ βίου δ' οὐδεὶς πόθος. Cf. Ringer 1998.

²⁶ Eur. *I.A.* 1250–1252.

state of insanity sent by jealous gods. One of them decides to kill himself, the other to live with what he did. The former is Sophocles' Ajax and the latter is Euripides' Heracles.

Ajax is one of the greatest Greek heroes of the Trojan War. Therefore, after Achilles dies, he expects to be given the son of Peleus' beautiful, handmade armor. But the council of Achaean princes makes a different decision, and the armor is given to Odysseus.

*ODYSSEUS: What can have possessed him
To do such a senseless thing?
ATHENA: He was crazed with jealousy
For the armour of Achilles, which was given to you.*²⁷

*MESSENGER: I know what I saw. The leaders were in council;
Calchas was there, and soon he left his place
And went to speak to Teucer, out of earshot
Of Menelaus and Agamemnon, took his hand
In a friendly grip, and begged him earnestly
By hook or crook to keep Ajax at home,
Not let him out of sight this whole day long,
Or else he'd never see him alive again
For on this day, no other, he was doomed
Too meet Athena's wrath. For, said the prophet,
The gods have dreadful penalties in store
For worthless and redundant creatures, mortals
Who break the bounds of mortal modesty.
And Ajax showed he had no self-control
The day he left his home. 'Son,' said the father –
And very properly – 'Go out to win,
But win with God beside you.' 'Oh,' said Ajax
With vain bravado, 'any fool can win
Glory and honour on my own account.'
A terrible boast. And then another time
Divine Athena came to urge him on
And told him where to lay about his enemies;
He answered blasphemously 'Holy One,
Give your assistance to some other Greeks;
The line won't break where I am in command.'
This kind of talk it was that broke the bounds
Of mortal modesty; and his reward
Was the full fury of Athena's anger.
But if he lives today, there is a chance
We may yet save him, with the help of heaven.
When Calchas told him this, Teucer at once
Called me to where he sat, and sent me off
With these instructions for you. If we've lost him,
Ajax has not an hour to live, or Calchas
Is no true prophet.'²⁸*

²⁷ Soph. *Aj.* 40: Ὀδυσσεύς: καὶ πρὸς τί δυσλόγιστον ᾧδ' ἤξεν χέρα? Ἀθήνα: χόλω βαρυνθείς τῶν Ἀχιλλείων ὄπλων.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 750–780: Ἄγγελος: τοσοῦτον οἶδα καὶ παρὼν ἐτύγχανον. ἐκ γὰρ συνέδρου καὶ τυραννικοῦ κύκλου. Κάλχας μεταστάς οἶος Ἀτρεϊδῶν δίχα, εἰς χεῖρα Τεύκρου δεξιῶν φιλοφρόνως θεῖς εἶπε κάπεσκηψε, παντοῖα

Ajax is deeply shaken, disappointed, desperate, and disgusted. He belongs to a Homeric world in which public recognition is crucial; courage must be confirmed by others' opinion and reward.²⁹ Since Ajax is not a resolute Stoic but a short-tempered warrior: he must spill blood to clear his name. However, by killing sheep instead of the Atridae and Odysseus, he has disgraced himself even more, so he essentially goes into solitude forever. Sophocles' Ajax thus provides the most appropriate starting point for a study of suicide triggered by the loss of honor.³⁰ All Sophocles' tragedies commence with a man of superhuman, heroic proportions, highly developed ethics, and psychological strength.³¹ As Zdeslav Dukat states, he has to choose.³² One option is that of common mortals, which is a compromise with the demands of the worldly order guarded and governed by the gods. Yet, for Sophocles' tragic hero, a compromise represents a betrayal of his own nature and heroism. Therefore, he chooses another option, which involves suffering, potential or certain disaster, and physical destruction. Once he makes his decision, the tragic hero adheres to it, while dramatic suspense is provided by attempts from those around him to dissuade him. Such attempts vary in nature from friendly persuasion to brutal force. The hero, however, indifferent to the consequences, turns a deaf ear and remains resolute. This results in his increasingly greater isolation: those around him start considering him delirious, unreasonable, and terrible (δεινός³³), so he has no other choice but to turn to nature (Ajax invokes clamorous paths, sea caves, coastal meadows) or beasts as the only possible interlocutors.³⁴

Ajax is representative of a negative relationship between the individual and society and displays a certain degree of noncompliance with society's expectations.³⁵ His decision to commit suicide is motivated by intense shame, but at the same time he also desires revenge.³⁶ Because he holds onto traditional values that no longer prevail, he commits suicide, believing this act will direct attention to moral values that are no longer respected.

τέχνη εἶρξαι κατ' ἡμᾶρ τοῦφανερὸς τὸ νῦν τόδε Αἴανθ' ὑπὸ σκηναῖσι μηδ' ἀφέντ' ἔαν, εἰ ζῶντ' ἐκείνον εἰσιδεῖν θέλοι ποτέ. ἐλᾶ γὰρ αὐτὸν τῆδε θῆμέρα μόνη διὰς Ἀθάνας μῆνις, ὡς ἔφη λέγων. τὰ γὰρ περισσὰ κἀνόνητα σώματα πίπτειν βαρείας πρὸς θεῶν δυσπραξίας ἔφασχ' ὁ μάντις, ὅστις ἀνθρώπου φύσιν βλαστὸν ἔπειτα μὴ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῆ. κείνος δ' ἀπ' οἴκων εὐθὺς ἐξορμώμενος ἄνους καλῶς λέγοντος ἠῦρέθη πατρός. ὁ μὲν γὰρ αὐτὸν ἐννέπει: τέκνον, δόρει βούλου κρατεῖν μὲν, σὺν θεῶ δ' αἰε κρατεῖν. ὁ δ' ὑψικόμπως κἀφρόνως ἡμείψατο: πάτερ, θεοῖς μὲν κἂν ὁ μηδὲν ὄν ὁμοῦ κράτος κατακτήσασαι: ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ δίχα κείνων πέποιθα τοῦτ' ἐπισπάσειν κλέος. τοσονδ' ἐκόμπει μῦθον. εἶτα δεῦτερον διὰς Ἀθάνας, ἠνίκ' ὀτρύνουσά νιν ἠῦδᾶτ' ἐπ' ἐχθροῖς χεῖρα φοινίαν τρέπειν, τότε ἀντιφωνεῖ δεινὸν ἄρρητόν τ' ἔπος: ἄνασσα, τοῖς ἄλλοισιν Ἀργείων πέλας ἴστω, καθ' ἡμᾶς δ' οὐποτ' ἐκρήξει μάχη. τοιοῖσδέ τοι λόγοισιν ἀστεργῆ θεᾶς ἐκτίσασαι ὄργην, οὐ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῶν. ἀλλ' εἴπερ ἔστι τῆδε θῆμέρα, τάχ' ἂν γενοίμεθ' αὐτοῦ σὺν θεῶ σωτήριοι. τοσαῦθ' ὁ μάντις εἶφ': ὁ δ' εὐθὺς ἐξ ἔδρας πέμπτει με σοὶ φέροντα τάσδ' ἐπιστολὰς Τεῦκρος φυλάσσειν. εἰ δ' ἀπεστερήμεθα, οὐκ ἔστιν ἀνὴρ κείνος, εἰ Κάλχας σοφός.

²⁹ Kitto 1962: 224. Cf. De Jong 1999: 239–332.

³⁰ Garrison 1995: 46–49.

³¹ Dukat 1981: 102.

³² *Ibid.* 103.

³³ Also of note is the deep dualistic meaning of this epithet: terrible, fearful, dangerous, but also: marvelous, strange, marvelously strong, powerful, clever, skillful. Hence the dilemma regarding the translation of its comparative form, added to the noun 'man' in verse 333 of *Antigone*. Cf. Soph. *Ant.* 333.

³⁴ For interpretations that emphasize the role of Ajax's social isolation, see: Knox 1961: 1–37; Knox 1964; Sorum 1986: 361–377.

³⁵ Sicherl 1977: 67–98.

³⁶ Soph. *Aj.* 458ff.

Thus, the armor of Achilles is awarded to Odysseus, who is intelligent, treacherous, and corrupt – in short, a true Euripidean Odysseus, a Levantine sponger, rather than a noble and idealized Homeric nobleman, πολύτροπος.³⁷ Ajax believes that his suicide will be his revenge. He apparently belongs to a heroic, Homeric society in which ἀρετή stands above all else, and in the play the reward goes to Odysseus, who symbolically represents a new society with a different system of values. By committing suicide, Ajax wants to avoid mockery, to reconcile himself with the gods, and also to prove to his family that he is anything but a coward.³⁸ In terms of his relationship to society, his suicide will allow him to retain his honor and avoid shame. Besides these ‘positive’ reasons for committing suicide, Ajax also has negative motives, which spring from his rejection of his culture’s values and are revealed by his growing, self-imposed isolation from the gods and men.³⁹

To emphasize the individuality of tragic heroes more forcefully, Sophocles creates their opposites – characters of modest, mortal dimensions: Antigone is accompanied by Ismene, Electra by Chrysothemis, and Ajax by Odysseus.⁴⁰ These characters are exponents of traditional Greek moderation, σωφροσύνη: they do not strive for the impossible and therefore fare well.⁴¹ Our sympathy, however, lies with a tragic hero, no matter how unrealistic the aspirations are in which he stubbornly perseveres. Powerless and miserable before the gods, misunderstood and humiliated by men, a tragic hero wins, through suffering and disaster, a somewhat strange moral victory. The price is paid by those around him, whom he ignores: he cannot be distracted even by troubles of his fellow men. Unlike in more extreme situations such as war,⁴² in everyday life he is not a paragon of good behavior; in fact, he is often a horrifying example of antisociality.⁴³

The most important characteristic of Sophocles’ tragedy is the strict separation of the divine and human spheres.⁴⁴ The actions of his characters, and especially those of a tragic hero, are not induced by gods: the causes and motives come from the characters themselves. And they are the ones who bear full responsibility for the destructive consequences of their own actions. A self-reliant and arrogant man makes a decision in accordance with his own nature and then tries to act on it, despite the resistance of the gods and men.⁴⁵

³⁷ Hristić 1982: 194.

³⁸ *Soph. Aj.* 396ff; 589–590. Cf. Garrison 1995: 46.

³⁹ Garrison 1995: 47.

⁴⁰ Which is an especially strong contrast, since Odysseus has everything Ajax lacks: inner strength, poise, and stamina. See Škiljan 1973: 13. Ajax, unlike Odysseus, cannot bear shame, humiliation, or rage and therefore lashes out at his closest friends and family. Cf. *Soph. Aj.* 650–653.

⁴¹ The term σωφροσύνη literally means ‘sound mind’ and denotes the state of being mentally mature. Aeschylus (*Aesch. Sept.* 610) considers every person who is σώφρων to be just (δικαιος), good (ἀγαθός) and pious (εὐσεβής). Cf. North 1966: 101–114; Suvak 2017: 50–97.

⁴² *Hom. Il.* 3. 229; 6.5; 7. 211.

⁴³ On the depiction of Sophocles’ Ajax as a kind of ancient Don Quixote who inspires respect and admiration but is excluded from the normal processes of society, see Jouan 1987: 67–73.

⁴⁴ Kitto 1962: 9.

⁴⁵ “The whole scenario of the tragedy represents a boat with Ajax’s tent; the chorus consists of sailors, Ajax too is a sailor, the helmsman of the ship. Thus, beginning by sailing in, at the end Ajax sets off for ‘ablution’ and ‘the meadows on the banks’. It is clear what these waters and ‘banks’ are; but the ‘ship’ too has unambiguous semantics in myth. The personification of waters beyond the grave, Ajax’s ship, the chorus of his friends, and

Sophocles wrote *Ajax* between 449 and 442 B.C.E., when the power and glory of Athens were at their highest. Euripides, however, wrote *Heracles* between 424 and 418 B.C.E., during the Peloponnesian War, when Athens suffered her first great defeats and was stricken by a terrible plague. It therefore comes as no surprise that *Heracles* is a tragedy about survival. It portrays the moral courage of a man who eventually accepts the punishment for his crime in spite of the fact that his life sentence of emotional pain is unbearable. This tragedy takes us to the city of Thebes where, during Heracles' absence, Lycus assumes the throne by killing Creon, the father of the hero's wife, Megara. Now, fearing revenge, he intends to slay her, her children, and Heracles' father, Amphitryon. Heracles arrives in the nick of time and kills him. He saves his family after completing his final labor. Just then, when he is at his happiest, old Hera's hatred catches up with him. In a fit of madness induced by Hera, Heracles kills his wife and three sons. After regaining consciousness, he wants to commit suicide, but Theseus stops him.

*HERACLES: ...Now, for a last affliction,
I have topped our house of crime with murder of my sons. No choice is left me. I am too much defiled to live
In my beloved Thebes. Even if I stayed, I could
Enter no temple, join no company of friends.
Cursed as I am, no one would dare to speak to me.
In Argos, then? It's Argos I am banished from.
Then must I try some other city? – and meet the glance
Of timid ill-will, a marked man, the prisoner
Of barbed allusions – 'Is not that the son of Zeus
Who killed his wife and children? He's not wanted here,
Among his fellows, change is a most bitter thing.
A man settled in ill luck feels no pain; to him
Enduring it is second nature.
Oh, I see
What fate waits for me. Earth herself will speak, and cry
'Don't touch me!' Sea will roar, 'Keep off!' and leaping
streams.
I see myself – Ixion, driven round endlessly,
Chained to his wheel. Oh, better far that Hellas, where
I have been great and happy, should not see me thus.
Why should I live? What profit is there in a life
So beggared, so polluted? Now let Zeus' wife,*

Ajax himself and his madness – all of these express death in image. Storm, murky waters, dirt, winter with its cold rain and icy wind – all these images of the physical world lie beneath the ethical concepts of the tragedy. Ajax' insanity is called 'a cold' by Tecmessa; in her words, sung in melos – and melos always contains the layer of most ancient images – 'Ajax lies dirty, ill with bad weather'. Of course in Sophocles we understand this image in the form of stormy misfortune from defamed honor, but the fact is that the figurative meaning of the concept sprang from the mythological image and is expressed in its terms. And this case is not unique. Ajax himself calls what has happened to him 'a wave of a bloody sea storm that circles, coming from all sides.' He has perished for his impudence of his audacity, for hubris; Agamemnon at the end of the tragedy speaks figuratively of Ajax where he cites the parable of the impudent sailor seafarer who forces the sailors to sail in a winter storm and who perishes from a foul weather illness (both terms for 'cold' are untranslatable in their meanings that are sometimes liberal, sometimes figural). Thus the whole story of Ajax and his insanity is an impudent (in respect to the gods) sailing in a boat against the current in a storm, in the severe cold of winter. Here is the 'dirty winter' that Tecmessa uses to designate Ajax' illness." (Freidenberg 1997: 149).

*Glorious Hera, shake Olympus with her shoe,
Dancing for joy! She has achieved her heart's desire,
Toppling to earth, pedestal and all, the foremost man
Of Hellas. Who could pray to such a god? For spite
Towards Zeus, for jealousy of a woman's bed, she hurls
To ruin his country's saviour, innocent of wrong!*⁴⁶

As opposed to his depiction as an indifferent father in some other tragedies such as Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*,⁴⁷ the Heracles in Euripides' tragedy is a loving and responsible parent who suffers the worst fate of a father: he becomes the murderer of his own children. Starting from this act, Euripides lucidly tells the story of the famous hero, whose life's central point is the ethical question of undue suffering.⁴⁸ After he realizes he has committed a terrible crime, the tragic hero is faced with a dilemma: either live the rest of his life filled with unbearable emotional pain and shame,⁴⁹ or commit suicide and put an end to the suffering. Heracles is cast in Greek myths and cults as having not only his own character but also an elaborate and motivated psychology.⁵⁰ He represents the universal best friend, the divine figure with whom the Greeks associated the advanced human capacity to love those who are non-kin.⁵¹ In Euripides' tragedy, this principle is particularly emphasized through Heracles' relationship with other humans, and this friendship alone can offer some protection against the vindictiveness of the gods.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 1279–1310: Ἡρακλῆς: ἄκουε δὴ νυν, ὡς ἀμιλληθῶ λόγοις πρὸς νουθετήσεις σάς: ἀναπτύξω δέ σοι ἀβίωτον ἡμῖν νῦν τε καὶ πάροιθεν ὄν. πρῶτον μὲν ἐκ τοῦδ' ἐγενόμην, ὅστις κτανὼν μητρὸς γεραίων πατέρα προστρόπαιος ὦν ἐγίμην τὴν τεκοῦσαν Ἀλκμήνην ἐμέ. ὅταν δὲ κρητὶς μὴ καταβληθῆ γένους ὀρθῶς, ἀνάγκη δυστυχεῖν τοὺς ἐκγόνους. Ζεὺς δ' — ὅστις ὁ Ζεὺς — πολέμιόν μ' ἐγείνατο Ἥρα — σὺ μέντοι μηδὲν ἀχθεσθῆς, γέρον: πατέρα γὰρ ἀντὶ Ζηνὸς ἠγοῦμαι σὲ ἐγώ: ἔτ' ἐν γάλακτί τ' ὄντι γοργωτοὺς ὄφεις ἐπεισέφηρσε σπαργάνοισι τοῖς ἐμοῖς ἢ τοῦ Διὸς σύλλεκτρος, ὡς ὀλοίμεθα. ἐπεὶ δὲ σαρκὸς περιβόλαι' ἐκτησάμην ἠβῶντα, μόχθους οὖς ἔτλην τὶ δέει λέγειν; ποίους ποτ' ἢ λέοντας ἢ τρισωμάτων Τυφῶνας ἢ Γίγαντας ἢ τετρασκελῆ κενταυροπληθῆ πόλεμον οὐκ ἐξήνυσα; τὴν τ' ἀμφίκρανον καὶ παλιμβλαστὴ κῦνα ὕδραν φονεύσας μυρίων τ' ἄλλων πόνων διήλθον ἀγέλας κὰς νεκροὺς ἀφικόμην, Ἄιδου πυλωρὸν κῦνα τρίκρανον ἐς φάος ὅπως πορεύεσμαι' ἐντολαῖς Εὐρυσθέως. τὸν λῴσθιον δὲ τόνδ' ἔτλην τάλας πόνον, παιδοκτονήσας δῶμα θριγκῶσαι κακοῖς. ἦκω δ' ἀνάγκης ἐς τὸδ': οὐτ' ἐμαῖς φίλαις Θήβαις ἐνοικεῖν ὅσιον: ἦν δὲ καὶ μένω, ἐς ποῖον ἱερὸν ἢ πανηγυριν φίλων εἶμι; σὺ γὰρ ἄτας εὐπροσηγόρους ἔχω. ἀλλ' Ἄργος ἔλθω; πῶς, ἐπεὶ φεύγω πάτραν; φέρ' ἀλλ' ἐς ἄλλην δὴ τιν' ὀρμήσω πόλιν; κἄπειθ' ὑποβλεπόμεθ' ὡς ἐγνωσμένοι, γλώσσης πικροῖς κέντροισι κληδουχούμενοι: Οὐχ οὗτος ὁ Διός, ὃς τέκν' ἔκτεινέν ποτε δάμαρτά τ'; οὐ γῆς τῆσδ' ἀποφθαρήσεται; κεκλημένῳ δὲ φωτὶ μακαρίῳ ποτὲ αἰ μεταβολαὶ λυπηρόν: ᾧ δ' αἰεὶ κακῶς ἔστ', οὐδὲν ἀλγεῖ συγγενῶς δύστηνος ὢν. ἐς τοῦτο δ' ἤξιν συμφορᾶς οἶμαι ποτε: φωνὴν γὰρ ἦσει χθὼν ἀπεννέπουσά με μὴ θιγγάνειν γῆς καὶ θάλασσα μὴ περᾶν πηγαί τε ποταμῶν, καὶ τὸν ἀρματήλατον Ἰξίον' ἐν δεσμοῖσιν ἐκμιμήσομαι. καὶ ταῦτ' ἄριστα μηδὲν' Ἑλλήνων μ' ὄραν, ἐν οἷσιν εὐτυχοῦντες ἤμεν ὄλβιοι. τί δητὰ με ζῆν δεῖ; τί κέρδος ἔξομεν βίον γ' ἀχρεῖον ἀνόσιον κεκτημένοι; χορευέτω δὴ Ζηνὸς ἢ κλεινὴ δάμαρ † κρόουσ' Ὀλυμπίου † Ζηνὸς ἀρβύλη πόδα. ἔπραξε γὰρ βούλησιν ἦν ἐβούλετο, ἄνδρ' Ἑλλάδος τὸν πρῶτον αὐτοῖσιν βάθροισιν ἄνω κάτω στρέψασα. — τοιαύτη θεῶ τῖς ἂν προσεύχοιθ'; ἢ γυναικὸς οὐνεκα. λέκτρων φθονοῦσα Ζηνὶ τοὺς εὐεργέτας Ἑλλάδος ἀπῶλεσ' οὐδὲν ὄντας αἰτίους.

⁴⁷ In *The Women of Trachis*, Heracles threatens to wait for his son Hyllus, even in the underworld, with wrath and a curse unless he puts him out of his misery and burns him alive on the pyre. Cf. Soph. *Trach.* 1232–1240.

⁴⁸ Hall 2010: 265.

⁴⁹ Eur. *Her.* 1295: ἐς τοῦτο δ' ἤξιν συμφορᾶς οἶμαι ποτε: φωνὴν γὰρ ἦσει χθὼν ἀπεννέπουσά με μὴ θιγγάνειν γῆς καὶ θάλασσα μὴ περᾶν πηγαί τε ποταμῶν, καὶ τὸν ἀρματήλατον Ἰξίον' ἐν δεσμοῖσιν ἐκμιμήσομαι.

⁵⁰ On Heracles' cult and place in the Greek mythology, see Burkert 1979.

⁵¹ Hall 2010: 267.

The main characteristic of Euripides' entire oeuvre is indeed his anthropodicy. Heracles chooses Amphitryon, a profoundly tragic figure, as his true father⁵² rather than Zeus, and Theseus rushes to his assistance at the most difficult time.⁵³ As Philip Vellacott writes:

The world presented here is the familiar world where neither birth nor wealth, piety nor courage nor innocence, gives any guarantee against the power of wickedness or the malevolence of chance. What the spirit of man can aim at achieving is a dignity which remains when the gods have withdrawn or joined the side of evil, a serene despair which knows that the world contains no higher hope than the human spirit can find within itself. And in *Heracles* a further encouragement is given: the firmness of human friendship as the one resource available in the depth of suffering.

And also:

In this play Amphitryon in particular illustrates what must have been the progress of many religiously-minded Athenians, from belief in divine goodness and a rather smug confidence in divine favour, to a conviction that the whole concept of moral goodness begins, operates, and ends in man alone.⁵⁴

Due to this idea, of all the surviving Greek tragedies, only *Heracles* deserves the epithet 'humanist' in the truest sense of the word.⁵⁵ Even though it is a play that provides a mythical explanation for a traditional hero's place in the Athenian cult, *Heracles* truly calls traditional religion into question and replaces it with more human-centered ethics.⁵⁶ Euripides' contemporaries could have associated such ideas with Protagoras, and later ancient tradition believed that it was in Euripides' home where the philosopher read out his famous treatise on the gods, beginning with the sentence: 'Man is the measure of all things.'⁵⁷

After a long debate, Heracles, once a powerful and victorious hero, now defeated and broken, decides to accept Theseus' counsel and support and thus, once again, becomes a rescuer, this time of his own life.⁵⁸ Heracles dismisses suicide and opts for a life full of compromises and limitations, as recommended by Theseus. He says that he has become 'a wrecked ship taken in tow'⁵⁹. But Heracles is no wrecked ship. He is a child of his author and

⁵² Eur. *Her.* 1260–1265: πρῶτον μὲν ἐκ τοῦδ' ἐγενόμην, ὅστις κτανὼν μητρὸς γεραίων πατέρα προστρόπαιος ὦν ἔγηνε τὴν τεκοῦσαν Ἀλκμήνην ἐμέ. ὅταν δὲ κρηπίς μὴ καταβληθῆ γένους ὀρθῶς, ἀνάγκη δυστυχεῖν τοὺς ἐκγόνους. Ζεὺς δ' — ὅστις ὁ Ζεὺς — πολέμιόν μ' ἐγείνατο Ἥρα — σὺ μέντοι μηδὲν ἀχθεσθῆς, γέρον: πατέρα γὰρ ἀντὶ Ζηνὸς ἠγοῦμαι σὲ ἐγώ: ἔτ' ἐν γάλακτι τ' ὄντι γοργωποὺς ὄφεις ἐπεισέφηρε σπαργάνοισι τοῖς ἐμοῖς ἢ τοῦ Διὸς σύλλεκτρος, ὡς ὀλοίμεθα.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 1170: ἦκω σὺν ἄλλοις, οἱ παρ' Ἀσωποῦ ῥοὰς μένουσιν, ἐνοπλοὶ γῆς Ἀθηναίων κόροισι, σὺ παιδί, πρέσβυ, σύμμαχον φέρων δόρυ...

⁵⁴ Euripides, *Medea and Other Plays (Hecabe, Electra, Heracles)*, Translation with an Introduction by Vellacott 1971: 14–15. Cf. Hall 2010: 267.

⁵⁵ Hall 2010: 267.

⁵⁶ Hall 2010: 267. The terrible consequences of the Peloponnesian War, and especially the Athens plague, for the spirit of the Athenians and their attitude to religion and traditional cults are also evident in the Greek dramas. More on Euripides' tragedies and religion and the so-called 'Euripides' atheism', see Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 291–294. Cf. Mikalson 1991: 29–69, 144–147, 225–236.

⁵⁷ Diog. Laert. *Vit. Phil.* 9. 8. 5.

⁵⁸ Yoshitake 1994: 135–153.

⁵⁹ Eur. *Her.* 1424: εἰς Ἀθήνας πέμψομαι Θηβῶν ἄπο. ἀλλ' ἐσκόμιζε τέκνα δυσκόμιστα γῆ: ἡμεῖς δ' ἀναλώσαντες αἰσχύνεις δόμον, Θηραεὶ πανώλεις ἐνψόμεσθ' ἐφορκίδες. ὅστις δὲ πλοῦτον ἢ σθένος μάλλον φίλων ἀγαθῶν

his times. In *Heracles*, Euripides forces his hero (who denies that gods can be vindictive and calls myths mere poetic fiction) and his audience to leave heroic myths behind and step into the more exalting world of adults, which is admittedly full of disappointments, but is also a world of moral responsibility, integrity, and reliability.⁶⁰ In this world man must find support in his fellow humans, who are not necessarily his kin but are of a kindred spirit and mind.

3. Conclusion

Ancient philosophers made a clear distinction between honorable and dishonorable suicide with regard to motives and circumstances. The question of honor seems to be the main issue for Athenians and also a common denominator of various discussions on the subject. Despite religious and social sanctions, suicide was very often an individual's response to social pressures, and it was usually done out of a desire to defend one's honor, out of fear of embarrassment, or for the common good of the community and other interest groups. Unlike the philosophers, Greek tragedy directs attention not toward the act of self-destruction itself, but instead toward the inner world of those who choose suicide and their thoughts and state of mind, thereby giving Athenian audiences a taste of their agony.

Written in two different epochs, the plays of Euripides and Sophocles depict the character and spirit of two different personalities, Heracles and Ajax, who, when faced with severe life blows and personal emotional suffering, take opposing views on life. *Heracles*, written at the time of crippling Athenian defeats during the Peloponnesian War, is a tragedy of survival. Hence the main character takes a contemplative approach toward suffering: he thinks it through and comes to his senses. He accepts himself and he accepts life as it is. Ajax is a child of a different era, of heroic and chivalrous times, and his author was enamored of Pan-Hellenism, which celebrated heroic victories and believed in a just order. Ajax has no true friend, no one who would support him and dissuade him from his suicidal thoughts. Teucro, his half-brother, is absent and, besides, has a weak character. Tecmessa, however loyal, is still a former slave and his unlawful wife, and the way he speaks to her reveals how little psychological intimacy they share. The Salaminian sailors stand by their captain but are still his subordinates. Perhaps no friend would have been of any value to him, as Sophocles' Ajax is too vain and obstinate. He is indeed the loneliest figure in Greek tragedy, and therefore it is not surprising that he is the only man to kill himself on stage. For Euripides, as well as for his *Heracles*, everything is shaken and much of it is destroyed. Amid the despair and hopelessness of the Peloponnesian War, he only has his own self and his heroes. Just a crumb of glory. Thus, his *Heracles* has Theseus, a friend of the kind that Ajax does not: a matching hero, whose support is both moral and material,⁶¹ and whose

πεπᾶσθαι βούλεται, κακῶς φρονεῖ.

⁶⁰ Hall 2010: 268.

⁶¹ Theseus says (1322–1339, translated by Vellacott): 'Well, then: obey the law, leave Thebes; and come with me / To Pallas' fortress, Athens. There I'll purify / Your hands from blood, provide you money and a house, / And give you those possessions which my citizens / Gave me when I had killed the Minotaur, and saved / Their fourteen children. Plots of land assigned to me / Throughout my country henceforth shall be yours, and while / You live shall bear you name. When you depart to death / The State of Athens shall revere your memory / With solemn sacrifice and monuments of stone. / Our citizens count it their pride to have a name / Among

advice Heracles, although at first he disputes and objects to it, eventually accepts. And he accepts it profoundly, as he accepts his own self the way he is. It is very difficult, but one can live with one's own self.

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the Hellenes for help given to a brave man. / You saved my life. Now you need friends; then I will show / My gratitude. When the gods honour us, we have no need / Of friends. Divine help is enough – when it is given.'
And then, in a dialogue, after Theseus had already convinced Heracles (1394–1402):
'THESEUS: My suffering friend, stand up now: you have wept enough.
HERACLES: I cannot; I am rooted here.
THESEUS: Yes, even the strong / Are crippled by misfortune.
HERACLES: Could I but stay here / Changed to a rock that feels no sorrow!
THESEUS: Say no more. / Give me your hand; I'll hold you.
HERACLES: No! Take care; my touch / On your clothes means pollution.
THESEUS: Then wipe off on me / All your uncleanness, all; I do not shrink from it.
HERACLES: I have no sons now; but I take you for my son.
THESEUS: Put your arm round my neck; lean on me as you go.'

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**ДРЕВНИ ГРЦИ И САМОУБИСТВО У ТРАГЕДИЈАМА:
СОФОКЛОВ АЈАНТ И ЕУРИПИДОВ ХЕРАКЛЕ**

Резиме

Самоубиство, упркос томе што је санкционисано и религијским и друштвеним мерама, често је било одговор древних Грка на притиске у оквиру заједнице, било да је реч о одбрани части, страху од срама или о жртви за опште добро полиса или неке интересне групе. Античка драма, за разлику од филозофа, преносила је центар занимања са самог чина на унутрашњи свет самоубице, на стање духа и на сплет мисли, допуштајући Атињанима да на непосредан начин проживе њихову агонију. Еурипид и Софокле су у својим трагедијама, насталим у две различите епохе, приказали карактер и дух две различите личности, Херакла и Ајанта. Они, суочени са тешким ударцима и емотивним страдањем, заузимају супротне ставове према животу. Ајант је чедо херојског и витешког доба када је Атина била на врхунцу моћи, а његов творац живео је у полету свехеленства, славио херојске победе, веровао у праведни поредак. За разлику од Херакла, Ајант нема правог пријатеља, особу која би га подржала и од самоубилачког наума одвратила. Теукро, његов полубрат није присутан, а и слабији је карактер; Текмеса, колико год била одана, бивша је робиња, а начин на који Ајант са њом разговара открива колико мало психолошке блискости они деле; морнари, Саламињани, свом душом су уз заповедника, али су му ипак подређени. Најзад, да такав пријатељ и постоји, мало би могао да утиче на Ајанта, јер је он проблематична личност, горд, сујетан, тврдоглав и бескомпромисан. Ајант је уистину најусамљенија личност грчке трагедије, те отуда можда и није изненађење да је његово самоубиство једино које је приказано на сцени. Еурипиду, као и његовом Хераклу, све је пометено и доведено у питање. У очају и безнађу Пелопонеског рата, „најтрагичнији” има само себе и своје јунаке. Тек мрвицу славе. Зато његов Херакле има Тезеја, пријатеља каквог Ајант нема. Себи равног јунака који даје моралну подршку и материјалну потпору. Његову реч и савет, иако их прво оспорава, очајава и јогуни се, Херакле на крају прихвата. Прихвата дубински јер је успео да прихвати себе таквог какав је. Много је тешко, али може се са собом.

Кључне речи: самоубиство, Ајант, Херакле, Софокле, Еурипид, самоћа, Пелопонески рат, самодовољност, пријатељство, Тезеј.

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