

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of Dr. Philip Davies and Dr. Jan Haywood.

**Title:** Noble Birth in Sophocles' Plays

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**Abstract:** This dissertation studies the theme of good breeding in five of Sophocles' extant plays, as well as incorporating a discussion of the relevant fragments. The theme is contextualised against its literary-philosophical as well as political background to better understand Sophocles' unique stance and his motive for engaging so thoroughly with the theme. The thesis is that Sophocles, with certain qualifications, believes that excellence could be transmitted by heredity, and because the Greek conception of excellence always has a strong socio-political element, the implication in the plays is that those of good breeding, who had been marginalised by the democracy but were capable of providing much benefit, need to be reintegrated into Athenian political society.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Outline of topic

The topic under investigation is that of good breeding in Sophocles. The idea of good breeding is that one or more good parents produce good children. In other words, the child's goodness is owed to the goodness of their parents. The Greek word for good is *agathos*, which is a cognate of the abstract noun *aretē*.<sup>1</sup> Good is a relative term and so what does it refer to? As much as good could refer to mental capability, health, vigour, physical appearance etc., in Sophocles it is primarily moral in quality, that is to say, that character is the thing referred to and emphasised.<sup>2</sup>

Although Aristotle stated that the central concern of drama is action, choices of how to act are shaped by character.<sup>3</sup> What lies behind character and where does it come from? For Sophocles, a person's true character is identifiable with their *phusis* ('nature').<sup>4</sup> And this *phusis* is not considered the product of chance but inherited from one's forbears.<sup>5</sup> With respect to Sophocles' dramatic characters, their inherited *phusis* functions as a form of moral conscience promoting and forbidding noble and ignoble behaviour respectively. The characters' awareness of being descendants of illustrious ancestors informs their conception of themselves. Their choice of action is calibrated with reference to the standards of their forebears. They are weighed down by a form of *noblesse oblige*, not of the kind generated by a sense of material privilege and the need to repay it but one born of an impulse to live up to the example of their ancestors and not shame their family name.

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<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of the signification of these important words, see the relevant section of chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> Stewart (2019) 241: 'The part of nature (φύσις) that matters most in Greek tragedy consists of moral qualities. The heroes of tragedy are those who are inherently good men and women.'

<sup>3</sup> *Poetics* 1450a.

<sup>4</sup> Halliwell (2017) 46 is right to highlight the ambivalence in the Greek conception of character, with a tension between *phusis* (intrinsic nature) and *ēthos* (character acquired through habits). As much as *phusis* is a latent potential requiring realisation, it is nevertheless the focus of Sophocles' characterisation, since *phusis*, as the intrinsic essence, is what someone should be, even though forces of nurture might threaten to pervert it.

<sup>5</sup> Stewart (2019) 237: 'Nature [φύσις] refers to the belief that the behaviour of individuals can be determined by inherent character traits that are passed down through families. Though education might play a greater or lesser role in the transference of these characteristics, the Greeks also believed that they were inherited through the bloodline.' Admittedly not all Greeks thought this the case, but it was a widely-held belief. The claim of Virtue, in Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles*, to know the child's nature (*phusis*) as a result of knowing his parents is indicative of this traditional outlook (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.21-22). Moreover, it is not by accident that one of the words for parents (*oi phusantes*) in Greek is related to nature (*phusis*). See chapter 2 for an etymological study of φύσις.

Although possession of a good *phusis* is the privilege of those born from good parents (Sophocles' plays do not depict heroic characters from humble backgrounds), Sophocles does not seem to subscribe to complete biological determinism (and neither do other contemporary figures), a concept which would imply that for the creation of an aristocrat<sup>1</sup> in the true sense of the word, i.e. a person combining both high birth and character, it is sufficient for two good parents to reproduce. In the plays it will be shown that the importance of nurture for the formation of character is acknowledged. A good *phusis* is equivalent to a high-quality seed but for it to fully flourish it needs conditions conducive for its growth.<sup>2</sup>

However, nurture cannot be easily severed from nature: the fact that one will be brought up and educated by a father inculcating noble precepts and ideals is because one is *born* from a father of quality. In this way a child could be seen as receiving an upbringing befitting their nature. Sophocles goes even further in some plays and suggests that a child from good lineage often receives, even in the case of an absence of the biological father, elite mentorship by virtue of his ancestry. For example, Philoctetes takes Neoptolemus under his wing almost on the basis alone of the latter being the son of Achilles. Equally, Orestes has as the substitute father-figure the Phocian prince, Pylades. In this way, Sophocles, instead of seeing the two concepts of nature and nurture as antithetical or mutually exclusive, rather, sees an interconnection, *voire*, an intertwinement. The nurture a child receives is not arbitrary but determined in many ways by their family background.

Another way in which Sophocles' view deviates from biological determinism is in the awareness that the transmission of *aretē* from parents to children is not fail-safe. Sophocles depicts characters, such as Ismene and Chrysothemis, who could be considered to fail to live up to their ancestry. In this way, although children are on the whole bred true to type there are exceptions. Moreover, sometimes an effort is made to understand pseudo-nobility in terms of ancestral failings. If someone's nobility is only one of rank or social status and not one of character, such as Agamemnon in the *Ajax*, explanation seems to be proffered in the suggestion that the ancestry is also pseudo-noble. It is great deeds and moral courage which make one's lineage truly distinguished rather than mere social distinction.

### Why does Sophocles place such emphasis on good birth?

Sophocles' emphasis on good breeding throughout his extant plays can be seen as an engagement with the antithesis *phusis-nomos*, widely popular in the fifth-

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<sup>1</sup> This sense in which we use this ambiguous word is defined on page 11 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Halliwell (1990) 32: 'This "nature" is itself a dynamic potential, requiring to be tended and brought to fruition, like Pindar's "vine-plant of *aretē*" (*Nem.* 8.40) through careful process of nature and education.'

century, and applied to many issues, including the social issue of good birth.<sup>1</sup> There was debate around noble birth as to whether it was a biological reality or a mere social creation: does noble birth exist by nature independently of societal recognition or is it a hollow entity reducible to its social manifestations of status, wealth and lifestyle etc.?<sup>2</sup> Sophocles' plays can be seen to be designed in such a way as, among other things, to demonstrate that noble birth is by nature inasmuch as the Sophoclean hero is typically presented as a social outcast deprived of the wealth and influence usually accompanying good breeding, yet they continue to live true to their aristocratic conception of themselves, and therefore the thesis, namely, nobility is not dependent on social factors, finds itself dramatised. That is to say, in the darkness of poverty, social ignominy or even the social vacuum of a deserted island the light of nobility still shines forth. Its radiance is distinct from the glitter and glamour of high-society lifestyle.<sup>3</sup>

This debate would have struck Sophocles in some ways as surprising. The Greek concept of *eugeneia*, which is based on the premise that one's nature (*phusis*) is good because it has been inherited from good parents, particularly the father, and by extension one's ancestors, is rooted in the principle of *nature* and therefore it could seem absurd to ask whether good breeding is by nature or by custom.

The theme of good birth seems related to Sophocles' promotion of the worth of the individual. His plays sympathetically portray a lonely figure mistreated by society. Although having his plays performed in the democracy of Athens where the principle of collectivism would naturally be valued, Sophocles appears to assert the importance of great individuals, not as enemies of society but as disregarded and undervalued potential benefactors. We know that in the democracy there was tension between the collective and the individual from the policy of ostracism, and the speech of Callicles (Plato, *Gorgias* 481b-792c) is perhaps the most emblematic philosophico-literary expression of the tension.<sup>4</sup> In Sophocles, the prerequisite for a sense of individual worth appears to be connected with good breeding.

Sophocles' protagonists have an unshakeable faith in their own individual nature, their sense of self, which they are aware they owe to their forebears. Knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> This will be explored in more depth in the *Philoctetes* chapter.

<sup>2</sup> The details of this debate will be fleshed out in the Euripides chapter (chapter 5).

<sup>3</sup> What Christ said about the treasures stored in heaven could be applied to Sophocles' innate treasures relating to character: 'But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal' (Matthew 6: 20). Sophocles similarly subscribes to the inalienability of noble character.

<sup>4</sup> The treatise by Anonymus Iamblichi (DK 89) seems to be an answer to Callicles' powerful speech, or at least whichever earlier sophistic text Plato's literary creation is based on. Also, the extant fragments of Antiphon's treatise *On Truth* (DK 87), although investigating the dichotomy *phusis-nomos*, can equally be read as disserting on the individual being constrained by the collective.

their illustrious lineage means that they have certain expectations as to how society should treat them and under the pressure of oppression they do not fall into negative thought processes, such as victim mentality or inferiority complex, which might make them believe that they deserve their maltreatment. They have a sense of their own dignity knowing that just as their ancestors were somebodies so are they.<sup>1</sup>

From a metaphysical perspective it seems that Sophocles has a preoccupation with the concept of time and is troubled by the inevitable destruction and degradation of almost all things over an extended period of time.<sup>2</sup> This cosmic ephemerality and fragility seems to provoke a feeling of nihilism, anguish and depression. But unlike Ludwig Boltzmann, who, with his law of entropy predicting the heat death of the universe, committed suicide overwhelmed by this inevitable nihilism, Sophocles seems to find a sense of permanence in great individuals of good breeding. In them are displayed two elements of permanence: one of character and one of lineage. In terms of character, figures like Ajax or Antigone who remain immutably fixed to their principles display a durability greater than that of iron.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, knowledge that this moral character is transmitted from generation to generation means that there is a linear permanence piercing the cyclical process of life and death.

From a literary point of view, tragedy by its very nature and literary conventions cannot but be connected in some way with good breeding. The raw material of tragedy is heroic myth which consists of individuals belonging to royal families. Indeed, tragedy, following the practice of epic, according to Aristotle at least, depicts an idealised version of people, that is to say, people better than what they are.<sup>4</sup> Sophocles as the consummate artist is fully aware of these principles and has seemingly run with the natural properties of the literary genre, cutting along the grain, as it were, to make his protagonists the embodiments of fine breeding, lofty ideals and heroic behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> A rapprochement between this distinctive characteristic of Sophocles' heroes could be made with Aristotle's definition of *megalopsuchia*, which the philosopher defines, at a fundamental level, as connected with the claim to and reward of great honours (*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.3).

<sup>2</sup> *Ajax* 646-92; *Oedipus at Colonus* 607-20.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, fragment 201e from Sophocles' *Eriphyle* says that 'the hearts of noble men do not go soft' (ἀνδρῶν γὰρ ἐσθλῶν στέρνον οὐ μαλάσσεται), so even in his fragments we find this idea of stubborn, granite-like nature connected with nobility. Conversely, there is the well-known passage in the *Antigone* describing how the brittle tree snaps, but the supple one survives the torrent (*Antigone* 710 ff.). This goes potentially against the current of my suggestion. However, it must be remembered that, in this instance, Haimon is commenting on Creon's fallible stubbornness. If the obduracy is founded on the bedrock of a well-laid principle, such as divine law, it is surely different.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1454b.



Aristotle says that crime/injustice which happens between family members is more moving than people unrelated by blood, for example, fratricide is more horrifying than homicide.<sup>1</sup> The structure within which heredity takes place is the family, and so the two are intimately related. Family relations, such as that of the mother-child and father-child as well as other issues such as incest, adoption, patricide/matricide are all dramatised in Sophocles' plays often in relation to the theme of noble birth. The dysfunctionality of a normal family is tragic, but the dysfunctionality of a royal family is even more tragic. Edmund Stewart has also highlighted the three major ways the theme of noble birth could be exploited by playwrights:

Debates on the essence of nature and its identification form the crux of many tragedies, especially those where the noble hero is suffering from unexpected exile or poverty; where his identity (and therefore lineage) is unknown; or where the mettle of a youthful protagonist is still to be tried.<sup>2</sup>

### Relevant scholarship

Although the prominence of this theme in Sophocles is such that commentaries and secondary literature cannot fail to mention it, there has been almost no sustained investigation of the theme. This lacuna, and indeed it is because the subject is worthy of more than just cursory treatment, is surprising, given the concentration and placement, often at pregnant moments, of terminology relating to noble birth in Sophocles' plays. Commentators, on the whole, have been more sensitive to the topic, partly because they are unavoidably working closely with the Greek text. One wonders whether some of the scholars specialising in literary criticism have failed to notice the prominence of the theme due to use of translations. In translations, the theme is still noticeable but not as patently.

Elftmann's PhD dissertation *Nobility of Birth in Sophoclean Drama* is the only monograph that has been written on this subject.<sup>3</sup> The author studies the topic from a historical, linguistic and literary angle; but these approaches are rarely intertwined. His thesis is that in several of the plays there is a dramatic exploration of how a character, confronted by a difficult situation, calibrates his reaction in function of the dictates of his noble birth, with the result that the notion of a 'freestanding individual' is to be considered foreign to the Sophoclean hero, whose essence must be realised through imitation and emulation of his forebears. And in the sustained dramatic treatment of the theme of nobility of birth Sophocles is unique among the tragedians. In his conclusion, he stresses that Sophocles conceives of nobility as something that is 'earned, not merely inherited' while also

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<sup>1</sup> *Poetics* 1453b.

<sup>2</sup> Stewart (2019) 237.

<sup>3</sup> Elftmann (1973) *Nobility of Birth in Sophoclean Drama*. PhD Diss., University of Pennsylvania.

conferring more responsibility than privilege.<sup>1</sup> I believe this point is on the mark and was one of the means by which Sophocles made depiction of noble breeding more palatable to the largely democratically-minded audience.

There exists another American dissertation titled *Sophocles and Aretê* in which the author, Moore, demonstrates convincingly that 'within the lifetime of Sophocles the Greek world saw the great change from the aristocratic ideals of Homer and Pindar, to the scientific, practical standards of the Sophistic enlightenment'.<sup>2</sup> One of his principal contentions is that, as a consequence of the mechanistic and material psychology of the Sophists,<sup>3</sup> it became fashionable in the fifth century to ask, "What would any man do if placed under these circumstances?", and this normative analysis of 'normal' behaviour precluded the possibility of the exceptional behaviour of a noble individual. Where Euripides, whose mind was particularly receptive to the teachings of the Sophists, portrayed characters as victims of circumstances and psychological impulses beyond their control, Sophocles, according to Moore, reasserted the 'dignity and integrity of a noble personality' whose 'inner core of selfhood' makes them not only impervious to the vicissitudes of fortune but also masters of their own powerful emotions.<sup>4</sup>

Webster in his *Introduction to Sophocles* dedicates a large proportion of his book to exploring Sophocles' connections with the social elite of his time as well as to exhibiting the importance of noble birth in the plays.<sup>5</sup> Webster's emphasis on the aristocratic bent of Sophocles' thought appears correct. However, the critic misses the mark somewhat in his elucidation of what the aristocratic ideal entailed for the poet. For example, based on the belief that *sophrosunê* was an important part of the aristocratic ideal, Webster assumes that this 'virtue' must have been cherished by Sophocles. However, an inconsistency arises, and is even admitted by the critic, from the fact that Sophocles' 'aristocratic' heroes are noticeably deficient in this regard. Overall, Webster's book provides an admirable amount of supportive information for his conviction that Sophocles was 'like one of the Athenian nobles', however there is a general lack of penetrative analysis.

Rose in addition to his chapter on the individual play, *Philoctetes*, in his *Sons of The Gods and Children of Earth* emphasises in his chapter 'Sophocles and Class' that 'Sophocles displays throughout his plays a profound ideological commitment – and

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<sup>1</sup> Elftmann (1973) 286.

<sup>2</sup> Moore (1938) 11.

<sup>3</sup> An approach which they borrowed from the Ionian physicists but directed towards the investigation of man rather than the cosmos.

<sup>4</sup> Moore (1938) 59.

<sup>5</sup> The critic is convinced of the aptness of Ion of Chios' description of Sophocles: 'In state business he was neither clever nor energetic, but like one of the Athenian nobles'.

a consequent agenda – to the idea that, however justified many elements in the critique of *eugeneia* by his rival tragedians are, his society should recognize precisely the natural superiority of these elements to all alternatives.<sup>1</sup> This does seem like a fair conclusion to draw from the evidence of the extant plays, where almost all of them feature a protagonist of high birth capable of inspiring admiration.

It is peculiar that the salience of noble birth in Sophocles' portrayal of his heroes is often admitted by other critics, and yet the theme receives perfunctory treatment, incommensurate with its accepted importance. For example, Kirkwood, when discussing the fundamental motivation behind the hero's determined endurance in the face of suffering, recognises that 'the habitual way of expressing this kind of devotion to an ideal is in terms of "nobility", the character of the εὐγενής.'<sup>2</sup> He reviews briefly how Sophocles extends the primary meaning of the word, signifying 'inherited rank', to emphasise the ethical side of the word, i.e. nobility of character, yet without ever severing it from the primary meaning. And he proffers as explanation of Sophocles' choice of this word its suggestion of a quality deep-rooted in nature.<sup>3</sup>

Winnington-Ingram concedes that Sophocles' heroes have a strong interest in hereditary excellence, the primacy of φύσις and the virtues of honour and courage.<sup>4</sup> However, he argues that these views do not necessitate a conservative attitude on the part of the poet, turning his gaze away from the fifth century to the heroic and aristocratic past. On the contrary, the values of the heroic ethos apparently 'survived tenaciously' into the fifth century, so, rather than attributing an aristocratic conservatism to Sophocles, we should recognise instead the intent of the poet to engage with contemporary issues, which had lost their class association. However, in my opinion, I do not believe the subject of heroism, even in the fifth century, and especially not in the plays of Sophocles, was ever severed from the notion of birth.

As can be seen, many scholars have highlighted the importance of the theme but other than Elftmann's unpublished dissertation there has been no monograph written on the topic. It is also noticeable that there has been a decreasing interest

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<sup>1</sup> Rose (2002) 267.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that Kirkwood ends his book reaffirming this idea highlights the critic's conviction of its significance: 'Sophocles sees man, not as ruined and sunk in despair by his suffering, but as fulfilling his nature as a εὐγενής ἀνὴρ by meeting with spiritual courage the challenge of his vulnerability.'

<sup>3</sup> Kirkwood (1958) 178: 'It is fitting that Sophocles, with his pervasive interest in character, should use as a key word to express the essence of heroism a word that suggests a quality lying deep in the nature of a hero's character.'

<sup>4</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1980).

in the topic among scholars. Most of the authors mentioned were writing almost half a century ago. In the last thirty years there has been very little added to this topic. One of the reasons for this might be found in the more general approach to Greek tragedy that became fashionable among a number of academics roughly thirty years ago. Broadly speaking, the approach consists in viewing the City Dionysia and the plays performed there as being designed to inculcate a democratic ideology in the citizenry. The three main doctrines of this approach are the following: (1) the social setting is democratic<sup>1</sup>; (2) the festival setting is structured along democratic lines<sup>2</sup>; (3) the plays promote and are characterised by democratic ideology.<sup>3</sup> If this view of the City Dionysia was correct, it would be reasonable for scholars to suppose that it was highly unlikely that a playwright would promote a theme with such strong aristocratic connotations as good breeding. However, there are two rebuttals to this hypothesis. The first tackles the premise of the hypothesis and is exemplified by pushback from scholars dissatisfied with this 'collectivist' approach. Strong arguments have been brought forward to counter the notion that the City Dionysia is reducible to a democracy propaganda event.<sup>4</sup> Griffin has been a strong ambassador of this challenge to the orthodoxy of the viewpoint that sought to reduce tragedy to a kind of political education programme:

Let us begin by casting a sceptical eye on the whole idea that the city of Athens could have had a consistent policy, at least of any complexity, in the commissioning of these plays. Our collectivists like to speak of 'the *polis*' commissioning the tragedies, as if there existed a permanent body to take such decisions, like the Arts Council in Britain, or more, perhaps, like the Ministry of Culture in the old Soviet Union. But in fact the choruses were allotted to the poets by one of the archons, a man chosen by lot, every year, from a body of men chosen by election.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This point is backed by the insistence on the Athenocentricity of tragedy, thus making it unique to Athenian democracy. See Stewart (2017) 238 for a full list of scholars subscribing to this view.

<sup>2</sup> For the suggestion that the pre-play ceremonials all embodied and promoted democratic ideology, see Goldhill (1990). For the notion that the constitution and comportment of the audience of Athenian tragedy is equivalent to the citizenry, see Goldhill (1997), Wilson (2011) 27, Burian (2011) 98.

<sup>3</sup> For the notion that the plays promote democracy obliquely through their freedom of speech where even democratic values are questioned see Goldhill (1990) and Burian (2011).

<sup>4</sup> For an argument against the supposed democratic structuring of the City Dionysia, see Rhodes (2003), Griffin (1998) 47. For the point that the audience in their passivity behave differently from the Athenian citizenry, see Heath (2011) 167. For the lack of democratic ideology in extant tragedies, see Griffin (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Griffin (1998) 54. The irony is that Griffin has just highlighted the *democratic* processes behind the selection of the judges.

The other refutation is related to the fact that whatever view one takes of the City Dionysia it is almost impossible to deny the strong presence of an aristocratic ideal in Sophocles. Even notable proponents of the 'collectivist view' of the City Dionysia, such as Goldhill, are troubled by Sophocles' plays which seem to challenge and question democratic values and he is forced to admit:

It is not difficult to see that the Sophoclean hero, with fierce demands for his or her individualism, his or her commitment to his or her own needs and demands in the face of society or social pressure, is scarcely a figure who could sit easily in democratic ideology, and it is indeed relevant that figures like Ajax and Antigone are set in conflict with figures who use standard arguments with a contemporary ideological slant.<sup>1</sup>

A democratic focus has not just been applied to tragedy but more broadly to Greek politics and society. Scholarly studies of aristocracy in ancient Greece are relatively few in number, certainly not proportionate with the subject's historical importance.<sup>2</sup> My thesis will therefore also help to address this scholarly shortcoming since the hallmark of an aristocrat, marking them out as distinct from the common mass, was their ancestry, i.e. being born into a family boasting a long line of distinguished ancestors, and therefore the research of this thesis will necessarily add to our understanding of the aristocratic aspect of Greek culture, especially because I contextualise the notion of good breeding found in Sophocles' plays with views expressed and held by other thinkers anterior and contemporary.

### Definition of key terms and theoretical framework

It is essential we define certain key terms. Investigating and writing about an ancient, foreign culture via the medium of the English language is naturally going to entail a certain element of, what I like to call, thought translation. Textual translation has its difficulties and deficiencies but one of the advantages is the lower risk of losing sight of the fact that a translation process is at work. However, when a conceptual analysis of a foreign culture is undertaken, there is the great risk of naively explaining Greek culture through the best-equivalent English terms even though the thing signified by the English term is not necessarily synonymous with the Greek phenomenon under analysis. A perfect example is the phenomenon of Greek democracy. Democracy is the best word we have for describing the political constitution of Athens in the late fifth century. However, our word, democracy, in its modern definition is used typically to describe a representative democracy where the only political agency the people have is electing a political party.

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<sup>1</sup> Goldhill (1990) 115.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Stein-Hölkeskamp (1989), Starr (1992), Fouchar (1997), Arnheim (1997), Donlan (1999) Duplouy (2006), Fernoux & Stein (eds) (2007), Capdetrey & Lafond (eds) (2010), Fisher & Van Wees (eds) (2015), Simonton (2017), Meister (2020), Simonton (2017).

Referenda, although a possibility, are rare. This word therefore, if understood in its usual sense, is not sufficient to capture the radical nature, from the point of view of today, of Greek democracy.

The terms particularly relevant to my thesis, which could lead to some conceptual and historical inaccuracies, are noble/nobility, aristocrat/aristocracy. Typically, when the English word nobility or aristocracy is used it conjures up the phenomenon of an elite social class possessing certain political privileges which are inherited and officialised through a title.<sup>1</sup> Although certain details of Athens' early history are unknown, it does not appear that there was ever such an institutionalised form of aristocracy.<sup>2</sup> van Wees has argued strongly against the utility of the concept of aristocracy, informed as it is by its medieval and modern European connotations, for understanding the Greek world, because the number of cases of hereditary privilege determined exclusively by birth is negligible. According to van Wees' understanding, 'the more one's status relies on the qualities of one's ancestors rather than one's own, the more "aristocratic" the value system.'<sup>3</sup> Van Wees seems essentially right with his stance that in the ancient Greek world, on the whole, the social hierarchy never became ossified to the point where social rank was conferred and enjoyed purely on the basis of descent, irrespective of personal merit. Hereditary titles, such as our duke and baron, were not known in the Greek world. Where I disagree with van Wees, however, is in his respective diminution of the role birth played in the social hierarchy. Van Wees insists that wealth, especially in the form of property, was the main dividing factor in the social structure, with the result that society was essentially fluid, a man of low birth with the right financial means could be part of the same status group as the wealthy well-born. Without doubt, the ancient sources, as we shall see with Theognis and Euripides, attest that money was responsible for a significant amount of social mobility. However, it is also quite clear they make a distinction between those who are prestigious in relation to both birth and money and those who boast only money. We know that even in classical Athens, a political figure such as Cleon was vilified by the comic poets for his supposed low birth in spite of his pertaining to the leisured class.<sup>4</sup> What is also particularly strange is that even after Solon had officially

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<sup>1</sup> Duplouy (2006) 11 is without doubt correct in making the general comment: 'La facilité avec laquelle nombre de chercheurs usent des mots, <<aristocratie>>, <<adel>>, <<oberschicht>>, <<upper class>> ou <<élite>> - sans même parler de <<noblesse>> -, tous termes connotés dans nos langues modernes par plus d'un millénaire d'histoire médiévale et moderne, a bien souvent déterminé a priori la conception des réalités historiques.'

<sup>2</sup> Ober (1989) 14: 'The problem is compounded by the Athenian refusal to grant formal political privileges to the elite.'

<sup>3</sup> Van Wees (2015) 20.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Aristophanes' *Knights* where Cleon and Agoracritus vie to be acknowledged as lowliest-born.

segmented the Athenian citizenry into economic classes, the concept of good birth continued to provoke so much discussion in the Attic theatre and legal courts.

In light of these points, it is not inappropriate to use the word aristocrat as long as we define in what sense it is used. It does appear that in Athens there was a certain population group who by their birth, wealth and education were distinguishable as social elites and therefore not part of the *dēmos*, when this word signifies the regular masses.<sup>1</sup> By the fifth century they had no official political privilege. However, it is likely that before Solon's reforms they had a monopolistic control of the archonship and Areopagus. These positions would have been filled by men of a certain family background, standing and perceived ability.<sup>2</sup> One hypothesis is that only Eupatrids had access to these political roles.<sup>3</sup> There is much debate about what exactly is meant by Eupatrids. However, the word in its most basic meaning signifies 'those born of noble fathers', and so Eupatrids were members of prestigious families.<sup>4</sup> What do I mean by prestigious families? The natural way that aristocratic families form is the following: if a person distinguishes themselves in a certain capacity for the collective good, then the descendants of that distinguished person are, because of the assumption of hereditary excellence, treated in a privileged manner.<sup>5</sup> So the Eupatrids would be the descendants of citizens who had achieved some social renown in the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle (*Pol.* 1291b14-30) remarks that the citizenry of a *polis* can be divided into the mass of normal citizens and the elite (*gnōrimoi*). The elite are differentiated by their wealth (*ploutos*), high birth (*eugeneia*), virtue (*aretē*) and cultural education (*paideia*).

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that seems to contradict the earlier statement that hereditary privilege exclusively by birth was relatively unknown in the Greek world. The evidence is very sparse, and we survey it in the next chapter. However, it seems likely that even with the Eupatrid group there would have been a certain fluidity. The Homer chapter will show a society where good birth is essentially a prerequisite of political privilege but not a guarantee of it.

<sup>3</sup> Ober (1989) 56 is quite helpful for reconstructing what defined an aristocrat and what political control they had: 'The ruling elite of the seventh century was defined by descent; its members may be characterised as aristocrats or nobles. They were (at least in later years) known collectively as the Eupatridai: those born from noble father [...] Every noble was certainly closely linked to members of other aristocratic *oikoi* through marriage connections and secondary degrees of kinship [...] Reasonable assumptions, however, are that the Eupatridai controlled the archon-selection process and that Eupatrid leaders foregathered from time to time, either formally or informally, as a council to advise the year's archons [...] It appears that the Eupatridai effectively dominated the major magistracies and hence that the government was largely or entirely controlled by the nobility.'

<sup>4</sup> This term is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

<sup>5</sup> This happened with the descendants of the tyrant-slayers in Athens. Mitchell (2013) 57 also believes that political rule was the reward for a recognition of excess *aretē*. Finley (1979) 63: 'At some point, remote or near in time, either conquest or wealth created the original separation. Then it froze, continued along hereditary lines, was given divine

But leaving aside the contentious issue of how exactly to define the term Eupatrids, when we are using the word 'aristocrat' in a political sense to refer to real people, whether as individuals or a collective group, we are designating primarily those distinct from the citizen mass in terms of birth. Not only were these individuals the descendants of illustrious ancestry but there was always the ideological assertion that they had inherited the excellence of their forebears. Coupled with this high birth were typically wealth and political influence, justified as the reward of their supposed natural superiority. But because of political instability, it could be the case that certain aristocrats did not actually have wealth and power. However, the expectation of power and wealth was always held by the aristocrats. As we can see, the situation is very complex comprising three elements: birth, character and social position, with multiple different combinations of these three basic elements possible. The plays of Sophocles are aware of these ambiguities and actually engage with the tension caused by the tripartite nature of the notion of aristocracy/nobility.

### Historico-political setting

There is a paradox in Greek tragedy, and maybe even more marked in Sophocles' plays, in that the political setting is democratic, and yet the story of the plays is dominated by royal households with particular emphasis made of the protagonist's aristocratic ancestry. The parameters of this discussion are slightly different from those set by the collectivists, as Griffin termed them,<sup>1</sup> who focus on the democratic features of the City Dionysia as festival. This brief discussion will focus on the broader context of Athens as a democratic city. One approach of addressing this problem is to question the assumption that the dominant ideology of Athens was egalitarian just because constitutionally it had shifted to a radical form of democracy. Yes, indeed, since Solon there had been an increasing movement to *isonomia* and *isēgoria*. Solon with his classification of the population into four classes based on wealth had moved the criteria for political office holding from birth onto economic means. And then Cleisthenes reorganised the grouping of the citizen population from four tribes, which were based on royal families, to ten tribes. The ten tribes were composed of three *trittues* (a coastal, city and inland one respectively). The 139 demes were grouped into the one of the thirty *trittus*. It is clear that Cleisthenes attempted to create regional equality whereby every region would be equitably represented in the *boulē*, which consisted of fifty representatives from each tribe. The fact that each tribe consisted of three different geographic localities seems to have also been designed to impede any

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sanction through genealogies that assigned every noble family a god for an ancestor, and was called a blood-distinction.'

<sup>1</sup> Griffin (1998) 47.



networking of urban elites. Without going into too much historical depth, the fifth century witnessed further democratic reforms: elections by lottery for many positions, the measure of ostracism, jury pay, *isēgoria* in the assembly etc.

The natural conclusion to draw from these constitutional reforms is that Athens was highly democratic, namely, every citizen had equal access to political office and the *polis* was directed by the *dēmos* at large, rather than a select few. However, practice might not reflect constitutional theory. Numerous scholars believe that members of the leading families of Athens continued throughout the fifth century to wield considerable influence.<sup>1</sup> For example, as much as lottery was accepted for political positions of which the consequences were not particularly significant, the position of general, of which there were ten, was always elected by vote. And these generals were typically from aristocratic families. The most famous example is Pericles who was elected general fourteen years in a row and used the position to have bearing on more than just Athens' military strategy. His influence was so great that the historian, Thucydides (2.65), called him, 'the first citizen of Athens.'

Even the radically egalitarian idea behind practice of *isēgoria* in the assembly probably remained a latent potentiality rather than an actuality. The likely reality is that those of high status, owing to their wealth, birth and education, monopolised the air time of the debate, with the mass of ordinary citizens expressing their opinion through noises of approbation or disapprobation.<sup>2</sup>

As much as I agree with this general take, I think a scholar, such as Griffith (1995) in his article 'Brilliant Dynasts: Power and Politics in the *Oresteia*', does maybe exaggerate the degree to which it was a democracy merely in name and not in practice. Because when we read a text such as pseudo-Xenophon's *Constitution of Athens*, the author paints a political picture of the poor majority actually having political control. There is no suggestion that it is an illusion that the *dēmos* holds the reins of government. The impression we get from this treatise is that the democracy really does allow all and sundry to speak in the assembly, the *dēmos* determines foreign policy to a large extent and the rich are answerable to the poor inasmuch as trierarchy and choregy are a socialist measure of taxing the rich for the benefit of the people. In addition, the people repress the aristocrats from engaging in their high-status activities of music and athletics. Even in the instances where the

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<sup>1</sup> Griffith (1995) 65: 'Even as larger measures of genuine power were progressively being assigned to the (predominantly poor) majority, nonetheless the city's leaders, spokesmen, and elected officials continued to be drawn almost exclusively from among the rich and well-born, and the rewards and perils of political leadership were experienced by relatively few.'

<sup>2</sup> Griffith (1995) 67. Sinclair (1988) argues that wealthy citizens were over-represented in the *boulē* and *ekklēsia*, with the *dikasteria* being more popular with the poorer citizens.

mass of ordinary people do not have control, such as generalship, it is argued that the people have deliberately refrained from gaining control knowing that it is to their benefit to have the elite members of society handling these positions for them.

I think the way to understand the complexity of the historical situation is not to create a black-and-white divide between two camps, the aristocrats and the *dēmos*. In fact, the aristocratic camp was a divided one. There were figures who by birth and wealth belonged to traditionally aristocratic families, but in their political inclinations were essentially democrats. The 'aristocrats', such as Solon, Cleisthenes, Pericles and Nicias, who went along with the ever-growing democratic ideology continued to occupy positions of political influence but only insofar as they pleased the *dēmos*. However, there was another group of aristocrats who were more hard-line, refusing to dance to the democratic tune, such as Cimon, Thucydides son of Melesias and those behind the Rule of Four hundred and of the Thirty Tyrants. These hard-line aristocrats for much of the later fifth century found themselves deprived of the political power that they thought their birthright. It is no coincidence that the plays of Sophocles depict an aristocratic protagonist humbled, marginalised and isolated, reflecting in all likelihood the contemporary socio-political situation in Athens. It would be very odd if this weakened state that all Sophocles' main characters find themselves in did not in any way have some resonance with contemporary reality. It is not enough to explain away this hallmark by saying that it is determined by the conventions of tragedy. It would be very easy to depict the suffering of a royal household without depicting members of the royal household deprived of their typical social privilege. For example, Priam's suffering in the *Iliad* does not lack any pathos for his still maintaining his social status.

Not only is there ambiguity over whether Athens was a democracy in name or reality, but there is also no certainty that *eugeneia* was exclusively the prerogative of the aristocratic element of the population. In fact, *eugeneia* was a principle highly valued by the Athenians generally. The primary reason for this is that Athens before its transition to democracy had known an oligarchic form of government where the political offices had been dominated by those of elevated background. Even though constitutional reforms diluted the political control of the aristocrats, the ideology of associating good birth with ability and privilege persisted. It was a residual ideology that still carried lots of influence.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the *dēmos* managed

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<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon can be witnessed with decolonisation. In a country like Zimbabwe, for instance, white people no longer have political control of the country but the ideology of western superiority still conditions the Zimbabwean elite to the point where English language and culture is seen as identifiable with high status, in contrast to the indigenous languages and culture which are typically less valued by the educated black elite. Ober (1989) 251: 'In light of their egalitarian political ethos, we might suppose that the

to find a way to appropriate the concept of *eugeneia* which had been exclusively held by the aristocrats.<sup>1</sup> The myth of autochthony resulted in the Athenian citizens having a sense of superiority to other Greeks, such as the Spartans, who were not an indigenous population.<sup>2</sup> The myth of the earth-born kings starting from Erechtheus was transferred onto the citizen population at large. As children of the earth, the Athenians considered themselves superior to other immigrant populations.<sup>3</sup>

The Athenian citizenry also considered itself superior by birth to the metic and slave population. Athenian citizenry was defined by descent: one had to be the son of an Athenian citizen. And then after the citizenship decree of Pericles, one's parents both had to be Athenian by ethnicity. This, in effect, made the Athenian population a closed gene pool. Emphasis on bloodline, which is normally the preoccupation of aristocratic families, became the concern and pride of the *polis*.<sup>4</sup>

It does appear that this myth of autochthony did have an effect in creating a more egalitarian ideology. Socrates in Plato's *Menexenus* (238e) shows an awareness of the political effects of such a myth claiming that unlike other states which are oligarchical or tyrannical, Athens is democratic and egalitarian because of the equality of birth (ἡ ἐξ ἴσου γένεσις) where everyone is born of the same mother (μᾶς μητρὸς πάντες ἀδελφοὶ φύντες), namely, the earth.

All this information suggests the Athenian population would not have been triggered by the mere mention of *eugeneia*, since the quality had in some ways been democratized. Sophocles himself even refers to Ajax' chorus of Salaminian sailors as the 'earth-born Erechtheids' (*Ajax* 202), therefore acknowledging in this particular instance perhaps the *dēmos*' claim to autochthony. However, what we see as an overall tendency is that Sophocles makes *eugeneia* an attribute of his protagonists of royal descent. Unlike Euripides who might use the adjective *eugenēs* as a description of an ordinary citizen or even a slave, Sophocles reserves this terminology for those who had been traditionally identified with good birth.

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Athenians would have rejected the concept of the inheritability of superiority as overtly elitist. But before the establishment of the democratic constitution at Athens, aristocrats had played a dominant role in the state and formed both a social elite and a ruling political elite. In the course of the generations of aristocratic domination, the concept of ancestral worth was deeply embedded in Athenian social attitudes.'

<sup>1</sup> This is highly speculative but it could be those who had played a leading role in deposing the *basileus* obtained a form of aristocratic status, from which the future descendants profited. The historical existence of the Greek kings has been questioned, see in particular Drews (1983).

<sup>2</sup> Barbato (2020) 82.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Menexenus* 237a; Demosthenes, *Orations* 60.4.

It follows therefore that Sophocles, if he did have an agenda beyond just winning first prize at the Dionysia, was attempting to defend and subtly promote the virtues of the underexploited aristocratic contribution to society. Given that he was writing in an essentially democratic environment, even though I have outlined the disputes and uncertainties over such a statement, it would not have been possible to make an overt and emphatic defence of the aristocracy. Instead, he engaged in a *topos*, popular, as it happens, in the law courts in the fourth century, of presenting aristocrats reduced to disempowered and miserable circumstances.<sup>1</sup> The masses in seeing their social superiors presented as outcasts, like Philoctetes, or madmen, like Ajax, or marginalised, like Electra, might well have experienced a certain satisfaction. However, Sophocles' representation attributes to these protagonists a certain resilience, dignity and greatness in the midst of such difficulty that ultimately leads to almost a vindication of the main character, a vindication, if discerned, that would be much more palatable to the masses. An outright promotion of an aristocratic ideal would have been inflammatory and against the spirit of the art form.<sup>2</sup> So instead the aristocratic individualism is often offset by the democratic and popular wisdom of the chorus and other characters. It seems probable that Sophocles felt obliged to veil the elitism<sup>3</sup> of his plays with democratic populist ideology in order not to create too great a stir. By infusing his plays with criticism of his heroes he saved them from ostracism.<sup>4</sup>

### The significance of the topic for understanding Sophocles' plays?

This thesis does not find justification for its existence merely in filling a gap in scholarship, in fact, an understanding of good birth and the role it plays is, as will hopefully be demonstrated, central to a more compelling vision of his plays, especially as concerns moral evaluation of Sophocles' protagonists. I believe that the theme of noble birth can help to settle the debate between the 'pietist' and the 'hero-worship' interpretation of Sophocles' protagonists, a debate which has divided many critics.<sup>5</sup> The theme of good birth comes down on the side of the

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<sup>1</sup> The fifth-century text of the Old Oligarch's *Constitution of Athens* could be considered to exemplify the same *topos*.

<sup>2</sup> Tragedy's environment of origin is flavoured by populism, under Peisistratus' rule (Lucas (1959) 38; Lesky (1959) 40) and the flowering of Greek tragedy did happen in democratic Athens. Moreover, even its literary features could be said to be more democratic, as seen, among other features, in its use of iambic trimeter for dialogue, a metre which most resembles everyday speech.

<sup>3</sup> Cambridge Dictionary: 'Elitism: the belief that some things are only for a few people who have special qualities or abilities.' For Sophocles, this elitism is produced by differences of birth.

<sup>4</sup> Critics espousing a pietist view, such as Bowra, take Sophocles' concession as his primary affirmation.

<sup>5</sup> For a more general summary of history of scholarly criticism in relation to Sophocles, see Goldill and Hall (2009) 10 ff.

'hero-worshippers'<sup>1</sup> who see in the protagonist an individual of great courage and conviction as against the 'pietists'<sup>2</sup> who judge characters according to their conception of Greek popular morality or, worse still, anachronistically by Christian ethics, often leading to the conclusion that the characters are hot-tempered figures whose fall from grace is the result of some character flaw (*hamartia*).

It is my contention that the characters' behaviour is to be measured against the criterion by which they themselves calibrate their behaviour, that is, their conception of their *phusis* (nature), the product of good breeding. Interestingly Knox, in defining the concept of heroism, which underpins his literary analysis, appears to acknowledge that nobility of birth is the underlying cause of this behaviour: 'But he [the hero] refuses to yield; he remains true to himself, to his φύσις, that "nature" which is inherited from his parents and which is his identity.'<sup>3</sup> In this way, as it seems to me, heroism, in being caused by and attributive of *eugeneia* (an abstract noun signifying inherited noble nature), ought, in spite of its importance, to be considered by critics as secondary to noble birth which lies at the root of it all. The concept of good breeding gives substance and constitutes the ultimate cause of the 'heroic temper' which Knox so sympathetically exposes. Without the notion of good breeding, this praise of heroism could seem relative and subjective: heroic individualism to one man could be megalomaniac egotism to another. But the concept of good breeding demonstrates that this heroism is not determined by opinion, *nomos*, but exists by nature, *phusis*, and therefore has an intrinsic validity. Moreover, in our detailed interpretation of individual plays it will

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<sup>1</sup> The hero-worship approach was first vigorously adopted by Whitman in his *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* which challenged the 'classic view' of the serene and pious Sophocles, the validity of the *hamartia* theory and the moral authority of the chorus. Knox then took the baton of this viewpoint but applied a more text-based approach.

<sup>2</sup> This 'pietist' approach finds its most emblematic expression in Bowra's *Sophoclean Tragedy*. The critic in his introduction outlines his method for extracting the supposed 'moral' from the plays. The first is what he terms the 'historical approach', defined as the necessity of obtaining an understanding of the intellectual and social climate in which the poet was writing. It is implied in the introduction and confirmed in the rest of the book that the critic will use the tenets of Greek popular morality, whose appositeness to the thought of Sophocles is never proven but assumed, to aid in ascertaining the ethical import of the plays. In addition, the utterances of the chorus, often condemnatory towards the protagonists, are arbitrarily given august authority and presented as representatives of the author's voice. Bowra's moralistic approach means that he interprets each tragedy as a representation of sinful behaviour punished by divine justice. The bad character traits behind the characters' falls happen to be the same as those condemned in popular Greek thought: pride, hubris, stubbornness, rashness, irreverence etc. For instance, Ajax is found guilty of pride and Oedipus of rashness. Apfel (2011) 260 argues that this 'disagreement about the plays' meaning is a reflection of the plurality of moral meanings the plays embody.'

<sup>3</sup> Knox (1964) 8.

be shown that the narrative force of the plays supports this reading with its emphasis on nobility as the yardstick of positive behaviour.

As much as Sophocles might sympathetically portray the heroic grandeur of his protagonists, it would be wrong to assume that he was an elitist who had disdain for the common folk. Although it is hard to extricate the position of an author from the multifarious voices within the dialogue of his plays, there is argument for believing that Sophocles' position can be summed up by a couple of verses in the *Ajax*, especially because the viewpoint seems validated by the dramatic action of his plays:

καίτοι σμικροὶ μεγάλων χωρὶς  
σφαλερὸν πύργου ῥῆμα πέλονται·  
μετὰ γὰρ μεγάλων βαιὸς ἄριστ' ἄν  
καὶ μέγας ὀρθοῖθ' ὑπὸ μικροτέρων (158-61)

And yet the little without the great are a weak defensive wall: with the great and supported by smaller ones it would stand most firm and tall.

In this way Sophocles shows appreciation for both great individuals and the common man.<sup>1</sup> There is a symbiotic relationship between the two. In the direct democracy of Athens with its emphasis on egalitarianism, this delicate relationship between the collective and the individual was being threatened. Sophocles' plays could be seen as a challenge to the ideology implicit in, for example, the act of ostracism, an ideology which fears rather than embraces individual greatness.<sup>2</sup>

### Outline of dissertation

In the next chapter (Chapter 2), there will be a lexical study of several Greek terms relating to the idea of good birth (*genos* and its cognates: *agathos*, *kakos*, *aretē*, *phusis* and *eupatridēs*). Then there will be a chapter dedicated to studying the presentation and evocation of noble birth in four major poets anterior to Sophocles who would, in most likelihood, have had a pronounced influence on the playwright: Homer, Theognis, Pindar and Aeschylus (Chapter 3). The first three poets all confirm emphatically the principle of birth. Then there will follow five chapters analysing individually five of Sophocles' plays: *Ajax* (Chapter 4), *Antigone* (Chapter 5), *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Chapter 6), *Electra* (Chapter 7) and *Philoctetes* (Chapter 8).<sup>3</sup> Having

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<sup>2</sup> The anecdote of Thrasybulus giving advice on how to maintain one's rule to Periander's messenger by cutting down the tall stalks of wheat (Herodotus 5.92 ff.) seems a useful way of understanding the act of ostracism, even if Thrasybulus was a tyrant and Athens a democracy. Furthermore, of course there is an element of speculation in attributing this view to Sophocles. However, this sentiment never seems to be contradicted by the dramatic action of any of his extant plays.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 72 for justification of denying chapters to *Trachiniae* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

studied Sophocles' representation of birth, in the penultimate chapter (Chapter 9), a comparison will be made with Euripides' depiction of the theme, with the aim of showing that Euripides is much more equivocal and cynical concerning the validity of birth than Sophocles. And then, naturally, the dissertation will end with a conclusion (Chapter 10) summarising our findings.

## Chapter 2: Lexical Study of Terms Related to Noble Birth

This chapter will conduct a word study of Greek terminology relating to nobility of birth, arriving at definitions based on an examination of the significant uses of a word, and we will see that the suggested definitions are more subtle and nuanced than the general translation. The approach is inductive rather than deductive: definitions are determined not by preconceptions but by of a careful study of the evidence.

This word study forms an important preliminary before any study of the theme of good birth in Sophocles can be undertaken, since we need to understand the history and meaning behind the words he uses, shaped as they are by how previous poets used them. *Eugenēs*, for example, is a word particularly favoured by Sophocles, but without knowing when this word first made its appearance and what forms the stem of the word, we are unlikely to arrive at the precise meaning Sophocles meant for the word.<sup>1</sup> *Phusis* and its cognates are also found frequently in Sophocles. It is not enough for us to translate the word simply as ‘nature’ without studying the etymology, which will show certain connotations not present in its English equivalent.

### *Agathos-kakos*

The adjectives *agathos* and *kakos* are significant moral terms relevant to the topic of ‘nobility’, as are their respective synonyms such as *esthlos*, *chrēstos* and *deilos*, *cherēs*. Before the late sixth century, there was a limited vocabulary of words signifying specifically birth. It appears that before the apparition of a more rich and specialised vocabulary, the adjectives *agathos* and *kakos* served to signify those of noble status, as Donlan has strongly argued:

During the Archaic Period the adjective ἀγαθος was the prime epithet of worth for a man. As such it very early acquired social and political connotations, and, along with its near synonym, ἐσθλός, served as the normative term of self-description by aristocrats throughout Greece<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are two books written concentrating on the language of Sophocles: Budelmann’s *The Language of Sophocles: Communitality, Communication and Involvement* (1999) and Albert Rijksbaron’s and de Jong’s (Editors) *Sophocles and the Greek Language: Aspects of Diction, Syntax and Pragmatics* (2005). Neither of the two books has been particularly relevant for this lexical study – the first focuses on Sophocles’ language from a literary point of view, the second from a grammatical point of view. Neither book has a section dedicated to words relating to noble birth in Sophocles.

<sup>2</sup> Donlan (1978) 99.



The literary evidence, as found in my chapters on Homer and Theognis, suggests that this schema espoused by Donlan is largely correct. Admittedly, though, these adjectives are somewhat problematic and there is sometimes debate as to their exact signification. The main source of the problem is the fact that they are words with a hybrid meaning. For example, *agathos* in its most basic meaning signifies ‘good’ or ‘capable. As we see, the definition in this sense is ethical or ability-related. But the word can have a social signification of ‘elite’, implying often high birth. The reverse is true of *kakos*.

The two potential meanings inherent in these adjectives are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are based on the belief that those of good birth and high status possess excellence, whether that excellence be moral or a certain ability, such as military prowess in the *Iliad*. There is the hypothesis, held by Donlan, that the above-listed adjectives were gradually replaced with more technical adjectives as the association of birth and excellence was progressively challenged and not taken as given. But even in the fifth century, after the vocabulary had enlarged, these adjectives could still have socio-political connotations, as passages from Euripides and Sophocles will show. In the *Ajax* of Sophocles, a relatively early play, it is still crucially important to understand the use of this category of adjectives since the majority of characters have recourse to them, and if the ambiguities of the words are not elucidated, confusion will ensue. And the evidence provided by Sophocles’ fragments shows categorically that *agathos* and *kakos* maintained strong connotations of birth for our author. For example, fragment 84 contrasts *agathos* with the adjective *agenēs* in such a way that *agathos* must be the equivalent of *eugenēs*:

κούκ οἶδ’ ὅ τι χρῆ πρὸς ταῦτα λέγειν,  
 ὅταν οἳ γ’ ἀγαθοὶ πρὸς τῶν ἀγενῶν  
 κατανικῶνται·  
 ποία πόλις ἂν τὰδ’ ἐνέγκοι; (Fr. 84, *The Sons of Aleus*)

I do not know what I can say in reply to this, when good men are conquered by ignoble men. What city could put up with this?

The evidence for ascertaining the signification of these words in archaic Greek thought is found primarily in Homer and Theognis. As much as certain scholars, such as Calhoun, might try to argue otherwise, there are enough instances where it is clear that *agathos/kakos* have a definitively strong socio-political connotation.<sup>1</sup> For example, in book 14 of the *Iliad*, Ajax, in commenting upon the corpse of Archelochus, claims that he does not look like a *kakos* nor a son of *kakoi* (472). *Kakos* here would be someone of lower status and birth. Those of high status are also of high birth and ability according to the general paradigm of Homeric society.

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<sup>1</sup> Calhoun (1934)

When Achilles boasts to be of an *agathos* father (*Iliad* 22.109) he is suggesting that he is of a father who is both of high merit and birth. As has been said, there is always an ethical/ability-related element to these adjectives but that does not negate their signifying status/birth because excellence and birth were strongly associated. The heroes are the well-born elite, the *agathoi*, because they possess excellence.

The situation is much the same in Theognis. The elegiac poet sees society as divided between the *agathoi*, who would be the well-born social elite, and the *kakoi*, who would be the low-born social inferiors. However, there is one major difference in that money has upset the social hierarchy. Where in Homer the three elements of birth, status and ability were generally harmoniously combined, even if with the dispute between Agamemnon and Achilles we see an emergent tension between merit and rank, in Theognis *agathos* cannot automatically be taken to signify the socio-political elite. For example, Theognis at one point says that those who were the *deiloi* are now *agathoi* (v. 57). He does not mean by this though that they have transfigured their nature but that they now occupy the positions of political influence and detain the wealth that would typically have been the privilege of the *agathoi*, namely, the well-born men of impressive character.<sup>1</sup> But clearly Theognis prioritised the elements of birth and character inherent in the adjective *agathos* and this is why he continued to use it to designate a certain social demographic. The use of the adjective shows to what extent excellence and noble birth were thought connected.<sup>2</sup> Of course, there were instances of people of high birth lacking goodness but the word *agathos* was essentially an ideal rather than a flawless reality.<sup>3</sup>

### *Aretē*

We have used the word 'excellence' multiple times. And the Greek word we have in mind when using this English word is *aretē*. *Agathos* and *aretē* are related linguistically inasmuch as the superlative of *agathos*, *aristos*, shares the same stem

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<sup>1</sup> Carrière (1954) 219 : 'D'après ce passage [54-8], la qualité apparaît en effet liée au rang social, non pas exactement au rang social actuel, à la puissance effectivement détenue à telle ou telle époque, mais plutôt, si l'on pénètre bien la pensée du poète, au rang social primitif, plus ou moins confondu d'ailleurs avec la position politique adoptée : les méchants, c'est la plèbe paysanne qui a pris possession du pouvoir.'

<sup>2</sup> Greenhalgh (1972) 202: 'The minds of nobles so prejudiced never totally separated any quality from the quality of noble. The quality of nobility was a prerequisite for all qualities including those ethical ones required by the moderate aristocratic ideology'. Carrière (1954) 221 notices the same attitude.

<sup>3</sup> Greenhalgh (1972) 197: 'Theognis' mind did not conceive 'the good man' in any absolute or objective ethical sense, but only as the ideal nobleman, the man of quality who displayed those ethical qualities which Theognis expected of a man whose essential quality was nobility.'

as *aretē*. Therefore, an *agathos* man would be someone possessing *aretē*. However, there was much disagreement in the Greek world about what exactly *aretē* was. Consequently defining the *agathoi*, those possessing, often through a hereditary process, *aretē*, is fraught with difficulty. Any clear understanding of *eugeneia* must be achieved by grappling with the difficult and Protean term of *aretē*, which was a crucially central concern in ancient Greece. Furthermore, the word, *eugeneia*, particularly relevant to any study of Sophocles was ultimately just a suggested explanation of how humans come to possess *aretē*, *eugeneia* proposing a hereditary transmission of *aretē*.

The basic translation of *aretē* is 'excellence'. The noun is related to the verb ἀρετᾶν meaning 'to thrive or prosper', which indicates that *aretē* is connected with the idea of fulfilment of purpose, function and potential. Something would be excellent if it were a true expression of what it was supposed to be. For example, the *aretē* of farmland could be considered fertility.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, an excellent piece of farmland is one that is highly fertile. One might say generally that *aretē* connotes the state of something being the best version of itself, fulfilling its true purpose. This idea, relatively simple in outline, becomes complex and uncertain when applied to humans since, unlike with a race-horse where it is relatively easy to say that its *aretē* is swift-footedness, it is much harder to pinpoint the essential purpose of a human, whose nature is complex as well as tripartite - physical, mental and spiritual. Also, a human is an indelibly social animal and therefore surely any definition of his *aretē* would need to include the interplay of his individual and collective life.

A brief survey of relevant Greek literature will demonstrate that the conception of *aretē* in ancient Greece was fluid and subject to change. In Homer's *Iliad*, man's *aretē* was of a fundamentally martial quality. When the heroes strive to be 'the best' (*aristos*), they do so by becoming the most distinguished warrior. This military emphasis is no longer present in Theognis' poetry, where *aretē* is equated with justice: ἐν δὲ δικαιοσύνη συλλήβδην πᾶσ' ἀρετὴ 'στι 'In justice there is the whole sum of excellence' (147). For Theognis, the excellence of a man is defined by the 'cooperative values' of honesty, loyalty and fairness. In Pindar, however, there is a return to the 'competitive values' but enacted in the sporting arena rather than the battlefield: an Olympic victory becomes a symbol of *aretē*. Another way in which some ancient Greek thinkers conceived of human excellence centred around intellectual ability. For example, Aristotle believes that reason is the defining

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<sup>1</sup> Thucydides 1.2: ἡ ἐν ἀρετῇ κειμένη γῆ equals 'productive land' (LSJ).

feature of being a human, and fulfilment is to be found in pursuit of the theoretical life.<sup>1</sup>

To speak generally, there was in the ancient Greek world, present most noticeably in Homer's works and persisting to lesser degrees in subsequent generations, the need for one's *aretē* to be publicly validated: personal recognition of one's ability was insufficient. In Homer, *kleos* is the emanating shining light of a hero's *aretē*, which must be reflected by the society in the form of *timē*. When the centrifugal force of *kleos* is not balanced by a commensurate centripetal force of *timē*, there is imbalance. There exists a symbiotic relationship between *aretē* and *timē*: *aretē* obtains *timē*, *timē* certifies *aretē*. The reason why *aretē* is rewarded with *timē* is because the society values and sees benefit in the excellence embodied and performed by the hero. Therefore, *aretē* always has a societal element and cannot be explained in relation to the individual alone. For example, if someone excelled in mathematics, Homeric society would not give high honour to this person since, as has been said, military excellence was valued above all else.<sup>2</sup> It follows then that an elevated social position is determined by high achievement and the esteem of the community, but without this last condition high achievement entails little or no social privilege, meaning that noble status is the reward for notable supply of society's demands. A brave and skilled Homeric hero is indispensable to his community since through his valour he not only provides security, without which the women and children could face enslavement from a foreign adversary, but also essential economic support, given the fact that pillaging is the means by which wealth is amassed.

It did indeed happen that a society's value system was challenged on the grounds of being ill-conceived. A notable case of this is to be found in the philosophical poetry of Xenophanes, who argues that his city, Colophon, incorrectly privileges athleticism above wisdom. The philosopher takes exception to the benefits, in the form of adulation, choice pieces of meat, front-row seats and gifts, conferred on athletic victors by the citizens, who fail to realise that his 'wisdom is greater than that of men and horses' (DK 21B2). In his mind, athletic accomplishment would not lead to a city being well-governed, whereas his wisdom would.

As we can see, the word *aretē* was a fluid term in the Greek world and could be co-opted by poets and thinkers giving their own particular connotation to the word. Another key feature of the word is that it almost never signified exceptional ability without any concomitant socio-political connotation. There was always the underlying assumption that whoever possessed *aretē* would be accorded certain

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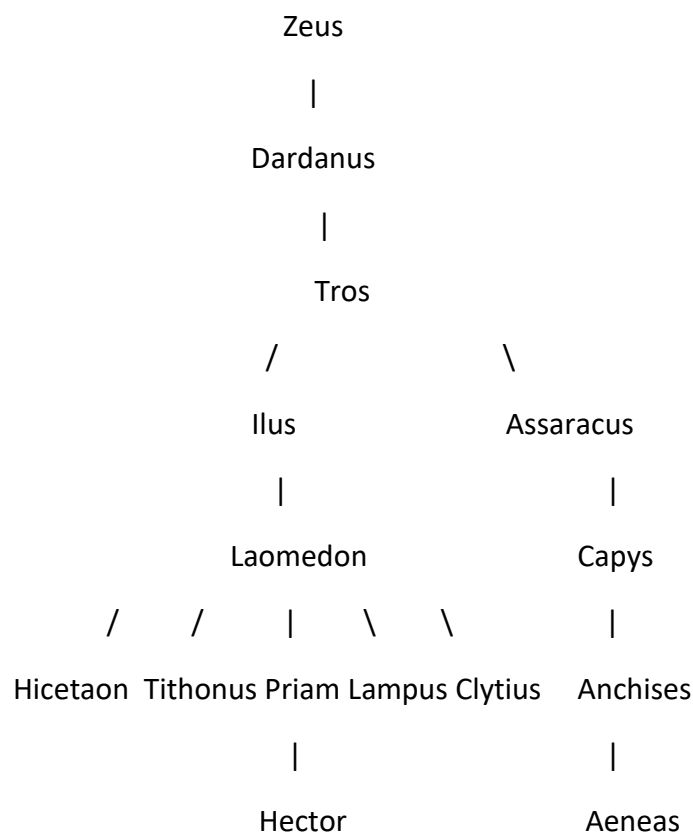
<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6-8.

<sup>2</sup> It must be acknowledged that the context of the *Iliad*, namely, a war, necessitates this emphasis.

societal privileges. Sophocles' heroes are unique for their sustained loss of *timē*, even if the Homeric Achilles provides a precedent.

### Genos

The majority of Greek terms connected explicitly with the idea of noble birth contain the stem, *genos*: *eugenēs*, *suggenēs*, *eggenēs*, *agennēs*, *dusgenēs*, *gennaios* etc. It is therefore important that we understand what *genos* meant for the Greeks. In Homer *genos* seems to refer to patrilineage. When a hero is questioned as to his *genos*, his response nearly always consists of a list of male ancestors.<sup>1</sup> In every significant recital of ancestry the presentation follows a patrilineal scheme. This seems to form the backbone of any genealogy. However, in some cases extra ancestral information is given such as naming the brothers and sisters of a patrilineal ancestor or even tracing patrilineal descent branching off from one's patriline. This family tree constructed from Aeneas' recital (*Il.* 20.215 ff.) showcases these points:



<sup>1</sup> Donlan (2007) 36: 'About half of the incidents of Homeric *genos* are in social contexts, where it is best construed as "descent" or "line of descent", specifically patrilineal descent or the patriline'.

It appears to be the case that extra detail beyond the patriline is given if this surplus information is of interest or if it serves a literary purpose. In this instance, Aeneas' speech, in addition to its immediate and contextual purpose of affirming the hero's worth before a potential duel with Achilles, might be seen to serve the literary purpose of allowing Homer to give an account of the royal house of Troy. There are other articulated family trees which stick almost exclusively to the patriline. For example, Achilles in his encounter with Asteropaeus lets it be known that his paternal ancestors are respectively Zeus, Aiacus and Peleus (*Il.* 21.187-9). No ancillary information is provided and yet this information is presented as constituting his *genos*. Consequently, the patriline should be regarded as the essential component of someone's *genos*.<sup>1</sup>

There is a lot that *genos* omits from the family tree. There is very little emphasis on bilateral kin such as brothers, cousins and uncles. This might be because the concept centres around descent rather than affinal relationship. Another notable omission are female relatives, even to the point of not naming one's mother. *Genos* is most certainly an androcentric way of categorising ancestry.<sup>2</sup> If *genos* were connected with parentage it would be natural for the mother to hold an important role therein. However, the beginning of Aeneas' recital contrasts parentage with *genos*:

ἴδμεν δ' ἀλλήλων γενεήν, ἴδμεν δὲ τοκῆας  
 πρόκλυτ' ἀκούοντες ἔπεα θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων (*Il.* 20.203-4)

We know each other's patriline, we know each other's parents hearing the  
 olden words of mortal men

Here γενεή is juxtaposed with τοκῆες. Immediately after, Aeneas contrasts the respective parents showing that Anchises and Aphrodite are not inferior to Peleus and Thetis. Once this is done he commences his exposition of his patriline prefacing it with the words:

εἰ δ' ἐθέλεις καὶ ταῦτα δαήμεναι, ὄφρ' ἐῷ εἰδῆς  
 ἡμετέρην γενεήν, πολλοὶ δέ μιν ἄνδρες ἴσασι (*Il.* 20.213-4)

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<sup>1</sup> Diomedes (*Il.* 14.110-127) presents his patriline with the small addition of naming his grandfather's brothers, while Glaucus (*Il.* 6.144-211) adds the names of his paternal uncles as well as his cousin, Glaucus. This last detail maybe serves the purpose of reminding the reader of the relationship between Glaucus and Sarpedon.

<sup>2</sup> One of the explanations for this androcentricity could be found in the social practice of lords having children with slave women. In order to spare a sizable portion of the population from illegitimacy and bastardry, the male line is prioritised to compensate for any slave origins on the maternal side. Finley (1979) 62: 'Commonly, in many different social systems, as among the Greeks later on, such offspring were slaves like their mothers [...] not so in the world of Odysseus, where it was the father's side that was determinative.'

If you wish also to know these things, so that you may know my patriline,  
which many men know

Although parentage is not without importance, otherwise Aeneas would not have made the parental comparison, it is an entity distinct from *genos*, and this is made very clear by Aeneas' wording.<sup>1</sup> Whenever *genos* is elaborated upon it virtually always follows or is preceded by an outlining of someone's patriline. Walter Donlan gives a summary of the essential qualities of the concept: 'The Homeric *genos* or *geneē*, unlike the kin members of the *oikos*, is essentially a group of dead men. The live members are necessarily few. Even when the grouping is a patrilineage, because descent is seldom traced back further than the great-grandfather, the bottom of the cone is never very broad. Nor does it actually do anything in the epics. We should regard *genos/geneē* less as a social group than as a cultural category.'<sup>2</sup> The evidence of Homer suggests that Donlan is right to view the structure and conception of the *genos* as such: amid all the branches of lateral affinity, the bough of male descent is prioritised. Obviously, the ancestral tree includes the patriline, and so it would be wrong to argue that the latter is categorically distinct from the former. It might be better to think of the patriline as being prioritised and focalised at the expense of other ancestral relations.

In Hesiod *genos* seems to have a more generic and classificatory meaning, no longer possessing the central Homeric idea of patriline. In Hesiod *genos* seems best translated as 'class' or 'race' in the majority of cases, being used as a means to classify a group. For example, *genos* is often used by the Boeotian poet to categorise gods in contradistinction to men: μ' ἐκέλονθ' ὕμνεϊν μακάρων γένος αἰὲν ἑόντων 'They ordered me to sing the race of eternal blessed gods' (*Th.* 33). *Genos* can also be used to make classifications within groups of mortals, such as designating women (*Th.* 590) as distinct from men or, famously, in the Five Ages of Man (*WD* 109-201). Nowhere in Hesiod does *genos* have the same genealogical flavour as in Homer.<sup>3</sup> An explanation for Hesiod's seemingly different conception of *genos* might be related not to any lack of interest in genealogy but to a lack of interest in heroism. The recital of ancestry might have been a hallmark of warriors seeking to prove their worth.

In our examination of subsequent authors, the emphasis will be on looking at instances where *genos* can be thought to have a genealogical connotation and studying whether Homer's notion of patriline persists or whether it undergoes an evolution accruing different specificities.

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<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that this is a case of focalisation rather than contrast.

<sup>2</sup> Donlan (2007) 36.

<sup>3</sup> The rare instances where the word has a genealogical connotation, it signifies offspring rather than ancestry (*Th.* 336)

A couplet from a fragment of the elegiac poet, Callinus, is of interest because the context suggests that *genos* is used in connection with ancestry:

οὐ γὰρ κως θάνατόν γε φυγεῖν εἰμαρμένον ἐστὶν  
ἄνδρ', οὐδ' εἰ προγόνων ἦι γένος ἀθανάτων (Fr. 1.13)

It is not apportioned for a mortal man to escape death, not even if in relation to his lineage he is the descendant of immortal forbears.

Here *genos*, as in Homer, is used to signify the idea of descent and this is made clear by the inclusion of the word προγόνων meaning 'forbears' or 'ancestors'. It is not stated whether forbears refer to the patriline or matriline or both. However, it is very clear that *genos* means 'lineage' here as opposed to 'offspring' or 'race'.

In the author, Tyrtaeus, out of the surviving fragments *genos* is found four times. In each case its meaning is to do with family/ancestry rather than mere classification. The word as it is employed seems to signify the notion of descent. For example:

ἀργαλέωι δὲ πόθωι πᾶσα κέκηδε πόλις,  
καὶ τύμβος καὶ παῖδες ἐν ἀνθρώποισι ἀρίσημοι  
καὶ παίδων παῖδες καὶ γένος ἐξοπύσω· (Tyrtaeus Fr. 12.28-30)

The whole city is in mourning for him with grievous longing, and there is a tomb and his children will be notable among humankind as well as the children of his children and his bloodline in the future.

The context proves beyond any doubt that *genos* is connected with descent of more than three generations since the word comes after the evocation of future grandchildren. The same meaning is found in Fr. 10.11-12<sup>1</sup> where the word ὀπίσω makes it clear that the idea applies to descendants yet unborn, but to be born in the future. Therefore, we can infer that where *genos* in Homer is fundamentally retrospective, here it seems to be forward-looking. In these two instances, the soldier is rallied not by the idea of honouring the valour of his ancestors but by leaving a legacy for his descendants.

However, in Tyrtaeus we appear to have two examples of *genos* being backward-looking thus making it Janus-faced:

ἀλλ', Ἡρακλῆος γὰρ ἀνικῆτου γένος ἐστέ,  
Θαρσεῖτ (Fr. 11.1)

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<sup>1</sup> εἶθ' οὕτως ἀνδρός τοι ἀλωμένου οὐδεμί' ὥρη  
γίνεται οὐτ' αἰδῶς οὐτ' ὀπίσω γένεος. (Tyrtaeus Fr. 10.11-12)



But, in relation to lineage you are from unconquered Heracles, therefore be brave

ἐχθρὸς μὲν γὰρ τοῖσι μετέσσειται οὐς κεν ἴκηται,  
χρημοσύνηι τ' εἴκων καὶ στυγερῆι πενίηι,  
αἰσχύνει τε γένος, κατὰ δ' ἀγλαὸν εἶδος ἐλέγχει,  
πᾶσα δ' ἀτιμία καὶ κακότης ἔπεται. (Fr. 10.7-10)

He [the fugitive] will be hated by those to whom he comes, yielding to hardship and grim poverty, and he disgraces his lineage, and he belies his fine appearance, and all dishonour and wickedness follow him

In Fragment 11, Tyrtaeus makes reference to the fabled ancestry of the Spartans descending from Heracles. What is peculiar is that, strictly speaking, the two ruling dynasties, the Aegiads and Eurypontids claimed descent from the twin brothers Eurysthenes and Procles, themselves descendants of Heracles. However, Tyrtaeus seems to accord this prestige to all the fighting Spartans. Anyway, it is clear *genos* is in this instance used to refer to long-dated ancestry. In Fragment 10 we have expressed the idea of 'shaming one's *genos*' and therefore it appears likely that *genos* refers to ancestors rather than descendants.

What can account for the fact that *genos* is always used with a genealogical connotation in Tyrtaeus and in a way which has much in common with Homer's conception of the word? Although Homer writes epic and Tyrtaeus elegy, the subject matter between the *Iliad* and Tyrtaeus' *Elegies* is essentially the same: warfare and the heroic code. It appears that in this domain bloodline is an important concern and therefore *genos* naturally is used to convey primarily this idea rather than its other potential significations such as 'group', 'race', 'age' etc.

This short word study of *genos* demonstrates the word never designated a corporate clan consisting of multiple powerful families before the Classical period.<sup>1</sup> The research of Bourriot and Roussel argues convincingly against this formerly traditional view. Donlan agrees with the fundamental stance of these two scholars who put an end to the 'notion that *genos* – the basis of the gentilic system – ever denotes anything like a clan, a large family of families linked by kinship, whether actual or fictive, or that it can ever refer to a permanent corporation with its own land, internal organisation, and religious cult.'<sup>2</sup> This traditional view, now overturned, cannot have been based on a careful study of the use of the word, *genos*, in the archaic and classical period, since no instances would have been found to validate such a conjectural hypothesis.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of *genos* by Theognis is studied in the section dedicated to him (chapter 4). There is equally no suggestion of clanhood in his use of the word.

<sup>2</sup> Donlan (2007) 30.

## Eugenēs

*Eugenēs* is a very important adjective in connection with noble birth, especially as it is used in particularly pregnant passages by Sophocles. It is a compound adjective comprised of the adverb *eu* and the stem *gen-*. The *gen-* stem makes it related to the verb *gignomai* 'to be born/become'. Its literal translation is then 'well-born'. The *gen-* stem also makes the adjective related to the noun *genos*. *Gignomai* and *genos* are related both linguistically and conceptually since a person is not born *ex nihilo* but from parents and within a family. Aristotle's definition of the noun *eugeneia* accords with these statements:

τὸ εὖ σημαίνει τι δήπου τῶν ἐπαινετῶν καὶ σπουδαίων, οἷον τὸ εὐπρόσωπον καὶ τὸ εὐόφθαλμον· ἀγαθὸν γάρ τι ἢ καλὸν σημαίνει κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον. πάνυ γε, εἶπεν. Οὐκ οὔν εὐπρόσωπον μὲν ἔστι τὸ ἔχον ἀρετὴν προσώπου; εὐόφθαλμον δὲ τὸ ὀφθαλμοῦ ἀρετὴν; Οὕτως, εἶπεν. Ἀλλὰ μὴν ἔστι γένος τὸ μὲν σπουδαῖον, τὸ δὲ φαῦλον ἀλλ' οὐ σπουδαῖον. Πάνυ γ', εἶπεν. Σπουδαῖον δὲ γέ φαμεν ἕκαστον κατὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ ἀρετὴν εἶναι, ὥστε καὶ γένος σπουδαῖον ὡσαύτως. Οὕτως, εἶπε. Δῆλον ἄρ', ἔφην, ὅτι ἔστιν ἡ εὐγένεια ἀρετὴ γένους. (Fr. 92 R. ap. Stob. IV, 29,25)

'The *eu* signifies something among the class of desirable and serious things, just like "fair-faced" *euprosōpon* and "of beautiful eyes" *euophthalmon*: it signifies something good or fine according to this reasoning.' 'Certainly', he replied. 'Is not fair-face the quality of having excellence of face, and beautiful eyes the excellence of the eye?' 'It is so', he replied. 'Well, one *genos* is serious, and another trivial but not serious.' 'Completely', he replied. 'We say that each serious thing is so because of the excellence of itself, so that a *genos* is serious in the same way.' 'It is thus', he answered. 'It is clear', I said, 'that nobility of birth is excellence of ancestry'.

Here Aristotle analyses the word breaking it down into its component parts of *eu* and *genos*. With an analogical approach, he asserts that the *eu* prefix, which in other words implies the state of something being an excellent version of itself, entails that *eugeneia* is ancestral excellence.

*Eugenēs* and *eugeneia* are words very infrequently used before the attic tragedians. Neither words are thought to occur in Homer. The vulgate does contain *euēgenēs* (*Il.* 11.47) to describe a certain Socus and as an epithet of the Trojans (*Il.* 23.81). However, editors believe that the correct reading is *euēphenēs* meaning 'wealthy'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aristarchus approved of *euēgenēs* whereas Aristophanes of Byzantium and Rhianus before him had texts containing *euēphenēs*. West prefers the latter.

The first uncontested use of this word is found in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* where Thetis is described as ἠϋγενής (94). The adjective does not seem to be specially or carefully chosen since there is nothing about Thetis' ancestry that makes her more noble than the other gods listed.

Phocylides employs the adjective side by side with its related noun *genos*:

τί πλέον, γένος εϋγενές εἶναι,  
οἷσ' οὔτ' ἐν μύθοισ' ἔπεται χάρις οὔτ' ἐνὶ βουλήϊ; (Stob. 4.29.28)  
What benefit is there in one's lineage being noble, if grace in speech and decision-making do not follow?

Why does Phocylides feel the need to combine *genos* with the adjective *eugenēs* when the adjective alone should, in theory, suffice, as it already features this idea of lineage as part of its composite structure? The answer appears to be related to the two-fold meaning, exploited by Euripides but already possibly in play in the seventh century, of *eugenēs*: 1) nobility of birth 2) nobility (of character). If excellence were hereditary, it meant that those born of good parents would be *ipso facto* good themselves. Phocylides challenges the assumption latent in the adjective and makes it clear that, in his eyes, it is possible for someone to be noble in relation to their ancestry without this being paralleled in their character. This suggests that at the time Phocylides was writing there was already an ambiguity surrounding the word, whose meaning, unless it was restricted, as done by Phocylides, could extend beyond a statement upon someone's ancestry to describe their character.

*Eugenēs* is found four times in Aeschylus. It is interesting that in one of the fragments we find the adjective used in its comparative form:

τίς γάρ] τοιοῦτ[ο]υς εϋγενεστέρους ἐμοῦ  
ἀρχοῦς ἄ]ν [ἐ]πι]οι καὶ στρατοῦ τὰ βέλτατα;

Who would say that these leaders are more noble than me and represent the best individuals in the army?

Because it is a fragment, the context, and even the text, is uncertain. Nevertheless, we can still attempt to elicit the conception that lies behind the use of the comparative form. If there is a binary divide between the noble and non-noble then a comparative would be unnecessary since one either is or is not noble. However, if the situation is more nuanced and gradated then it is possible that even within the noble class attention might be paid to degrees of nobility with the result that one noble, although being noble, might be less noble than another noble. This is admittedly not a new phenomenon; in Homer the heroes in their ancestral recitations are usually vying to gain one-upmanship over each other in this regard. There is nevertheless a novelty in Aeschylus' uses of the adjective, being the first

occurrence of the comparative form of the word and therefore the first instance of the idea of contrasted degrees of nobility being condensed into a single lexical form.

ἔγῳ δὲ Τυδεΐ κεδνὸν Ἄστακοῦ τόκον  
τῶνδ' ἀντιτάξω προστάτην πυλωμάτων,  
μάλ' εὐγενῆ τε καὶ τὸν Αἰσχύνης θρόνον  
τιμῶντα καὶ συγοῦνθ' ὑπέρφρονας λόγους·  
αἰσχυρῶν γὰρ ἀργός, μὴ κακὸς δ' εἶναι φιλεῖ.  
σπαρτῶν δ' ἀπ' ἀνδρῶν, ὧν Ἄρης ἐφείσατο,  
ρίζωμ' ἀνεῖται, κάρτα δ' ἔστ' ἐγχώριος,  
Μελάνιππος· (*Seven Against Thebes* 407-13)

I will set up the cherished son of Astacus against Tydeus as a protector of these gates, very noble and honouring the throne of Shame and hating haughty words: he is slow to shameful things, and is not accustomed to be base. His race springs from men sown from dragon's teeth, of those spared by Ares, he is therefore indigenious, Melanippus.

In this passage does *eugenēs* refer to Melanippus' ancestry or his moral character or both? The context suggests that both ideas are at play. In lines 409-411 the discussion seems to centre around moral rectitude and therefore it only seems fitting that *eugenēs* partakes of this general atmosphere. But then we get a description of Melanippus' ancestry, how he is a descendant of the men born from the dragon's teeth sown by Cadmus. It therefore seems likely that *eugenēs* is used to invoke both Melanippus' ancestry and his moral character.

### *Dusgennēs and agennēs*

As more or less antonyms of *eugenēs*, there are *dusgennēs* and *agennēs*. *Dus-* as a prefix is the opposite of *eu-* so it is used to describe someone who is ill-born rather than well-born. The word is first used in Pindar. It is quite a popular word in Euripides, being used twelve times. When it is used in the fifth century it replaces the semantic domain held by the word, *kakos*, but more specifically focuses on the idea of birth. However, the word also contains moral connotations, as, for example, in Euripides' *Electra* (363).

*Agennēs* is an interesting adjective. The *-a* is an alpha privative which, as a prefix, is used to signify the absence of something. Therefore, to describe someone as *agennēs* is to say that they lack a *genos*. The sense is not that they lack ancestors altogether, otherwise how would the person exist, but that they do not know their bloodline, often because their ancestors did not achieve any renown. And *genos* as we have seen from Homer was essentially a cultural construct and therefore it is not something that everyone would have by nature. Not everyone has a lineage,

just as in today's world some people have no clue of their ancestry beyond their grandparents, while others have family trees going back to William the Conqueror.

### *Eggenēs and suggerēs*

There are other adjectives of note with the stem *-gen*, such as *eggenēs*, *suggenēs*. *Eggenēs* and *suggenēs* seem to have been coined by Pindar, or at least he is the first poet wherein there is an extant use of them. The word *suggenēs* is used nine times by Pindar in his extant oeuvre. It is a composite adjective formed by the preposition *sun* 'with, together' and the verb *gignesthai* 'to be born'. The word suggests an innate quality, i.e. something existing at birth. The English words 'congenital' and 'innate' are probably the nearest equivalents. These English equivalents lack, however, the family element present in *suggenēs*. It can be understood that something exists at birth because it has been inherited from one's ancestry, hence why the Greek *genos* 'family' and *gignesthai* 'to become/be born' share the same stem. This fact is reflected in the adjective *suggenēs* where it combines both the idea of innateness and kinship. The kinship element is evidenced by the adjective being able to be employed substantively to mean 'kinsman, relative'. It is clear from the context in which this word is used by Pindar that he has in mind both the notion of birth and family. The meaning of *eggenēs* is much alike. The *eg* is a form of the preposition *en* 'in'. So, the adjective signifies essentially that something is 'in the family/bloodline'. 'Inherited/hereditary' are probably the best translations, since 'innate' does not necessarily imply hereditary transmission.'

### *Gennaios*

Earlier we said that *eugenēs* was a word particularly favoured by Sophocles. Another word with a similar meaning, *gennaios*, is also employed relatively frequently. There is a passage where Aristotle engages in the technique of synonymics, first theorised by the sophist, Prodicus, in an attempt to distinguish the difference in meaning between these two seemingly similar words. It must be acknowledged that he is defining these words in relation to the animal world, and therefore his definitions might not necessarily be applicable to humans. Nevertheless, *eugenēs* is suggested to connote 'high birth' in contradistinction to *gennaios* which refers to the idea of being 'true to one's nature'.<sup>1</sup> Based on this definition, it would be possible for someone of 'low birth' to be *gennaios* as long as their person had not suffered any denaturation. This at least can be inferred from the examples given in the passage below where the wolf, although not being described as *eugenēs*, is nevertheless labelled as *gennaios*. Let us now look at some instances of the word *gennaios* in archaic literature to see whether Aristotle's definition holds true.

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart (2019) 5 is sceptical that the tragedians would have been alert to this subtle distinction.

Aristotle makes the following distinction between the adjectives, *eugenēs* and *gennaios*:

τὰ δ' ἐλευθέρια καὶ ἀνδρεῖα καὶ εὐγενῆ, οἷον λέων, τὰ δὲ γενναῖα καὶ ἄγρια καὶ ἐπίβουλα, οἷον λύκος· εὐγενὲς μὲν γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ γένους, γενναῖον δὲ τὸ μὴ ἐξιστάμενον ἐκ τῆς αὐτοῦ φύσεως (HA 488b17-20)

Some animals are free, brave and well-born, like the lion, others are true to their birth, wild and scheming, like the wolf: 'well-born' consists in coming from good stock, while 'true to one's birth' is the state of not deviating from one's nature

The adjective *gennaios* appears only once in Homer. Diomedes uses it in the context of a potential duel with Aeneas and Pandarus:

οὐ γὰρ μοι γενναῖον ἀλυσκάζοντι μάχεσθαι  
οὐδὲ καταπτώσσειν· ἔτι μοι μένος ἔμπεδόν ἐστιν· (Il. 5.253-4)

For it is not in my nature to fight while retreating nor to act cowardly. For the strength in me is fixed.

Before focusing on the meaning of the word *gennaios* in this sentence, it is worth looking at the context. Aeneas and Pandarus have decided to launch an attack mounted on chariot against Diomedes. Sthenelus urges Diomedes to retreat aboard his chariot warning him that Pandarus is the son of Lycaon and Aeneas the son of blameless Anchises and Aphrodite. So when Diomedes responds to this advice with the claim that retreat would go against his nature, perhaps a certain assertion of his own nobility should be read into his response, something that the word *gennaios* seems capable of doing.

Certainly *gennaios* in this passage seems to suggest the idea of what is characteristic of, or natural for, Diomedes to act, yet, this almost implies, at the same time, the idea of *eugeneia*. Diomedes will not deviate from his nature but this very nature is in some ways inherited from his father and, by extension, his paternal line. The primary reason that probably informs Diomedes' conception of his natural way of fighting is the knowledge of how his paternal ancestors fought. If none of them showed cowardice or took a backward step, then it would be aberrant for Diomedes to so.

The next occurrence of *gennaios* is found in a fragment of Archilochus preserved by Athenaeus. Athenaeus quotes Archilochus to try to understand what Plato means when he speaks of 'high-class figs', τὰ γενναῖα σῦκα (Ath. 14.653c; *Laws* 844e):

γενναῖα λέγει τὰ εὐγενῆ ὁ φιλόσοφος, ὡς καὶ Ἀρχίλοχος·  
< . . > παρέλθε, γενναῖος γὰρ εἰς. (Ath. 14. 653d, fr. 225)

By 'high-class' the philosopher refers to crops selectively bred, just as Archilochus:

'Pass, for you are noble.'

As we can see, Athenaeus in his semantic discussion makes a connection between the words *gennaios* and *eugenēs*. Presumably what is meant by this name of 'high-class figs' is that they came from good trees and the cultivation process had led to optimal fruits.

In Pindar there is found a passage which seems to use *gennaios* in the context of heredity:

φυᾶ τὸ γενναῖον ἐπιπ' ῥέπει  
ἐκ πατέρων παισὶ λῆμα. (*Ode* 8.44)

By nature the genuine spirit falls from fathers to the sons

What *gennaios* seems to be signifying here is that the father's spirit is passed down in an unobstructed manner to his sons. These two lines seem to have the same meaning as our idiom: 'the apple does not fall far from the tree'. *Gennaios* in this Greek passage does the work of our 'not far from'. *Gennaios* is therefore a way of conveying the ideas of things being bred true to type. Once again, we see that the word is used in connection with the well-born. As much as the word had the ability to be applied to all social classes, in practice the word seems heavily tied up with the social elite.

Aeschylus also uses the word in relation to the father-son dynamic but includes the role of the mother through a poetic metaphor:

καὶ τρὶς γοναῖσι τοὺς γυναικείους πόνους  
ἐκαρτέρησ' ἄρουρα, κούκ ἐμέμψατο  
τοῦ μὴ ἔξενεγκεῖν σπέρμα γενναῖον πατρός. (*Fr.* 99.7-9)

And three times my ploughland endured the womanly pangs of childbirth, and he had nothing to complain about in terms of me bringing forth truly his paternal seed.

In this passage a farming metaphor is used to describe pregnancy. The man's sperm is represented as a seed and the woman's womb as ploughland. The female character appears to be saying that in the same way that good, fertile land allows the seed to grow to its full potential, she, as a bearer of the father's sperm, provided the right conditions for the father's 'seed' to grow in a healthy and undamaged way.

## Phusis

The farming metaphor of the last passage nicely introduces the next word, *phusis*. The word is commonly translated as ‘nature’ and this English translation actually captures the basic essence of the Greek word quite well. But to understand the nuances of the word, it is necessary to see that it derives from the verb *phuō* meaning ‘to beget’ or, in an intransitive sense, ‘to grow’. If one looks at the natural world, whether that be flora or fauna, one sees that things do not just exist in a static, eternal way but rather there is insemination followed by growth. It is the same with humans. *Phusis* therefore signifies the nature that grows from the act of reproduction.<sup>1</sup> That in the Greek language a child’s nature was seen as intimately linked with its parents’ is shown by the fact that ὁ φύσας could mean ‘father’. Moreover, in the fifth century, with the well-established *phusis-nomos* dichotomy the word was used philosophically to signify ‘truth/reality’ as opposed to the artifices of society.<sup>2</sup> Sophocles does seem to borrow this objective sense of the word in his application to humans. *phusis* is therefore the underlying essence of a person as opposed to idiosyncrasies and habits they have culturally accrued.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Arist. *Pol.* 1252b33: οἷον ἕκαστόν ἐστι τῆς γενέσεως τελεσθείσης, ταύτην φαμέν τὴν φύσιν εἶναι ἕκαστου

<sup>2</sup> Rose (1992) 150: ‘In Herodotus and the medical writers of the fifth century *phusis* comes then to mean the normal condition as opposed to a sick or fortuitous state of people or things. Specifically applied to individual human beings or to the generality of human individuals, the term came to designate the particular, essential character of individuals.’

<sup>3</sup> However, Duplouy (2003) 14 believes that the etymology could be linked just as well to *patris* ‘fatherland’: ‘εὐπατρίδης peut également dériver du mot πατρίς (εὐ-πατρίδ-ης)’. He cites an anti-tyrannical drinking-song as evidence (*Constitution of Athens*, 19.3) as well as a passage from Alcibiades the Junior’s defence speech (*Concerning the Team of Horses*, 25). Duplouy maintains that the contrast made by the young Alcibiades is only understandable if *eupatridēs* has more than just a connotation of nobility extending to suggestions of anti-tyrannical resistance otherwise a contrast with his maternal line, also being noble, would not be necessary, that is to say, two noble lines would not be juxtaposed with each other in this way. Duplouy’s insistence on this double meaning of the word, *eupatridēs*, seems to me not entirely convincing. It is true that in these two instances, at least in the drinking-song, it is possible to detect an anti-tyrannical context. However, a word’s inherent meaning is not determined by the flavour of one or two contexts it finds itself in. Moreover, in both of the passages cited as evidence, there seems to be an elaboration of the word *eupatridēs* making it clear that the respective author understands the word as signifying a good patriline. Another argument against Duplouy’s thesis is found in his own article (p. 18) where speaking of the use of this word by the tragedians he admits: ‘extrait de tout contexte historique, le terme εὐπατρίδης γ [among the tragedians] perd son sens politique tout à fait spécifique pour ne garder que sa valeur gentilice générale, contribuant, comme les termes εὐγενής, ἔσθλός ou ἀγαθός à définir la position de chacun à travers une éthique de la noble ascendance.’



## *Eupatridēs*

The last word we will study is *eupatridēs*, which is used prominently in the *Electra*. As an Athenian term it is particularly relevant to Attic theatre. The word combines the adverb *eu* 'well' with the noun-stem of 'father' *patēr* giving it the literal meaning: 'of a good father' or 'well-fathered'.<sup>1</sup> This is how Alcibiades the Junior explains the word in his defence speech (admittedly the historicity of this speech has been doubted):

Ὁ γὰρ πατήρ πρὸς μὲν ἀνδρῶν ἦν Εὐπατριδῶν, ὧν τὴν εὐγένειαν ἐξ αὐτῆς τῆς ἐπωνυμίας ῥάδιον γινῶναι (Isocrates, *Concerning the Team of Horses*, 25).

My father on the male side was of the eupatrids, whose nobility is easy to discern from their name

There is uncertainty as to whether the so-called 'eupatrids' in Athens constituted a social caste, i.e. an institutional nobility, or even a clan. There are certain passages in Aristotle and Plutarch relating to the political history of Athens where the word seems to be used to designate a noble class. Aristotle in describing the years after the departure of Solon says that the people elected ten archons πέντε μὲν εὐπατριδῶν, τρεῖς δὲ ἀγροίκων, δύο δὲ δημιουργῶν 'five from the eupatrids, three from the countrymen and two from the artisans' (*Constitution of Athens* 13,2). Plutarch says that Theseus divided the population of Athens into three groups: πρῶτος ἀποκρίνας χωρὶς εὐπατρίδας καὶ γεωμόρους καὶ δημιουργούς 'First he divided them apart into eupatrids, countrymen and artisans' (*Theseus* 25, 2). I believe that these two authors are using the word as a general term to refer to the rich and well-born within Athenian society and that the word must not be seen as a technical term defining a fixed social order. Hippodamus of Miletus (*apud Politics* 1267b-1268a) and Plato (*Timaeus* 24 a-c) also speak of a tripartite division of society but they do not use the term *eupatridēs* to describe the social elite.<sup>2</sup> If *eupatridēs* was a technical term signifying a long-lasting exclusive social class, we would find it used much more frequently in earlier authors, a phenomenon that is not seen. Plutarch and Aristotle use, in my opinion, *eupatridēs* as a general term to describe the social elite who possessed generational wealth, and so, it would be inaccurate to read into it a technical term designating a neatly defined and precise institutional nobility. It strikes me that any English word signifying in a general way those comprising the upper stratum of society, such as 'nobleman', would form a reasonable translation. The question of whether the eupatrids constitute a clan

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<sup>2</sup> This viewpoint accords in this regard with that of Duploux, who also warns against the tendency of attributing to the 'Eupatrides une place spécifique dans le schéma historiographique d'évolution institutionnelle de la cité d'Athènes'.

demands less attention since it has already been argued that the word *genos*, which some scholars take as the Greek word for clan, almost never seems to be used in this specialised sense, except in regard to sacerdotal families.

Although we have studied in depth the relevant lexical terminology pertaining to birth, the chapters that follow do not restrict themselves to studying exclusively passages featuring it. Of course, the list of relevant vocabulary is useful since if we come across such words in the texts we are on high alert that the passage is of interest. Furthermore, we now have more appreciation for the history, etymology and nuanced meaning of these words, rather than associating them with their generic English translations. However, it is possible for the concept of birth to be engaged with by a poet without using the lexical terminology studied above. For example, when a Homeric hero lists his genealogy this is surely of direct relevance to our subject of inquiry, even if the passage features no technical vocabulary. Also, and this is true most especially in the analyses of five of Sophocles' plays, the dramatic action gives a representation of birth, at the level of plot. If we were myopically focused on specific words, we would lose sight of this bigger picture, which Sophocles most certainly paints.

## Chapter 3: Earlier Authors

### Homer

It is vitally important to investigate the ideas concerning birth found in Homer's epics because he had such a great influence on shaping not only the literature of subsequent genres but also societal attitudes. There is a tradition that Sophocles, in particular, took great inspiration from Homer, even to the point of being called the 'tragic Homer'.<sup>1</sup> And Knox notes that the 'heroic temper' identifiable with Sophocles' protagonists is particularly Achillean in nature.<sup>2</sup> We will see that many of the attitudes found in Homer in relation to birth, such as the tension between reputation and ability, the need to prove one's pedigree through achievement, *noblesse oblige*, the focus on the patriline, are all reflected in Sophocles' oeuvre. None of Sophocles' characters are implicated directly in a military war and yet they all display a belligerent and strife-bound conception of what it means to be a *eugenēs*. The hedonistic lifestyle sung by Anacreon of drunken symposia, erotic encounters and the joys of the Muse are absent from Sophocles. The playwright has transposed the ethic of the Iliadic battlefield onto the struggles of Life. And this ethic is intricately bound up with breeding.

As a preliminary, it is worth acknowledging that George Calhoun sets out in his two-part article 'Classes and Masses' to contest the notion that 'the society in which the poet found his background was composed of a plebeian mass dominated by a nobility of birth'.<sup>3</sup> He argues that the absence of specific words designating noble birth, found frequently in later literature, as well as the lack of interest in genealogical material suggest that it would be a misconception to view Homeric society as stratified into distinct classes determined by birth.

Calhoun makes the mistake of confusing thought with words: the alleged omission of technical and abstract words for noble birth does not necessarily mean that Homer is unaware of the concept, or that the concept is of little importance in his epics. Word study, when not practised with restraint, can be guilty of seeing individual words as constituting the thought-world of the piece of literature, when, in actual fact, they are constituent parts which convey meaning not as solitary entities but in their combination with other words. From a structural point of view, it is through the combination of words that narrative and dialogue are formed, and

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<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of all the ancient testimony commenting on Sophocles' emulation of Homer, see Schein (2012), according to whom, 'It was staple of Greek literary criticism from the fourth century BCE through to the middle ages, that Sophocles was an admirer and emulator of Homer (φιλόμηρος, ζηλωτής Όμήρου) and himself "Homeric" (Όμηρικός).'

<sup>2</sup> Knox (1964).

<sup>3</sup> Calhoun (1934).

it is in these more complete forms that Homer's interest in genealogy can be demonstrated.

It is nevertheless apparent that Homer's poems do not depict a political aristocracy. It appears that Homer is writing at a time when the transition from kingship to aristocracy had not yet fully taken place.<sup>1</sup> However, good birth is still a highly important attribute. The heroes who have gathered at the plains of Troy might more accurately be described as regional *basileis*, Odysseus of Ithaca, Achilles of the Myrmidons, for instance, rather than aristocrats, but what makes them *basileis* rather than one of the mass of foot-soldiers is the fact that they belong to a royal patriline. Birth is therefore still a critical quality by which the society is structured, even if the Homeric poems do not depict a political class of hereditary nobles, as found in medieval Europe.

ἀλλὰ καὶ ὡς μοι εἰπὲ τεδὸν γένος, ὀππόθεν ἐσσί.  
οὐ γὰρ ἀπὸ δρυὸς ἐσσι παλαιφάτου οὐδ' ἀπὸ πέτρης (*Od.* 19.163-4)  
Yet even so tell me of your stock from which you come; for you are not  
sprung from an oak of ancient story, or from a stone

The meaning behind Penelope's question to Odysseus has puzzled commentators.<sup>2</sup> Why does she justify her question asking who he is by stating that he is not sprung from ancient oak or rock? The answer is relatively simple and has no need of fancy anthropological explanations. Penelope is stating the fact, albeit in poetical terms, that no one is a free-standing individual devoid of family roots. Any human being has human family origins and is not therefore a product of the inanimate natural environment or created *ex nihilo*. Up until this point, Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, has refrained from giving Penelope an account of his family origins. She, eager to know the beggar's family background, makes it clear to the beggar the impossibility of pretending that he has no ancestry; like everyone else, he must be the offspring of two parents and therefore part of a larger family tree.

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<sup>1</sup> Starr (1992) seems correct in his statement that 'the Homeric world had not travelled all the way toward the elaboration of an aristocratic ethos' because there had not yet been the 'elimination of the Zeus-sprung *basileis*.' Finley (1979) 92 focusing on the the society depicted in the *Odyssey* detects a tension between kingship and aristocracy: the suitors would be the aristocrats challenging the primacy of Odysseus' rule as king. Drews (1983) argues that the word *basileus* signifies 'aristocrat' rather than 'king' in the Homeric epics. This position challenges the convention of seeing Homeric society as fundamentally monarchical.

<sup>2</sup> Calhoun (1934) 192. Stanford (1962) 321 lists the different ways the phrase has been understood: (1) as signifying 'ancient and obscure ancestry' (2) as implying that the 'human race originated from trees or from the earth itself' (3) as connoting 'a mere nobody with no distinguished ancestors'. Stanford with his excellent feel for Greek literature himself suggest that 'the force of Penelope's phrase, then is "You must have some relatives, if you're not a freak."'

This genealogical interest is not unique to Penelope in Homer's epics. Throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, strangers are often asked questions pertaining to their place of birth and their family background. The prominence given to this category of questions suggests that the best way to get to know a person is to learn where and who they are from. Conversely, when a character is to introduce themselves, they will often say who they are the son of and where they are from. This genealogical interest does not feature exclusively in dialogue sections where two strangers meet for the first time; throughout the narrative, Homer will use the patronymic when referring to a certain character, e.g. Telemachus, son of Odysseus, or Diomedes, son of Tydeus. Its prevalence almost desensitises us to the peculiarity and foreignness of the mind-set it belies. This section will explore what role noble birth plays in Homer's epics.

We have just spoken about introductions, and it is interesting that sometimes a stranger can be supposed to be of good lineage before any declaration or inquiry is made in this regard. There are several instances in Homer's epics where someone is presumed to be of good parents based purely on their physical appearance.<sup>1</sup> For example, Ajax after slaying Archedochus exclaims:

οὐ μὲν μοι κακὸς εἶδεται οὐδὲ κακῶν ἔξ,  
 ἀλλὰ κασίγνητος Ἀντήνορος ἵπποδάμοιο  
 ἢ πάϊς· αὐτῷ γὰρ γενεὴν ἄγχιστα ἐώκει<sup>2</sup> (*Il.* 14.472-4)

He does not seem to me to be a mean man nor of mean parents, but the brother of horse-taming Antenor or his son: for he resembles him most uncannily in his appearance.

In book four of the *Odyssey* during Telemachus' trip to Sparta, Menelaus upon seeing the young man and his friend Pisistratus remarks:

οὐ γὰρ σφῶν γε γένος ἀπόλωλε τοκῆων,  
 ἀλλ' ἀνδρῶν γένος ἐστὲ διοτρεφέων βασιλῆων  
 σκηπτούχων, ἐπεὶ οὐ κε κακοὶ τοιούσδε τέκοιεν (*Od.* 4.62-64)

The race of your parents has not been lost, you must be of godly sceptre-bearing kings, since no mean parents could have begotten you.

<sup>1</sup> Donlan (1999) 6 'External appearance as index of human worth, already firmly established in Homer, continues as a constant theme in the developing aristocratic self-conception.'

<sup>2</sup> Janko (1992) 219 seems to misinterpret the passage when he says 'To pretend to praise a slain foe is to praise one's own valour. We marvel at Aias' guess – and then at the sarcasm of his question, when the poet adds "he knew full well"!' The Greek that he translates as 'he knew full well' is εἴ γινώσκων which would be better translated as 'judging well', the secondary meaning of the word according to the *LSJ*.

The idea implicit here is that a person's appearance can be seen as an index of their social background. That a child can resemble in appearance one or both of their parents is an uncontroversial and relatively common phenomenon. And the example drawn from the *Iliad* could potentially be understood to be a case of it. However, Menelaus' praise of Telemachus and Pisistratus, on the other hand, does not seem to be based on making a connection between them and their fathers, Odysseus and Nestor, for at this point their identity remains undisclosed. Rather, Menelaus associates the appearance of the two young men with a collective notion of what a person of royal ancestry looks like. It is almost as if Menelaus sees in his mind a Platonic form of kingly appearance, of which the two young men appear to him as manifestations. Unlike the act of saying that a son resembles his father, whether the father be a king or a peasant and its ready admittance due to being based on a specific, concrete and personal comparison, suggesting that someone has the appearance of a king's son without knowing the king in question is harder to accept since it is an impersonal and abstract comparison based, most probably, on pattern recognition. For example, Menelaus will in his encounters with kings' sons have developed a collective notion of what this class of person looks like and, therefore, if he sees someone else who shares the qualities of this collective class, he naturally draws the conclusion that they have kingly ancestry.<sup>1</sup>

In both passages, no specific details concerning physical features are provided justifying the deductions of good breeding. The famous teichoscopic scene is maybe where Homer engages in the most visual description, relatively speaking, of the main heroes: Agamemnon, Odysseus, Ajax and Idomeneus. The description of Agamemnon is of particular interest since Priam, unknowingly but accurately, says that he looks like a king (170). This particular comment is provoked by the exceptional beauty (*καλόν*) and majesty (*γεραρόν*) of Agamemnon. It would seem then that beauty is potentially an aspect of kingly appearance. Majesty, here, seems to be equivalent to stateliness of manner. Therefore, a kingly appearance is not constituted purely by static physiognomy but also, presumably, by the royal bearing, grace and air that one gives off corporeally. Homer tries to give the four mentioned heroes individualised treatment, and this is perhaps why Agamemnon is marked out as kingly, perfectly natural given his role as confederate leader, but, that is not say that the other heroes are not of royal descent - their descriptions can also tell us what are the potential physical qualities indicating illustrious ancestry. Physical size, whether it be height or breadth of shoulder, seems to be a common feature of all three descriptions. Ajax stands out among the Achaeans by virtue of both his great height and breadth, while Odysseus is more noticeably broad than tall and Agamemnon the inverse. From a practical point of view, it is

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<sup>1</sup> We will see that this *topos* is found also in Sophocles and Euripides (Euripides chapter).

understandable why height and breadth would be associated with good breeding. These physical qualities are determined by diet and the physiognomy of one's parents. Not only would the heroes have had a better diet, eating choice pieces of meat, than the 'common folk' but their forbears, by virtue of also having had a more nutritious, protein-based diet, would be big and tall with the result that it is only natural that their descendants should turn out, both by heredity and nurture, to be so as well, thus making physical stature a family affair.

Noble birth certainly carries kudos and a recital of illustrious lineage could function as a way of making others favourably disposed to one's own ability. For example, Diomedes justifies his advice, in spite of his youth, to Agamemnon with reference to his lineage:

έγγυς άνήρ· ού δηθά ματεύσομεν· αἴ κ' έθέλητε  
πειθεσθαι, και μή τι κόττω άγάσησθε έκαστος  
οὔνεκα δη γενεήφι νεώτατός είμι μεθ' ύμίν·  
πατρός δ' έξ άγαθοῦ και έγώ γένος εύχομαι είναι  
Τυδέος, όν Θήβησι χυτή κατά γαῖα καλύπτει. (//. 14.110-14)

The man is near, not long will you search for him, if you are willing to be persuaded, and let not each of you begrudge me because I am the youngest among you: I boast with regard to family to be from a good father, Tydeus, whom heaped-up earth holds buried in Thebes.

He then goes on to give a brief biography of his ancestors starting with his great-grandfather Portheus. He does not fail to highlight the pre-eminence of his forbears. In speaking of his grandfather, Oineus, he says that 'he was, out of his siblings, exceptional in excellence' (118) and of his father that 'he surpassed all the Achaeans with the spear' (124-5). At the end of the family history he reasserts that his pedigree should entitle his voice to be heard as long as he has spoken well:

τά δε μέλλετ' άκουέμεν, εί έτεόν περ.  
τώ ούκ άν με γένος γε κακόν και άνάλκιδα φάντες  
μῦθον άτιμήσαιτε πεφασμένον όν κ' έῦ είπω.

Be prepared to take heed of my words, if they are truly spoken. Therefore you should not dishonour me, claiming that I come from a bad family or that I am a cowardly weakling, provided that I have spoken well.

It is interesting to note that Diomedes does not presume the attention of his addressees based purely on his lineage. He acknowledges that there is the second criterion of whether he has spoken eloquently and sensibly. In this regard, the recital of his family background appears to give him provisional permission to voice

his advice as well as to make his listeners lend their ear, or, give him the benefit of the doubt, as it were.<sup>1</sup> This right to speak is a privilege of the social elite, an honour accorded, on the whole, to those from good families. This is why Diomedes uses the verb ‘dishonour’ because forbidding him to speak would be tantamount to treating him as one of the lower-ranked citizens. The deeds of his ancestors have won him the honour of having his voice heard. There seems to be the implied idea that if Diomedes’ forbears were distinguished figures, particularly his father and grandfather, there is a strong likelihood that he himself is cut from the same cloth. The recital would be rather pointless unless there was the *sous-entendu* that the greatness of his forbears has been passed down to him.

The Thersites episode in book two illustrates the dishonour that is meted out when someone mean and from a humble family attempts to speak publicly, thus confirming the social code that has been identified in Diomedes’ statement.<sup>2</sup> Once the army has abandoned its flight, Thersites decides to rebuke the greed and cowardice of Agamemnon in order to stir up mutiny once again.<sup>3</sup> However, he receives a remorseless rebuking from Odysseus who reminds him of his lowly status and the deference he must pay to his betters:

ἴσχεο, μηδ’ ἔθελ’ οἷος ἐριζέμεναι βασιλεῦσιν  
οὐ γὰρ ἐγὼ σέο φημὶ χειριότερον βροτὸν ἄλλον  
ἔμμεναι, ὅσσοι ἄμ’ Ἀτρεΐδης ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθον.  
τῷ οὐκ ἂν βασιλῆας ἀνά στόμ’ ἔχων ἀγορεύεις,  
καί σφιν ὀνειδέα τε προφέροις, νόστόν τε φυλάσσοις (//. 2.247-51)

<sup>1</sup> Janko (1992) 162: ‘Here Diomedes argues that his lineage and valour make up for his juniority.’ Donlan (1999) 18 ‘It has already become clear that one must be a member of the “club” in order to compete.’ This is appropriate in relation to this episode with Diomedes, because his right to speak is based on his pedigree.

<sup>2</sup> The commentary of Kirk (1985) 138 is rather confusing. He starts by stating the general deduction of Thersites’ common origin derived from his lack of ascribed patronymic and place of origin. And then goes on to argue that Thersites’ claim of capturing and holding for ransom prisoners (2.231) is ‘surely a feat for the ‘front fighters’ or (named) nobility.’ But then asserts ‘The division into aristocrats (or ‘outstanding men’, cf. 188) and the rest is in any case a rather loose one, and it seems more probable that the omission of both patronymic and city or region is intended, rather, to distinguish this outrageous person – who would not be permitted to open his mouth in assembly if he were a common soldier, except to roar approval or occasional dissent – from his noble and more fortunate peers.’ It seems therefore that Kirk reverts back to the generally accepted view that Thersites is of non-elite status.

<sup>3</sup> It is true, as Rose (1988) 19 remarks, that Achilles also rebuked Agamemnon for his greed and cowardice. However, Donlan (1973) 151 correctly remarks ‘his [Achilles’] speeches are full of the heroic ethic wholly lacking in Thersites’ broadside. Thersites’ realistic, pragmatic, common soldier’s view of warfare is in all essentials the same as Archilochus.’



Restrain yourself, and do not be minded to quarrel alone with kings. For I think that there is no baser mortal than you among all those who with the sons of Atreus came beneath Ilios. So you ought not take the name of kings in your mouth as you hold forth, and cast reproaches on them, and watch for home-coming

The first reason Odysseus gives for Thersites' need to show restraint and abstain from public speech is his low rank. Odysseus suggests that Thersites is the meanest dreg of society and therefore his voice counts for nought. Thersites' low rank is presumably determined not just by the ugliness of his physical appearance but also by his complete lack of noble birth.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that the patronymic is not used even once in relation to him.

Odysseus rounds off his rebuke with a menacing threat and a violent blow. This illustrates the severe punishment that would face anyone trying to transgress the class boundaries. It is a divided society where discrimination is based not on colour but on class.<sup>2</sup> Curiously, Homer's description of the army's reaction to the episode suggests that the regular soldier sided with Odysseus.<sup>3</sup> In which case, the elite's superiority is not to be seen as a simple imposition upon the masses, since they themselves appear to accept that this hierarchy is desirable:

νῦν δὲ τόδε μέγ' ἄριστον ἐν Ἀργείοισιν ἔρεξεν,  
ὄς τὸν λωβητῆρα ἐπεσβόλον ἔσχ' ἀγοράων.  
οὐ θῆν μιν πάλιν αὖτις ἀνήσει θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ  
νικεῖειν βασιλῆας ὄνειδείοις ἐπέεσσιν

But now is this deed far the best that he has performed among the Argives, since he has made this scurrilous babblers cease from his harangues. Never

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<sup>1</sup> Geddes (1984) 23 'His fault is not he is low-born – we are not told about that one way or the other'. The admission has already been made that although there is a lack of vocabulary signifying birth specifically, the concept is still of essential importance. Even though Thersites is not described by an adjective, such as *dusgenēs*, which in fact appears nowhere in Homer's extant oeuvre, does not mean that we are precluded from deducing humble origin for this character. He is clearly represented as being not one of the social elite and because Homeric society is dualistically divided between the elite heroes and the ordinary rank and file, we can assume that Thersites belongs to this latter category. His appearance and the lack of patronymic further justify such an assumption.

<sup>2</sup> Arnheim (1977): 'The insolent commoner who dares to insult Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae and commander-in-chief of the expedition against Troy, is described in great physical detail... There can be no doubt from this as to what Thersites' origin and character are... there can be no doubt there are class barriers in Homeric society.'

<sup>3</sup> This is how de Ste. Croix (2013) 413 takes the passage: 'Homer is not at all on his side; he represents the bulk of the army (*hē plēthus*, line 278) as disapproving strongly of his seditious speech and as breaking into applause and laughter when the great Odysseus thumps him.'

again, I think, will his proud spirit set him on to rail at kings with reviling words

Noble birth is often invoked in the context of a duel seemingly as a way for a person to confirm their worth or superiority. The undertone appears to be that there is some correlation in ability between the descendant and his ancestors. A particularly emblematic example of this belief is found in Achilles' encounter with Asteropaeus:

κεῖσ' οὕτως· χαλεπὸν τοι ἐρισθενέος Κρονίωνος  
παισὶν ἐριζέμεναι ποταμοῖό περ ἐκγεγαῶτι.  
φῆσθα σὺ μὲν ποταμοῦ γένος ἔμμεναι εὐρὺ ρέοντος,  
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γενεὴν μεγάλου Διὸς εὐχομαι εἶναι.  
τίκτέ μ' ἀνήρ πολλοῖσιν ἀνάσσων Μυρμιδόνεσσι  
Πηλεὺς Αἰακίδης· ὃ δ' ἄρ' Αἰακὸς ἐκ Διὸς ἦεν.  
τῷ κρείσσω μὲν Ζεὺς ποταμῶν ἀλμυρηνέντων,  
κρείσσω αὖτε Διὸς γενεὴ ποταμοῖο τέτυκται. (Il. 21.184-91)

Lie as you are! Hard it is to strive with the children of the mighty son of Cronos, even for one begotten of a river. You say that your birth is from the wide-flowing river, but I claim to be of the lineage of great Zeus. The father who begot me is one who is lord among the many Myrmidons, Peleus, son of Aeacus; and Aeacus was begotten of Zeus. So as Zeus is mightier than seaward-flowing river, so mightier too is the offspring of Zeus than the offspring of a river.

Achilles' line of argument is that his superiority over the river Asteropaeus is guaranteed by the fact that his ancestry is superior to that of the river.<sup>1</sup> The descendant of Zeus seems convinced of the intimate connection of ancestry and progeny: if my ancestors are superior to yours, I myself am superior to you. It is interesting to note that in this passage of only seven lines *genos/geneê* is used three times. In the same way that Hesiod's *Theogony*, serving as a divine cosmology, focused on relations, Achilles' explanation of martial prowess is based on *genos*, where classification is made according to the family to which one belongs. Achilles does not assess himself and the river based on individual attributes but examines the two *genē* to which they respectively belong. There is a suggestion that the outcome of the duel between the two individuals was inevitable, determined by the value of each contestant's *genos*.

Another example of this phenomenon is to be found at the beginning of the duel between Achilles and Aeneas. The duel starts with Achilles taunting Aeneas who in

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<sup>1</sup> Richardson (1993) 68 is correct in his pattern recognition when he says that 'the main theme of Akhilleus' speech of triumph, the genealogical comparison, is standard in heroic confrontations.'

response gives a long description of his royal ancestry, presumably to make clear to Achilles that he is not fighting against a weakling and that he must be taken seriously as an opponent.<sup>1</sup> Aeneas formulates the start of his speech in such a way to make clear that, in terms of ancestry, there is parity between the two:

ἴδμεν δ' ἀλλήλων γενεήν, ἴδμεν δὲ τοκῆας  
πρόκλυτ' ἀκούοντες ἔπεα θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων·  
ὄψει δ' οὔτ' ἄρ' πω σὺ ἐμούς ἴδες οὔτ' ἄρ' ἐγὼ σούς.  
φασὶ σὲ μὲν Πηλῆος ἀμύμονος ἔκγονον εἶναι,  
μητρὸς δ' ἐκ Θέτιδος καλλιπλοκάμου ἀλοσύδνης·  
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν υἱὸς μεγαλήτορος Ἀγχίσαο  
εὖχομαι ἐκγεγάμεν, μήτηρ δέ μοι ἐστ' Ἀφροδίτη (//. 20.203-9)

We know the family of each other, and we know each other's parents, hearing the old tales of mortal men: by sight though you do not know mine nor I yours. They say that you are the son of blameless Peleus, and your mother is sea-born Thetis of beautiful locks. Well, I boast to be from great-hearted Anchises, and Aphrodite is my mother.

The presentation is very symmetrical with an ABAB scheme (father-mother, father-mother). This presentational symmetry is designed to reflect the parity and equality between the two lineages, where both feature an impressive father and a divine mother. Aeneas then traces his royal Trojan ancestry all the way back from his great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, Zeus. Aeneas' paternal line runs as follows: Zeus, Dardanus, Erichthonius, Tros, Capys, Assarakos, Anchises, Aeneas.<sup>2</sup>

In book 6 Diomedes asks Glaucus, in reaction his bold and valiant fighting, of his origins to make sure that he is not a god. Initially, Glaucus appears to answer coyly with the famous simile that generations are like leaves on a tree:

οἷη περ φύλλων γενεὴ τοίη δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν.  
φύλλα τὰ μὲν τ' ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δὲ θ' ὕλη  
τηλεθώσα φύει, ἔαρος δ' ἐπιγίγνεται ὥρη·  
ὥς ἀνδρῶν γενεὴ ἢ μὲν φύει ἢ δ' ἀπολήγει (//. 6.146-9)

Like the generation of leave such is the generation of men. Some leaves the wind blows to the ground, other leaves, when it is the season of spring, a

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards (1991) 313 aptly comments: 'It is common for Homeric warriors to recount their pedigrees with pride, because the glory of the fathers is reflected upon their sons.'

<sup>2</sup> Edwards (1991) 313 seems right regarding the length of this genealogical speech that 'it is also not unfitting that splendid history of Troy's kings should be rehearsed just as the doom of the city is being prepared for.' In this way the speech serves also a broader literary purpose.

blooming forest puts forth. In the same way one generation of men springs up and another dies.

At face value, it seems as though this simile is designed to illustrate the ephemerality of human life, not only in describing the cyclical process of life and death through the metaphor of spring and autumn but also in choosing as the vehicle of the metaphor leaves, things inherently insubstantial, slight and fragile.<sup>1</sup> And as such, it forms a very strange, and almost inappropriate, preface to a ninety-line long recital of ancestry.

Glaucus then commences exposition of his family ancestry going as far back as his great-great-grandfather, Sisyphus. The only family member whose accomplishments he describes, and in detail, are those of his grandfather, Bellorophon, presumably because he is considered his most distinguished forbear. We hear testimony of his honour, in the form of his refusal to sleep with the king's wife, as well as stories exemplifying his great valour (fighting the Chimera, Solymi, Amazons etc.). Interestingly Glaucus alludes to his grandfather's fall from grace (6.200-2). The story is told in vague terms but he definitely refers to the time when Bellorophon tried to fly to Mount Olympus on a horse, only to fall down after Zeus had sent a gadfly to sting his horse as punishment for the act of hubris. It seems that Glaucus is confident that the accomplishments of his grandfather offset any imperfections of character. It could also be the case that, since Bellorophon is such a well-known figure, Glaucus would have exposed himself to the accusation of bias had he not given a complete and balanced biographical portrayal.

Glaucus ends his speech by invoking the advice his father gave to him:

Ἴππόλοχος δέ μ' ἔτικτε, καὶ ἐκ τοῦ φημι γενέσθαι·  
πέμπε δέ μ' ἐς Τροίην, καί μοι μάλα πόλλ' ἐπέτελλεν  
αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων,  
μηδὲ γένος<sup>2</sup> πατέρων αἰσχυνέμεν, οἳ μὲγ' ἄριστοι  
ἔν τ' Ἐφύρη ἐγένοντο καὶ ἐν Λυκίῃ εὐρείῃ.  
ταύτης τοι γενεῆς τε καὶ αἵματος εὐχομαι εἶναι. (//. 6.206-11)

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk (1990) 176: 'The likening of human generations to the fall of leaves in autumn and their growing again in spring carries no suggestion of rebirth, but means that life is transient and one generation succeeds another.' This critic does not read into the metaphor as much I have done but he fails properly to account for the fact that Glaukus then proceeds to speak at length about his ancestry.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase γένος πατέρων could, from one point of view, be seen as somewhat tautologous if *genos* signifies patriline. However, from another point of view, it could be seen as confirming that *genos* means patriline, rather than ancestry, through this expansive phrasing which makes the meaning explicit.

Hippolochus gave birth to me, and from him I declare to be born; he sent me to Troy, and enjoined to me many things, namely, to always be the best and surpass others, not to shame my paternal line, men who were greatly the best in Ephyre and Lycia. From this family and blood I boast to be.

There is an expectation placed upon Glaucus by his father, in view of his illustrious lineage, to distinguish himself on the plains of Troy. In fact, he is urged to be the very best and second to no man, and in this way he will avoid bringing shame upon the family. What emotional and psychological impact can we imagine this would have on Glaucus? I believe he would feel a pressure, perhaps even somewhat oppressive, to live up to his forbears as well as a confidence, fostered by the knowledge of his ancestors' accomplishments, in his ability to achieve great things. What a contrast there must be between this send-off and that of an ordinary foot-soldier, whose parents' only prayer is for him to return home safe with no mention made of keeping the family flag flying, since social obscurity is all that the family has ever known.<sup>1</sup> The foot-soldier, without even considering any disparity in equipment, is psychologically unarmed wielding in neither hand the incisive spurs to excellence, expectation and confidence, derived from one's lineage, as shown in this passage.

We have focused on nurture dynamics but Glaucus' use of the word αἵματος (blood) points to, or at least suggests, the idea that somehow his family excellence also 'runs in the blood' and that his nature shares the same properties, to avoid the anachronistic term of 'genes', as his ancestors. It is important not to underestimate the significance of this single word. Had Glaucus been an adopted son, he would never have been able to employ the word in this context. As much as we see that Glaucus' nurture and family background have led him to prize the attainment of excellence, it is difficult to ignore the concurrent theory, complementing as opposed to conflicting with the nurture argument, that he has an innate propensity to excellence by virtue of being the blood-descendant of illustrious ancestors.

It is interesting how the Homeric heroes, when speaking of the family tree, use rather grandiose expressions such as 'I boast to be from x', or 'I declare to be from y'. Glaucus has used both in the space of six lines. Maybe it is for metrical reasons why the simple verb 'to be' is not used without any announcing verb. But there could be a more philosophical reason behind this phenomenon. There is something terribly concrete and definite about the verb 'to be'. However, there is always a small element of uncertainty concerning the biological legitimacy of children, especially in ancient Greece where there were no medical paternity tests. The

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<sup>1</sup> I am deliberately painting a black-and-white picture of contrast here.

heroes seem cognisant, even if only at an unconscious level, of this uncertainty and therefore make known that their lineage is not an objective fact but a subjective assertion.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there is for them a test by which they can prove their ancestry and that seems to be by matching the distinction of their forbears, obviously with the underlying assumption that only a family descendant would be capable of this feat.

As much as these recitals of ancestry attest to the conviction that there is a connection between birth and worth, it seems to be the case that the relationship between the two is not considered to be perfectly proportionate, that is to say, it could happen that a person of lower birth proves to be superior to someone of higher birth. This is definitely the inference to be drawn from these words of Agamemnon:

μηδὲ σύ γ' αἰδόμενος σῆσι φρεσὶ τὸν μὲν ἀρείω  
καλλείπειν, σὺ δὲ χεῖρον' ὀπάσσειαι αἰδοῖ εἴκων  
ἔς γενεὴν ὀρώων, μηδ' εἰ βασιλεύτερός ἐστιν (//. 10.237-40)

Do not out of respect leave behind the better man and take the worse man yielding to shame and focusing on birth, not even if he is kinglier.

Agamemnon's advice to Diomedes before his espionage mission is revealing of the fact that in the Homeric ethic merit is supposed to be counted before birth.<sup>2</sup> The social structure aims to avoid being an ossified, institutionalised nobility of birth where privilege and distinction are passed down as a birth right. Homer's epics are noticeably absent of incompetent nobles, showing that noble birth is not in and of itself a prized attribute. Even though this passage shows an awareness that birth does not equal excellence, Homer's heroes are nevertheless, almost without exception, both competent and noble. The two qualities seem to be intimately connected in the poet's works. Even though there is a theoretical awareness of the potential disconnect between birth and worth, Homer does not appear to present a decisive rupture between the two. Just as in a perfect legal system the just should equal the legal, Homer, on the whole, presents the well-born as synonymous with the good.

Far from depending on titular or hereditary distinction, the heroes appear to be governed by a form of *noblesse oblige*, preventing them from resting passively on the laurels of their pedigree and forcing them to live up to the expectations of their

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<sup>1</sup> Another way of understanding the formulation is to detect boastful pride.

<sup>2</sup> Hainsworth (1993) 175: 'Diomedes was a young man and sometimes at least (4.411-18, though not at 9.31-49) deferential towards seniority and rank. That a man can be χείρων and βασιλεύτερος is implicit in the wrath of Achilles, but as an *arcanum imperii* it is not usually so candidly revealed as it is here.'

birth and reciprocate their enjoyment of privilege with the fulfilment of duty. They know that their elevated social position cannot be supported by their bloodline alone but needs to be buttressed by individual excellence. Sarpedon's speech to Glaucus is a famous expression of this idea:

Γλαῦκε τί ἦ δὴ νῶϊ τετιμήμεσθα μάλιστα  
ἔδρη τε κρέασίν τε ἰδὲ πλείους δεπάεσσιν  
ἐν Λυκίῃ, πάντες δὲ θεοὺς ὡς εἰσορώωσι,  
καὶ τέμενος νεμόμεσθα μέγα Ξάνθοιο παρ' ὄχθας  
καλὸν φυταλιῆς καὶ ἀρούρης πυροφόροιο;  
τὼ νῦν χρὴ Λυκίοισι μέτα πρώτοισιν ἐόντας  
ἐστάμεν ἠδὲ μάχης καυστείρης ἀντιβολῆσαι,  
ὄφρα τις ᾗδ' εἴπη Λυκίων πύκα θωρηκτῶν·  
οὐ μὰν ἀκλεέες Λυκίην κάτα κοιρανέουσιν  
ἡμέτεροι βασιλῆες, ἔδουσί τε πίονα μῆλα  
οἶνόν τ' ἕξαιτον μελιθεῖα: ἀλλ' ἄρα καὶ ἴς  
ἐσθλή, ἐπεὶ Λυκίοισι μέτα πρώτοισι μάχονται (310-21)

Glaucus, why have we both been specially honoured with front-row seats, choice pieces of meat and many cups in Lycia with all looking upon us as gods? And we possess an estate by the banks of the river Xanthus, beautiful with vineyards and wheat-growing fields. Now it is necessary for us, being with the front-rank Lycians, to stand and face raging warfare, so that one of the cuirassed Lycians might loudly say: 'Not without glory do our kings rule in Lycia, and eat fat lambs and drink choice honey-sweet wine. But their force is good, since they fight with the foremost Lycians'.

Sarpedon knows that his and Glaucus' privilege cannot, or, at the very least, should not be maintained simply by virtue of their position as rulers of Lycia which, although not stated in this passage, they owe to the accomplishments of their grandfather, Bellorophon. In this way, good birth has given them property and high standing, however, of these things they are not freeholders but leaseholders, and their lease is paid through valour on the battlefield.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hainsworth (1993) 352: 'These famous verses constitute the clearest statement in the *Iliad* of the imperatives that govern the heroic life and their justification. It is, as Sarpedon puts it, a kind of social contract: valour in exchange for honour. Honour comes first, for only the founders of dynasties gained their thrones by first showing valour (like Bellorophon, 6.171-95); their successors inherited their status, and might, as here, have to remind themselves of the obligations that it entailed.' Lacey (1968) 38: 'The claim to be a hero, an *agathos*, depended in the first place upon family, but high birth was not enough; to sustain the claim other qualifications were required, the principal one being the strength

Many of the attitudes towards birth found in Homer will be reflected in Sophocles' oeuvre. Firstly, we will see how referencing one's family background as a rhetorical resource for gaining the upper hand will structure a whole debate scene in the *Ajax*, where each of the interlocutors boasts to have the most eminent family background and therefore a higher status, and this higher status would seem to lend more authority to their argumentative position in the verbal exchange. The instances of this feature in Homeric dialogue suggest that, as much as Calhoun seems right to argue that there is no official hereditary nobility in the Homeric epics, the social hierarchy does seem to be structured in a dynamic way by claims to superior ancestry. Secondly, the Homeric approach of valuing high birth but not blindly putting one's faith in it is also applicable to Sophocles' treatment, as we shall see. In the Homeric epics, the status of the heroes depends to some extent on their pedigree but, at the same time, it is necessary for them to prove through deeds of valour that they are commensurate with their ancestry. So, in essence, good birth serves a dual purpose: it serves to give someone standing but also acts as a spur to achieve excellence.<sup>1</sup> Excellence and good birth, even if there are certain exceptions and the relationship requires constant confirmation, are presented as intricately joined principles, with the result that Homer's *aristoi*, who all boast excellent breeding, are in fact the best men in regards to the military *aretē* valued by Homeric society.

### Theognis and Pindar

The reason why I have elected to examine the topic of birth in Theognis and Pindar is because of all the lyric/elegiac poets these two are most notable for their focus in this regard. Both poets are writing in the archaic period and outside of any democratic constitution, even if populism is a growing issue, and so we witness a notable freedom in their expressions in support of breeding. The education of Athenians, with its emphasis on literature, music and athletics, is likely to have involved exposure to the poetry of Theognis and Pindar with the result that the views expressed by these poets would have provided some sort of context against which any other stances on noble birth would be appreciated. Certainly in Euripides we see provocative passages questioning noble birth whose radicality seems due, in part, to the fact the passages are actively rebelling against the views of anterior poets. One of the reasons why we do not see argumentative passages in Sophocles attempting to prove the validity of the concept of breeding is maybe because the

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and fighting ability necessary to protect a hero's family and possessions from would-be marauders, and perhaps also the ability to augment his possessions by plunder.'

<sup>1</sup> Donlan (1999) 15 'The ability to trace descent from heroes of the past was important in two directions. It acted as a spur to the individual [...] and it helped to establish the warrior's credentials as warrior, identifying him as a member of the closed fraternity, enabling him to trade on his "status".'



poet could rely on the fact that good birth was a traditional concept already promoted by Theognis and Pindar. If it had been a new idea that Sophocles was introducing he is unlikely to have been able to refer to it in the brief and, one might even say, presumptuous way he does.

### Theognis

The poet Theognis has commonly been seen as a spokesperson of aristocratic ideology. Although the exact details of the political situation of his native Megara are unclear it is manifest from certain of his elegies that it was experiencing social upheaval, or at least a restructuring of the social structure, caused in large part by wealth predominating over birth and character as a determinant of social position. In the following elegy we see this expressed as well as featuring an analogy, much referenced, illustrating the notion of *aretē* being consanguineous with recourse to animal breeding practices:

κριοὺς μὲν καὶ ὄνους διζήμεθα, Κύρνε, καὶ ἵππους  
εὐγενέας, καὶ τις βούλεται ἐξ ἀγαθῶν  
πάσασθαι γῆμαι δὲ κακὴν κακοῦ οὐ μελεδαίνει  
ἐσθλὸς ἀνὴρ, ἦν τις χρήματα πολλὰ διδῶ·  
οὐδὲ γυνὴ κακοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἀναίνεται εἶναι ἄκοιτις  
πλουσίου, ἀλλ' ἀφνεὸν βούλεται ἀντ' ἀγαθοῦ.  
χρήματα γὰρ τιμῶσι· καὶ ἐκ κακοῦ ἐσθλὸς ἔγημεν  
καὶ κακὸς ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ· πλοῦτος ἔμειξε γένος,  
οὕτω μὴ θαύμαζε γένος, Πολυπαῖδη, ἀστῶν  
μαυροῦσθαι· σὺν γὰρ μίσγεται ἐσθλὰ κακοῖς. (183-92)

Cyrnus, we seek out well-bred rams, asses and horses, and someone looks to obtain offspring from good stock. But a fine man does not disdain to marry a base woman from a base father, as long as much money is given, nor does a woman refuse to be the wife of a base man, provided he is rich, since she seeks wealth over virtue. In this way they honour money: a fine man marries a woman from a base man and a base man marries a woman from a fine man. Wealth has adulterated the stock. Therefore, do not be surprised, son of Polypaus, to see the race of the citizens become obscure; fine has been mixed with base.

Theognis uses the example of livestock, where selective breeding is applied, to call into question the marriage practices of his time. What exactly does he mean when referring to the seeking of εὐγενέας animals? There are three different possibilities, all of which could be at play at the same time. Firstly, the point might be that animals are chosen for breeding based on an inspection of their physical frame, general health and temperament. Secondly, he might be referring to the notion of

pedigreed animals. Technically, a pedigreed animal is one whose ancestors have been recorded in written form. In archaic Greece where writing was a relatively recent phenomenon, a pedigreed animal could be one whose ancestors were known through oral tradition. Thirdly, Theognis might be implying the notion of purebreed, such an animal is one whose ancestors all belong to the same breed. The benefit of pure breeding is that the offspring will invariably inherit the appearance and traits of their parents, in other words, they are bred true to type.

I believe that all these ideas are implied by the word εὐγενέας in this instance, especially seeing that they can still all be present in the modern practice of race-horse breeding. For example, if a horse breeder wanted to produce an Ascot-winning Thoroughbred, they would have to choose their sire and dam from the Thoroughbred breed, so that the offspring would be a purebred Thoroughbred or, as might glibly be said, a thoroughbred Thoroughbred. Then there would be the more exacting stage of doing a medical inspection of the potential parents, looking at their muscular frame, examining their gait, the length of their gallop stride, their lung capacity etc. This physical inspection would be combined with a study of their pedigree, studying their ancestry hoping to find that they are from a long line of successful racehorses. In practice, very wealthy horse breeders tend to breed racehorses from parents who have already been crowned victors at racing events. This pragmatic approach can work in the case of racehorses since the emphasis is almost uniquely on swift-footedness verifiable by contests. With the other two animals that Theognis lists, rams and asses, the tripartite attention to physical health, pedigree and purebreed are less likely to be elided.

This method of breeding animals is contrasted with marriage habits which Theognis considers dysgenic. In effect, he laments that the nobles intermarry with the *nouveaux-riches* for financial gain. The fault is committed not only by noble men but also by noble women. The language used by Theognis suggests that the offspring of these marriages are a crossbreed, where the positive traits of the aristocracy inevitably end up watered down. Clearly the poet considers the aristocrats to constitute a separate and superior breed from the rest of the population.<sup>1</sup> γένος (v. 191) seems to refer to the pedigreed ancestry of the social elite. It is almost as though Theognis envisages the *agathoi* as a separate breed from the *kakoi*. But from the process of intermarrying, the *genos* of the *agathoi* has now been hybridised. In the elegy Theognis appears to ascribe equal importance to the role of women as men in the reproductive process, which differs somewhat from Homer's androcentric conception of *genos*. And the social consequence of this

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<sup>1</sup> This particular passage should be enough to counter the claim of Van Wees (2003) 67 that 'he [Theognis] claims in justification of the elite no hereditary privileges or innate superiority.'

phenomenon is that the formerly stratified and hierarchical structure of the citizen population,<sup>1</sup> neatly maintained by people of the same class marrying, while at the same time shunning any marriage prospects with their social antipodes, has been thrown into disorder.

Theognis would prefer for nobles to practise selective breeding as practised with livestock so that breed/class, pedigree/ancestry and optimal traits become the determinant features in marital union. Although the idea of good human offspring is not directly stated, it is nevertheless implicitly understood that Theognis' advice is predicated on the notion that *aretē* is hereditary, i.e. if the right conditions are met, it is possible to engender an *agathos* child. Theognis does not believe that human reproduction is random and arbitrary, but instead insists on the intimate relationship between parents and child. It is not surprising that this passage is often taken to represent ancient eugenics.

This is not the only passage in Theognis which stresses the importance of selective breeding.

οὔτε γὰρ ἐκ σκίλλης πόδα φύεται οὐδ' ὑάκινθος,  
οὔτε ποτ' ἐκ δούλης τέκνον ἐλευθέριον (537-8)

For neither a rose nor a hyacinth is born from a squill, and never a freeman from a slave mother.

Here a botanical analogy is used to illustrate the point that in human reproduction biological determinism is also at play. Just as there are different species of plants, so there are different categories of humans, and these categories are not interpenetrable.<sup>2</sup> What is particularly interesting is that only the mother is referenced, not in such a way for us to infer that the matriline is privileged as in the Jewish custom, but it certainly gives an importance to the mother's role in the production process that was rarely present in Homer and, as we shall see in the *Electra* chapter, could, at times, be strongly denied.<sup>3</sup>

Concomitant with this faith in the power of selective breeding to produce a man of quality is a denial of formal education to be able to make a bad man good:

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<sup>1</sup> This concept appears implied by the use of *genos* (v. 190).

<sup>2</sup> Greenhalgh (1972) 202 rightly emphasises Theognis' conviction in the indispensability of the 'stock' for achieving excellence: 'Theognis' starting-point was the principle that neither man nor any other creature could have quality unless its progenitors had quality.'

<sup>3</sup> Van Groningen (1966) 213: 'Il en est de même de la conviction que la nature des parents, surtout de la mère, détermine celle des enfants, cf. Eurip. Fr. 298, c'est pour cela que Th. s'oppose si vigoureusement au mariage du noble avec la femme de basse naissance.'

ἀλλὰ διδάσκων  
οὔποτε ποιήσεις τὸν κακὸν ἀνδρ' ἀγαθόν.

But teaching you will never make the bad man good (437-8)

Scholars have sometimes seen a contradiction in the oeuvre because Theognis advocates the need for Cynrus to learn from the company of good men

ἀλλ' αἰεὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἔχεο·  
καὶ παρὰ τοῖσιν πῖνε καὶ ἔσθιε, καὶ μετὰ τοῖσιν  
ἴζε καὶ ἄνδανε τοῖς, ὧν μεγάλη δύναμις.  
ἐσθλῶν μὲν γὰρ ἅπ' ἐσθλὰ μαθήσεται

But always cling to good men, drink and eat by their side, and sitting among them be pleasing to those whose power is great. For from good men you will learn good things.

In fact, the contradiction is only apparent. Theognis is denying the efficacy of formal, theoretical and paid education while at the same time advocating the benefit of company, example and mentorship.<sup>1</sup> The sort of formal education that would be sold by the Sophists with the promise of the teachability of excellence is vehemently denied by Theognis. But the traditional learning process of a young nobleman growing into his role by keeping the company of older noblemen and absorbing their habits in a natural and osmotic way is championed.

Furthermore, how do we square Theognis' faith in selective breeding to produce a man of quality with his admission that those born good can become bad? Put simply, Theognis believes that a well-born man requires the appropriate nurture to fulfil his latent nobility, and failing this, he can end up a *kakos*. However, those born a *kakos*, irrespective of how well they are educated, have no chance of becoming an *agathos*.<sup>2</sup> In essence, good birth is a necessary but not sufficient condition of excellence, nurture is a necessary complement, and bad birth altogether precludes the possibility of excellence.

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<sup>1</sup> Carrière (1954) 225 also resolves this apparent contradiction in a similar way: 'Ce dont Théognis proclame ici la faillite, c'est un enseignement méthodique, presque scolaire, comme celui que donnèrent, plus tard, les sophistes [...] l'éducation qu'il y recommande est tout autre ; c'est celle que donnent avant tout l'exemple et les fréquentations.'

<sup>2</sup> Van Groningen (1966) 123 in relation to elegy 305-8, where Theognis concedes that not all men are born of low quality from the stomach but some – those born of good stock – become bad through bad association, comments: 'il exprime la conviction que même des hommes bons de naissance gâtent leur caractère par le commerce des méchants' but 'le poète ne fait qu'exprimer ses doutes sur la corrigibilité de ceux qui sont dépourvus de la vertu.' Greenhalgh (1972) 207 understands Theognis' position in the same way.

## Pindar

Of all the Greek authors, Pindar's emphatic insistence on the principle of hereditary excellence is perhaps the most noticeable.<sup>1</sup> In the majority of his odes the success of the victor is understood and explained in terms of family origin.<sup>2</sup> His odes are replete also with words relating to heredity (*suggenēs*, *emphuēs*, *phua*, *gennaios*, *gnēsios* to list but a few). And then there are multiple passages where he makes a gnomic statement concerning the idea of bloodline. In order to gain an impression of how Pindar understands the notion of inherited excellence let us examine these very passages.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter we will investigate two main themes: (1) Pindar's tendency to point out the athletic successes of the victor's forbears; (2) his stance in favour of natural ability as opposed to tuition in the educational debate. The ideas proposed in Pindar's odes about the importance of bloodline for success and his low valuation of education are important to study carefully because they would have formed, to some degree, an ideological context against which statements in Sophocles' plays on the matter would be understood. Although there were up to a thousand Greek cities, through trade they were intricately connected and we know that the oeuvre of one poet from a particular city could influence that of another poet living in another city.

Before delving into the relevant passages, it is important to make two disclaimers. The first is that it is impossible for us to know exactly what Pindar as a person thought on the matter of birth. We are entitled to say that his extant body appears to present a coherent and relatively consistent stance on the subject, but the jump of identifying this with the poet's personal view is invalid. One of the major reasons for this caution arises from a mindfulness of the manner in which this plays are

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<sup>1</sup> Valle (1977) is also not insensitive to the emphasis of the poet on the concept of inherited excellence: 'fue el quien pronuncio los más altos elegíos de la naturaleza privilegiada del noble [...] Esa naturaleza especial, transmitida por los antepasados, explica la victoria de los atletas.'

<sup>2</sup> Rose (1968) 160: 'Pindar chooses to integrate the achievement of the victor with his origin. I count twenty-three odes out of the surviving forty-four in which the excellence of the victor is explicitly presented as inherited from the heroes of his homeland [...] Of these, all but *Olympian* 9 and *Nemean* 3 also emphasize a purely literal sense of inherited excellence by associating the victor's achievement with those of his relatives or family line. In *Olympian* 9 and *Nemean* 3, where presumably the family of the victors was not sufficiently distinguished to permit praise of a specific heritage, Pindar is nonetheless strikingly emphatic in proclaiming the principle of inherited excellence (*Ol.* 9.100-104; *Ne.* 3.40-42)'. The Theban boy runner Thrasydaeus in *Pythian* 11 is said to have cast another wreath onto the ancestral hearth, capping two previous triumphs (possibly by his grandfather).'

<sup>3</sup> Webster (1936) believes that the aristocratic ideal of Pindar was the greatest influence on the thought of the playwright.

commissioned and performed. On the whole, Pindar was commissioned to write victory odes for athletic victors who belonged to a wealthy, politically influential and sometimes even royal family. As cynical as it may seem, it would be in the poet's personal interest to wax lyrical on the advantages of good birth since it would likely echo the belief system of the victor/victor's family who had commissioned the ode.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there are times when Pindar's insistence on breeding, innate ability and the unteachability of excellence plays to his favour as a poet of aristocratic status over his competitors, Simonides and Bacchylides, to name the most notable ones.

*Athletic success runs in the blood*

For a notable instance of Pindar associating an athlete's victory with those of his ancestors, *Pythian* 10 is an illustrative example:

τὸ δὲ συγγενὲς ἐμβέβακεν ἴχνεσιν πατρὸς  
Ὀλυμπιονίκα δις ἐν πολεμαδόκοις  
Ἄρεος ὄπλοις·  
ἔθηκε καὶ βαθυλείμων ὑπὸ Κίρρας ἀγῶν  
πέτραν κρατησίποδα Φρικίαν. (12-16)

His inborn nature has made him follow in the footsteps of his father, twice Olympic victor in the war-sustaining armour of Ares: and the contest in the deep meadow under the rock of Cirrha made Phricias a victor in the footrace

Pindar associates Hippocleas' victory in the double stadium race with those of his father in the hoplite race. The ode appears to be asserting that Hippocleas' victory is due to and testimony of his father's athletic prowess. Furthermore, if, as one of the scholia suggests, Phricias is the grandfather of Hippocleas, we have presented to us a three-generation bloodline of victors in foot-races. Pindar is hereby attributing fleet-footedness to bloodline in the same way that the swiftness of racehorses is put down to breeding. He does not make this comparison himself but the comparison has been drawn by me to illustrate Pindar's recourse to lineage as an explanation of ability.

Equally, in *Pythian* 8 Pindar connects Aristomenes' success with that of his maternal uncles:

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<sup>1</sup> Kurke (1991a) 289: 'The identification of father and son in the song of praise glorifies the entire family rather than just the individual victor.' Kurke (1999b) in her book on Pindar also stresses that aim of the athletic victor is to make the *nostos* of bringing the victory back to the family *oikos* rather than being a uniquely individual success. In this light, Pindar's emphasis on the family seems more natural. However, Pindar places more emphasis on blood than Simonides or Bacchylides, meaning that Pindar is not merely adapting to the dynamics of the ritual of athletic victory ode performance in his genealogical focus.

παλαισμάτεσσι γὰρ ἰχνεύων ματραδελφεοῦς  
[Ὀλυμπία τε Θεόγνητον οὐ κατελέγχεις,  
οὐδὲ Κλειτομάχοιο νίκαν Ἴσθμοῖ θρασύγιον· (35-37)

For in the feats of wrestling you follow in the footsteps of your mother's brothers and you do not disgrace Theognetus, victor at Olympia, nor the victory of strong-limbed Cleitomachus at the Isthmus

Pindar then goes on to quote a statement made by Amphiaraus at the sight of sons fighting bravely in front of seven-gated Thebes:

‘φυᾶ τὸ γενναῖον ἐπιπρέπει  
ἐκ πατέρων παισὶ λῆμα.’ (44-45)

By nature the noble spirit falls from the fathers to the sons.

So in this instance not only is there mention of other family members who have excelled at the games but a gnomic statement is quoted which seems to have the same meaning as our, ‘The apple does not fall far from the tree’. Pindar in quoting this statement is presenting transmission of traits from the father to the son as being in line with the operations of nature.<sup>1</sup> The statement advocates for the phenomenon of hereditary transmission. Moreover, the adjective *gennaion* often has the connotation of breeding ‘true to type’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kirkwood (1982) 210: ‘The emphasis of this version on the heredity of excellence (φυᾶ τὸ γενναῖον... λῆμα, 44) suits P.’s theme and symbolizes the prowess of Aristomenes and his uncles.’

<sup>2</sup> At times the vocabulary Pindar uses in relation to this idea of inherited excellence goes so far as to even associate it with destiny: πότμος δὲ κρίνει συγγενῆς ἔργων περι/ πάντων (*Nemean* 5.40) ‘An innate destiny determines every deed’. πότμος literally means ‘that which befalls one’ coming from the verb πίπτω ‘to fall’, and therefore comes to mean ‘fate/destiny’. The idea seems to be that one’s success in life is decided by the nature one inherits from one’s family forebears. Pindar’s belief in inherited excellence is so strong that he attributes a quasi-fatalism to it. It would appear to be the case that Pindar might suppose that someone born of a long line of athletic victors is ‘fated’ to be one also. At any rate, the context in which this gnomic statement is made strongly suggests that this is the case. Just after the statement, he invokes the maternal uncle of Pytheas, Euthymenes, who himself was an athletic victor. And the two are said to glorify their kindred ethnicity - ὁμόσπορον ἔθνος (43) - of Peleus. ὁμόσπορον literally means ‘sown together/sprung from the same’. The success of Pytheas and his maternal uncle, Euthymenes, being sprung from the illustrious family seed of Peleus, are presented as inevitable and natural victors, for whom there is already great precedent for their success. And Euthymenes’ success is also preceded by that of his maternal uncle. *Isthmian* 1.39-40 also implies that those of good breeding will overcome the vicissitudes of fortune and return to their position of privilege/distinction.

Pindar is not unaware, however, that a family bloodline is not always an unbroken chain of excellence. There is a vegetal metaphor used in his work which seems to suggest that excellence can skip a generation:<sup>1</sup>

τεκμαίρει καί νυν Ἀλκιμίδας τὸ συγγενὲς ἰδεῖν  
ἄγχι καρποφόροις ἀρούραισιν, αἵτ' ἀμειβόμεναι  
τόκα μὲν ὧν βίον ἀνδράσιν ἐπηετανὸν πεδίων ἔδοσαν,  
τόκα δ' αἵτ' ἀναπαυσάμεναι σθένοσ ἔμαρψαν. (*Nemean* 6.8-11)

And now Alcidas testifies that the inborn quality of his family resembles crop-bearing fields, which sometimes provide abundant sustenance from its plains, while at other times take strength from rest.

This farming metaphor is particularly apposite in the case of Alcidas whose father, Theon, had no athletic success to boast of but his grandfather, Praxidas, had multiple boxing victories. The great-grandfather, Socleides, in this pattern of alternate generational success, was similar to the father, Theon, in enjoying no athletic distinction. Socleides' three younger brothers though (Alcidas' great-great uncles) had all won contests in boxing. Nonetheless after recalling the history of all these victories within the family Pindar concludes:

σὺν θεοῦ δὲ τύχα  
ἕτερον οὐ τίνα οἴκον ἀπεφάνατο πυγμαχία πλεόνων  
ταμίαν στεφάνων μυχῶ Ἑλλάδος ἀπάσας (25-27)

By divine favour, the boxing contest has elected no other family to be a bearer of more crowns in the heartland of Greece<sup>2</sup>

In addition, Pindar draws attention to the athletic achievements of this Bassidae family and uses the adjective, παλαίφατος 'of ancient fame', to describe the family - γενεά (52). At the end of the ode we hear how Alcidas' victory represents the twenty-fifth obtained by this 'famous family' (100 ff.). It strongly appears that Pindar has brought forward all this genealogical history regarding boxing to demonstrate unequivocally that this athletic prowess runs in the family. The family essentially represents a boxing dynasty. Interestingly, when Praxidas is mentioned as the grandfather of Alcidas, Pindar inserts the adjective ὁμαίμιος 'of the same blood' (16). This suggests that Pindar believes that ability runs in the

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<sup>1</sup> As a reaction to the vegetal metaphor Valle (1977) 53 states: 'A veces la excelencia de una familia no se realiza en uno de sus descendentes, como un campo puede dejar de dar buena cosecha un año.'

<sup>2</sup> For another passage of Pindar expressing a similar sentiment, see *Nemean* 11. 37-8.



blood.<sup>1</sup> Given the time of his writing, the poet could only have had a vague notion of the biological mechanics of hereditary transmission but it does appear that blood seems to be for him the means by which transmission takes place.

#### *Natural ability vs. tuition*

Pindar in his capacity as ode-composer also takes a very strong stance in the debate between natural ability and tuition.<sup>2</sup> Based on the surviving statements made by Pindar, nature is presented as taking precedence and no amount of learning or application would allow someone born with an inferior nature to outdo someone blessed by nature.<sup>3</sup> A person's nature determines their success and, even, destiny. It goes without saying that when Pindar refers to a person's nature, he is not imagining an entity created arbitrarily but one inherited from one's predecessors.

There is the often quoted passage expressing disdain for learnt behaviour:

σοφὸς ὁ πολλὰ εἰδὼς φυᾶ· μαθόντες δὲ λάβροι  
παγγλωσσία, κόρακες ὤς, ἄκραντα γαρούετον  
Διὸς πρὸς ὄρνιχα θεῖον (*Olympian* 2.86-88)

Wise is the man knowing many things by nature: but some with learnt knowledge chatter with boisterous garrulity, like crows, against the divine eagle of Zeus.

Here there is a very neat contrast between nature and learning. Things known innately are presented as wisdom whereas those things taught are considered vanity.<sup>4</sup> The bird imagery also reinforces Pindar's hierarchy by contrasting the eagle

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<sup>1</sup> Donlan (1999): 'Pindar sounds the theme of excellence through the almost mystical conviction that the glory of the victor in his brief moment of triumph is the result of qualities inherited from legendary heroes through generations.'

<sup>2</sup> Valle (1977) 54 points out that Pindar positions himself on the side of innate ability in this debate: 'En sus elogios de la naturaleza excepcional del aristócrata, el poeta hace notar que sus cualidades son *innatas* frente a las cualidades adquiridas por medio del aprendizaje.'

<sup>3</sup> Bowra (1964) 171 understands Pindar's position in the same way: 'Inborn gifts count for a great deal, and without them it is almost impossible for a man to surpass others in achievement'. Valle (54) states Pindar's view in equally strong terms: 'Según Píndaro, no puede ser fructífera la educación donde no hay dotes innatas. Por eso da él sus preceptos educativos a los que poseen esas cualidades transmitidas por herencia, los príncipes y señores de elevado linaje.' Rose (1968) 400: 'The influence of his stress upon "natural" gifts is noted particularly in the sphere of educational theory and in the debate still conducted between *ars* and *ingenium*.'

<sup>4</sup> Willcock (1995) 162: 'The essential gnomic point, familiar from other passages of Pindar, is of the superiority of natural ability to acquired learning [...] belief in natural ability is typically aristocratic, i.e. that quality comes from birth, not training. Pindar argues that the person who has had to learn will never achieve the superiority of the natural athlete (or indeed the natural poet, *O.* 2.86-7). All the same he does not deny the benefit of

with crows. The idea is that by nature the eagle is the apex bird and it could never be otherwise.

In *Nemean* 3 there is a passage putting forward a very similar idea to the last:

συγγενεῖ δέ τις εὐδοξία μέγα βρίθει·  
ὄς δὲ διδάκτ' ἔχει, ψεφηνὸς ἀνήρ ἄλλοτ' ἄλλα πνέων οὐ ποτ' ἀτρεκεῖ  
κατέβα ποδί, μυριᾶν δ' ἀρετᾶν ἀτελεῖ νόω γεύεται (40-42)

Someone is greatly mighty if they have innate repute: whoever has things through learning, he is a man of shadows fluttering hither and thither and does not stand with firm feet, but tastes of many aptitudes with a futile mind

The context of this particular passage is an encomium of the ancestry and abilities of Achilles. Before the statement Pindar sings the notable achievements of Peleus and Telamon, Achilles' uncle (34-39). Then, after the statement, Pindar details the exceptional child talents of Achilles, such as, his strength, swift-footedness and hunting ability, before listing his martial accomplishments later in life (43-63). Given this context the purport of lines 40-42 is quite clear. Achilles is an example of someone who is 'greatly mighty' with 'innate repute'. He is capable of things that are beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. He is of a special nature, a nature inherited from his illustrious forebears, which allows him to attain greatness. Pindar does not as a contrast give an example of someone relying purely on education. But the statement suggests clearly that education on its own is ineffective and the man reliant on it will be like Tantalus lifting himself up to the fruits of excellence but never being able to reach them.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly at the end of the eulogy of the Aeacids Pindar says:

τηλαυγὲς ἄραρε φέγγος Αἰακιδᾶν αὐτόθεν·  
Ζεῦ, τεὸν γὰρ αἶμα (N. 3.64-65)

The gleam of the Aeacids has been fixed far-shining: for it is your blood, Zeus.

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experience and practice (*O.* 7.53).' Kirkwood (1982) 75: 'This is the boldest of many statements by Pindar of the importance of inborn excellence.'

<sup>1</sup> Instone (1996) 161: 'Success in physical struggle depends on the natural ability one has inherited rather than on any taught skills. It is not surprising that Pindar should be drawn to this belief, since (a) many of the successful athletes for whom he wrote were themselves descendants of successful athletes (b) success in the games requires good physique rather than brain.'

The Aeacids traced their decent back to Zeus. The passage seems to be saying that the members of the family have enjoyed such great repute because they have the royal blood of Zeus coursing through their veins.<sup>1</sup>

Another way in which this educational debate is engaged with is by stressing the fixity of one's nature, that is to say, that one's nature is not something that can undergo substantial or meaningful change. One's nature is almost seen as a fatalistic principle determining the outcome of one's behaviour and, perhaps even, the course of one's life. It is obvious how this idea is related to the educational debate since the implication is that education would not be effective since one's nature is not pliable to any significant extent.

In *Olympian* 11 Pindar is praising the pancratium victory of Hagesidamus. He ends the ode extolling the native race of the victor, the Locrians. Having called the Locrians hospitable, noble, wise and brave he finishes with this gnomic statement:

ἐμφυῆς οὐτ' αἴθων ἀλώπηξ  
οὐτ' ἐρίβρομοι λέοντες διαλλάξαντο ἦθος (20-21)

Neither the tawny fox nor the thunderous lion change their inborn character

Because of the context it is possible that the poet is here referring to an ethnic nature where the people of the same ethnicity are considered, on the whole, to share similar qualities.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that Pindar has had recourse to an animal metaphor. In the world of wild animals, the fixity and determinism of nature is most manifest. A lion is always a lion and does not ape any other animals. A lion never thinks to behave like a herbivorous prey animal. The same is true of the fox. Pindar, in Aesopic fashion, is correlating human behaviour with animal behaviour. In this instance, the suggestion seems to be that, in the same way that animals adhere to their inborn character, so do humans, and therefore nature is essentially immutable.

As much as humans, unlike animals perhaps, have the free will to behave contrary to their natural tendencies, there seems to be a statement to the effect that the attempt to suppress one's nature is futile:

ἄμαχον δὲ κρύψαι τὸ συγγενὲς ἦθος (*Olympian* 13.13)

It is impossible to hide one's inborn character

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<sup>1</sup> See also *O.* 9.100-104 where it is asserted that 'that which comes from nature [φυῆ] is always strongest.'

<sup>2</sup> It would appear from other odes of Pindar that one's nature is thought to be inherited from two sources, the biological family and also the political family of one's native community. The parents, as Locrians, would transmit to their children certain Locrian attributes while also transmitting some qualities specific to their biological family trees.

The story as related by Statius of Achilles hiding on the island of Lemnos exemplifies well the purport of this statement.<sup>1</sup> Thetis, in order to save her son from campaigning in Troy, has sent him to the island of Lemnos where he lays hidden disguised as a young maiden. But when Odysseus and Diomedes, who have set out to find him, play the trick of blowing the war trumpet, Achilles, unlike the other girls, grabs the gifts of helmet and shield, ready to do battle. The idea is that one's innate character exercises an inner compulsion that cannot be completely resisted. In this way, this statement supports the notion that Pindar was disbelieving in the capacity of nurture and training to effect lasting changes.

Although, unlike animals perhaps, humans have the free will to behave contrary to their natural tendencies, it is advised for someone to stick to what they are naturally good at:

τέχνη δ' ἐτέρων ἕτεροι· χρὴ δ' ἐν εὐθείαις ὁδοῖς στείχοντα μάρνασθαι φύσιν  
(*Nemean* 1.25-26)

Different men have different skills: it is best walking along straight paths to compete according to one's natural ability.

To give an example of the point being made here, someone gifted with a powerful physique and pneumatic muscles would do well to stick to the sprint race of the *stadion* rather than try his hand at the long-distance *dolichos* which suits a slimmer physique and a body capable of extended endurance rather than a short explosion of energy. The idea is to work with one's natural ability rather than against it. In familiar terms it can be expressed as 'playing to one's strengths'.<sup>2</sup> Nature being the essential prerequisite of success indicates which activity can be pursued successfully.

In summary, Pindar has been shown to have a firm belief in the principle of hereditary excellence. The athletic ability of the victors, for whom he composes his odes, is presented, by and large, as something inherited from their forbears. Heredity is consequently understood as deterministic. And because of this, Pindar gives priority to natural talent over taught skill in the educational debate. Moore asserted that Sophocles' conception of *aretē* was a reformulation of the old ideal, 'richer and more profound' than that typified by the poetry of Pindar.<sup>3</sup> There is certainly something in this judgement since Pindar's emphasis on athletic ability,

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<sup>1</sup> Statius, *Achilleid* 675 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Bowra (1964) 171 understands the statement in a similar vein: 'Pindar's view of athletic success accounts for it through more than one case. First, a man must be born with the potentiality of it. It belongs to his φύσις (*O.* 9.100; *P.* 8.44; *N.* 7.54), and though men differ from one another in this, they must do their best to make the most of what gifts they have [...] (*N.* 1.25)'.  
<sup>3</sup> Moore (1938) 65.

physical beauty and the joys of leisure is quite at odds with the moral fibre of Sophocles' heroes in the face of social struggles. Nonetheless, in the *Electra* chapter we will see how Sophocles makes use of athletic imagery to highlight the breeding of Orestes.<sup>1</sup>

### Aeschylus

There is debate among scholars as to whether Aeschylus' political sympathies were conservative and aristocratic or in favour of the new democracy.<sup>2</sup> Although he was born into a Eupatrid family, it seems to me probable, based on an interpretation of his plays, that he was pro democracy.

The main piece of evidence supporting this interpretation is the role he gives to the Areopagus in the *Eumenides*. The historical context is that Ephialtes had only just reformed the Areopagus (462 BC), which had been a stronghold of aristocratic control, into a mere court for trying cases of murder. Although this is not a new argument (it was admirably articulated by the great Richard Livingstone<sup>3</sup>), its need to be restated comes as a result of some modern scholarship downplaying Aeschylus' democratic tendencies. Aeschylus gives the Areopagus no other function than that which Ephialtes had reduced it to. This surely suggests acquiescence on the part of the author with the recent democratising reform. Furthermore, the whole scene of Orestes being put on trial and the decision being put to the vote strongly echoes democratic processes. In Athens litigation was particularly popular and one of the rights, even duties, of citizenship was jury service. The court case depicted in the *Eumenides* is certainly reflective of fifth-century Athenian litigation rather than the more informal gathering of Homeric chieftains discussing issues in a

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly Stewart (2019) 257 sees Pindaric influence in Euripides' description of Orestes' revenge against Aigisthus, leading him to comment: 'In honouring his boy victors, Pindar frequently stresses the earlier achievements of the athlete's family. Such a tradition provides these youths with a significant advantage in the gymnastic trials that will see them pass from adolescence into manhood. The eventual victory is the natural continuation of a family and further vindication of the inherent strength of the clan.'

<sup>2</sup> Griffith (1995) 63 acknowledges that 'Aeschylus seems to address himself the most directly and eloquently to the issues of democracy', but argues that this reading is undermined by the prominence given to high-status characters. Rose (1992) does not state his position clearly but it appears the scholar detects democratic sympathy in Aeschylus. Livingstone (1925) argues that Aeschylus is staunchly democratic. Smertenko (1932) 233 takes a middle position, stating that he is 'an advocate of reconciliation between opposing parties.'

<sup>3</sup> Livingstone (1922) 124: 'And those who believe that he took the conservative view must explain why he gives the Areopagus the functions which the democrats left it and gives nothing more. Aeschylus makes the Areopagus a law court, not a council. Ephialtes reduced it from a council to a court. Aeschylus assigns it no other function than to try homicide, and represents it as instituted to settle a murder case. Trial of murder was the chief function which Ephialtes assigned it.'

council. A further point that reinforces this last piece of evidence is the fact Aeschylus, alone among the tragedians, depicts ancient Athens as kingless.<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus has therefore imbued the whole context and atmosphere of the *Eumenides* with a democratic feel, something very odd unless the poet felt a strong sympathy for the emergent democracy.

In terms of bloodline, Aeschylus seems to have a rather grim view of hereditary transmission. Where Sophocles' focus is on the inheritance of excellence, Aeschylus' is on the inheritance of guilt.<sup>2</sup> The *Oresteia* explores the curse that afflicts the house of Atreus with guilt being passed from Atreus to Agamemnon and then to Orestes. Admittedly, resolution is achieved at the end of the play. Yet, it cannot be denied that the trilogy has engaged, at length, with the implications of inherited guilt. Sophocles makes his *Electra* a play of young aristocrats proving their mettle in order to regain their patrimony. The matricide, a taboo act inspiring dread, is actually given very little, next to no, emphasis by Sophocles. Aeschylus, on the other hand, draws out the tragic consequences of the matricide and the pollution that results from it through the figures of the Furies. The overall result is that hereditary transmission is depicted in a negative light by Aeschylus.

In the *Agamemnon* there is a chorus song which uses the parable of a lion cub (717-36). A careful study of this passage shows that its probable signification is a condemnation of the royal family members. Although the passage is typically understood to refer to Helen as the lion cub and Paris/Troy as the herdsman, Knox has argued convincingly that the parable has wider significance and fittingly alludes to the ruling family members.<sup>3</sup> The lion is often an animal used to symbolise royalty. In effect, the interpretation would be that the people, *ho dēmos*, rear and look fondly upon the young aristocrats but the ending is always bloody for them – the aristocrats do not have the people's interests at heart and eventually their avaricious, haughty and oppressive nature reveals itself. It is very interesting that Aeschylus uses the phrase, *χρονισθεὶς δ' ἀπέδειξεν ἦ/θος τὸ πρὸς τοκέων* (727-8) 'But in time the lion cub reveals its nature that inherited from its parents.' So, in

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<sup>1</sup> Dodds (1960) 20: 'The curious circumstance that in the *Eumenides*, alone among Greek tragedians, Athens lacks a king has hardly received the attention it deserves.'

<sup>2</sup> Rose (1992) 193 does well to draw out how the concept of inherited guilt challenges aristocratic ideology centred on bloodline: 'It was the scions of the great aristocratic *oikoi* ('houses') who were most deeply committed to the whole ideology of inherited excellence and immortality won through continuity in the male line. Thus a doctrine that focused on the corruption inherent in wealth, that not only threatened the initial perpetrator of crimes with divine retribution but held out the prospect of disaster for his progeny, constituted a fundamental ideological attack on aristocracy.'

<sup>3</sup> Knox (1952) 22: 'The lion cub is not only Helen, but Aegisthus, Agamemnon, and Clytemnestra.'

this instance hereditary transmission is not denied but rather affirmed. However, once again, it is not the transmission of virtue but of violence.

Adopting a less political perspective on Aeschylus, it seems possible to detect influence from the latter on Sophocles in the conception of parenthood. Apollo in the *Agamemnon* (657 ff.) makes the rather bold point that there is only one parent, namely, the father; the mother is a mere receptacle of the male-generated semen.<sup>1</sup> Athena, using her own example as born from the thigh of her father, Zeus, seconds the position of her brother. We shall see in Sophocles' *Electra* how this prioritisation of the father's parental role is dramatised. As much as one could dismiss the argument of Apollo as a sophistic trick to support his defendant, it does appear that this male-dominated notion of reproduction was a belief seriously held by certain fifth-century thinkers. In terms of selective breeding, it is not an inconsequential idea since it suggests that the greatest of attention needs to be paid to the father with little regard for the status of the mother.

The last three chapters have served as introductions to the analyses of five individual plays which are to follow. Having studied the socio-political setting, the relevant lexical terminology and the presentation of good birth in four of the most important anterior poets, we are now in a good position to carry out a focused study of the selected plays. These introductory chapters provide the necessary context, without which we would lack a vantage point when looking at the relevant passages in Sophocles' plays. There can be a tendency in literary analysis to paraphrase the events of the play with the result that the criticism is more narrational than analytical. If one relies only on interpreting a work of art using exclusively what is in the work of art, there is a great risk of merely restating what is already in the play. However, by bringing to the analysis a wealth of contextual capital, greater gains can be won since the work's message is not only understood internally but externally.

It is important to be aware that the analyses which follow will not restrict themselves to a narrow conception of good birth nor will they only target passages featuring the relevant terminology. The most salient Greek word for conveying the idea of good birth is *eugeneia*. As Aristotle notes, it means 'excellence of the family'. The family is therefore a very relevant entity in relation to any discussion of

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<sup>1</sup> Smertenko (1932) 234 links this passage with the fact that Pericles was an Alcmeonid on his mother's side. For the scholar, the curse befalling the House of Atreus stands for the curse afflicting the Alcmeonid family for their killing of Cylon's followers at the altar of the Eumenides. It is an interesting rapprochement but I am wary of looking at the *Oresteia* as a political *roman à clef*.

good birth, for this last is transmitted via the family according to the aristocratic conception. Therefore issues that relate to the family such as incest, adoption, child-parent relationships, to name but a few, will be explored in the following chapters, where relevant. Obviously, the focus is on breeding but it would be an artificial exercise to extract this topic from all related topics and single-mindedly study it. The more broad and general approach adopted here allows for a richer and deeper understanding of good birth.

A decision has been made to study five rather than all seven extant plays of Sophocles. The reason for this is that the five selected appear to engage more centrally with the theme than *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Trachiniae*. Because good birth was a constant preoccupation of our poet's mind we still find some passages pregnant with meaning in relation to birth even in these two plays. For example, in the *Trachiniae* (v. 307-9) there is a passage (quoted and analysed on p. 190) where Deianeira deduces from the appearance of Iole that this last must be of noble ancestry. And in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, the protagonist claims (v. 7-8) that he has been able to endure his suffering partly because of his noble birth (quoted on p. 173). However, there is not, from my close reading of the plays, enough material in either of these plays to warrant a chapter-long analysis such as is given to the other five plays. Furthermore, the five selected plays form a good combination since each one seems to study the theme of good birth from a different perspective.



## Chapter 4: *Ajax*

### Introduction

The *Ajax* is a play which appears to engage with two time periods: the Homeric world and the contemporary world of fifth-century democratic Athens. It is the exploration of the tension and interplay between these two periods that seems to give the play such powerful resonance.<sup>1</sup> The play, although set on the plains of Troy, certainly spoke to the concerns of its theatral audience. The actual events of the play are the slaughter of the cattle (prior to the play and therefore reported), Ajax' suicide and eventual burial. Sophocles was free to give whatever slant he fancied to these actions, but it is quite clear that he has made the play centre on the theme of excellence and breeding. So much of the dialogue refers to and predicates itself on the notion of good birth, even to the point where scholars have called such discussion irrelevant to the play, assuming that the action of the play should determine and limit the playwright's focus.<sup>2</sup> In my opinion, they have failed to understand the play's main message. Failure to appreciate the central importance of the theme of birth has caused an inability to appreciate the play's unity, and therefore accusations have been made that it is a diptych play where the second half does not relate well to the first half.<sup>3</sup>

That said, there are certain scholars who have asserted that the play revolves around the concept of nobility. Zanker, rightly, suggests that the play has a 'preoccupation with the problem of what constitutes noble action, or, in the play's own terminology, what is the nature of εὐγένεια'.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Lawall, back in the 1950s, argued that the 'the central psychological problem seems to be that of being *aristos*; who is *aristos*, what does it mean, and is *aristeia* still possible?'.<sup>5</sup> There is still need for this particular chapter, however, because no other article or chapter concentrates so exclusively on the subjects pertaining to the theme of good birth.

By way of preface, it is important not to think that the topic of good birth is diluted by not being referred to by exclusively birth-specific words. Because the words *aristos*, *esthlos* and *aretē* had progressively lost their genealogical element in favour of their ethical component, there could be the danger of assuming that these words no longer connote birth in Sophocles. However, based on the context and intent of

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<sup>1</sup> Libanius (*Declamatio* 14.20) reports that the play stirred a great and emotional public reaction comparable to Phrynichus' *Siege of Miletus*, this latter play actually incurred a fine.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Holt (1981) 282 in speaking of the debate scene following the death of Ajax claims that there is discussion of 'irrelevant matters as the supposed ignobility of archery (1120-23) and the scandals of Agamemnon's ancestors (1290-98).'

<sup>3</sup> Waldock (1951), among others, made this particular point very vocally.

<sup>4</sup> Zanker (1992) 20.

<sup>5</sup> Lawall (1959) 290.

their use, it is clear that Sophocles is using these adjectives in much the same way as Homer, namely, as connoting, most certainly, birth and character.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Homer, Sophocles has also doubled up with more the more technical vocabulary of *eugenēs* and *gennaios*.<sup>2</sup> This leads to a very concentrated terminology pertaining to birth, a lexical proof that this is the central theme of the play.

The *Ajax* explores the theme of good breeding in three main ways: 1) the generalising remarks of the chorus; 2) father-son relationships (Ajax-Telamon, Ajax-Eurysaces, Teucer-Telamon); 3) the debate scene over the corpse of Ajax. As we shall see, the whole play, from beginning to end, treats the theme of good birth. Because the events of the play follow from the awarding of Achilles' arms to the best fighter, it is natural that 'excellence' (*aretē*) should be a central concern. And because excellence (*aretē*), according to the model of the play, is connected with one's *phusis*, which has been inherited from one's parents, good breeding is the underpinning of excellence. This, at least, is how the play, according to my interpretation, presents the case.

### The Chorus

The Chorus, composed of Salaminian sailors, and therefore non-elite characters, are significant not only as a contrast with the elite figures in the play but also with the sailors of fifth-century Athens, who by virtue of the thalassocracy had gained political importance.<sup>3</sup>

In the first choral ode, the chorus speak of the importance of there being cooperation between the great and the small members of society and how there should be a symbiotic relationship between the two:

τῶν γὰρ μεγάλων ψυχῶν ἰεῖς  
οὐκ ἂν ἀμάρτοις· κατὰ δ' ἂν τις ἐμοῦ  
τοιαῦτα λέγων οὐκ ἂν πείθοι·  
πρὸς γὰρ τὸν ἔχονθ' ὁ φθόνος ἔρπει.

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<sup>1</sup> *Kakos* appears fifty-seven times, fourteen of which connoting social status (109, 133, 380, 456, 551, 964, 1012, 1071, 1078, 1177, 1235, 1241, 1391); *aristos* six times, five of which with a noticeable class connotation (636, 1304, 1340, 1380, 1381); *aretē* twice, once connoting social status (1357); *chrēstos* twice, once connoting social status (1369); *esthlos* three times, all signifying social status (1345, 1352, 1399).

<sup>2</sup> *Eugenēs* appears four times (480, 524, 1095, 1229), *gennaios* twice (938, 1355) and *dēmotēs* once (1071).

<sup>3</sup> Sorum (1986) 362 rightly comments that 'the growing importance of the navy further undermined the tradition of individual distinction not only in military exploits but also in social class.' The importance of the navy is said, at least according to Pseudo-Xenophon's *Constitution of Athens*, to have been one of the major catalysts for increased democratic reform. The military prowess previously enjoyed by the well-born had been opened up to the lower classes.

καίτοι σμικροὶ μεγάλων χωρὶς  
σφαλερὸν πύργου ῥῦμα πέλονται·  
μετὰ γὰρ μεγάλων βαιὸς ἄριστ' ἄν  
καὶ μέγας ὀρθοῖθ' ὑπὸ μικροτέρων.

Taking aim at the great souls you would not miss; levying such things against me someone would not persuade, for envy is directed against the 'haves'. And yet the small without the great are a weak tower of defence, the small ones supported by the great ones would be most secure and, equally, the great ones with the littler ones.

They begin by acknowledging the typical attitude, characterised by envy towards those in society who are well-off, and they believe that Ajax has been a victim of slander instigated by this emotion of envy. But they then use a stonework metaphor to suggest that the small cannot survive without the great and vice versa.<sup>1</sup> This surely speaks to the socio-political situation of fifth-century Athens where there was this tension characterised by envy of, yet, at the same time, need of the rich aristocratic families. Much of Athens' public life was financed by private capital, notable liturgies being chorus-funding and trierarchy.<sup>2</sup>

The chorus then turn to a bird metaphor to highlight Ajax' natural superiority over his detractors:

ἀλλ' ὅτε γὰρ δὴ τὸ σὸν ὄμμ' ἀπέδραν,  
παταγοῦσιν ἄπερ πτηνῶν ἀγέλαι·  
μέγαν αἰγυπιὸν δ' ὑποδείσαντες  
τάχ' ἄν ἐξαίφνης, εἰ σὺ φανείης,  
σιγῇ πτήξειαν ἄφωνοι. (154-7)

But when they have escaped your sight, they twitter like flocks of birds.  
Scared at a great eagle they would immediately cower in deadly silence.

This is presumably not in contradiction with the earlier ideal of cooperation between the higher and lower strata of society. The situation has become out of skew because Ajax' natural superiority is no longer acknowledged and deferred to. The lesser men are taking confidence from Ajax' absence to spread slanderous rumours about him. It is interesting that Ajax is compared to an eagle, perhaps

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<sup>1</sup> Garvie (1998) 141 sees the sententia at odds with Ajax' attitude: 'Sophocles may have in mind a wall in which the gaps in the large stones are filled with smaller ones; cf. Pl. *Laws* 902d-e [...] Ajax, in his isolation as a tragic hero (29n.) will never really acknowledge any such dependence on the ordinary people in his life, so that in a sense 162-3 applies to him as much as to his enemies. Kamerbeek (1953) 51 also detects the viewpoint of the poet: 'A political preference on the part of the poet, a leaning towards ὁμόνοια'.

<sup>2</sup> Swift (2019) 38.

making reference to his great-grandfather, Zeus, for whom the eagle was a sacred animal. It is also possible that there is a linguistic connection being made.<sup>1</sup> Both possibilities would serve to demonstrate Ajax' superiority and natural association with the apex avian predator.

Tecmessa's address to the chorus is eulogistic from an ancestral point of view. She draws on their autochthonous descent from Erechtheus:

ναὸς ἄρωγοὶ τῆς Αἴαντος,  
γενεᾶς χθονίων ἀπ' Ἐρεχθειδῶν,  
ἔχομεν στοναχὰς οἱ κηδόμενοι  
τοῦ Τελαμῶνος τηλόθεν οἴκου. (201-4)

Crewmen of the ship of Ajax, from the race of the earth-born Erechtheids,  
we have pains we who care for the distant house of Telamon.

Tecmessa is anachronistically linking Salamis with Athens by identifying these Salaminian sailors as descendants of Erechtheus.<sup>2</sup> It is possible that Sophocles is flattering the ideology of the Athenian *dēmos* who all saw themselves as well-born inasmuch as being descendants of the autochthonous Erechtheus. But this chorus who passively declare their dependency on Ajax do not seem perfectly synonymous with the navy of Athens, the members of which had gained an unprecedented amount of influence in the state because the maintaining of the empire depended upon their service.<sup>3</sup> The audience members who were sailors would therefore see a somewhat asymmetric reflection of themselves in the play.<sup>4</sup>

But the reference to the collective good birth of the chorus is somewhat undercut by their cowardly attitude. Unlike Ajax who places more emphasis on the preservation of his honour than self-preservation, the chorus operate essentially out of an instinct of prudent survivalism. After hearing from Tecmessa of Ajax' nocturnal madness they express their unheroic wish to escape by boat so as to

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford (1963) 80: 'Perhaps an allusion to the etymology of Αἴας from αἰετός is intended'.

<sup>2</sup> Hogan (1991) 189: "'sprung from Erechtheus," the first king of Athens. Salamis was not annexed by Athens until the sixth century, but two Athenian families traced their lineage back to Ajax' sons Eurysaces and Philaios (the second is not mentioned by Sophocles). As an object of heroic cult and the eponymous hero of one of the ten Cleisthenian tribes, Ajax was revered as a native Athenian.' See also Garvie (1998) 147; Finglass (2003) 204.

<sup>3</sup> McCallum-Barry (2019) 136.

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is also possible that there is a literary intention behind this identitarian appellation, namely, to stir sympathy in the audience for Ajax, in his extremely unsympathetic act of frenzied slaughter, by portraying his sailors as largely synonymous with the Athenian oarsmen.

avoid any repercussions from the Greek army (245 ff.).<sup>1</sup> The natural conclusion to draw from this is that courage and heroic valour are still the attributes of the well-born. As much as Sophocles has nobilitated the chorus with the Erechtheus appellation, he has deprived them of the heroic character of his noble protagonist.

### Ajax-Telamon

Although Telamon does not feature as a character in the play, his name is often invoked and his reaction to events conjectured with the result that the action of the drama feels influenced by him despite his absence.<sup>2</sup> The prominence of his presence in the mental landscape of the characters is presaged in the first choral ode where his name is referenced three times. Interestingly, two of these uses occur as part of a patronymic where the chorus address Ajax as ‘son of Telamon’ rather than by name (134, 183). Admittedly, the patronymic was a standard form of address in ancient Greece. However the employment of it twice by the chorus seems to serve the dramatic purpose of signalling to the audience that Ajax’ identity is not autonomously independent but, rather, closely related to and strongly influenced by his father.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, Ajax’ relationship with Telamon seems to represent the archetypal case of the pressure of being the son of a highly successful and prestigious father. Ajax lives in fear of disappointing his father’s expectations. The internalised notion of his father’s judgment acts a *quasi*-conscience. Sophocles seems at pains to stress the pressure that comes with being the son of a high-achieving father.<sup>4</sup> As much as it is a privilege for Ajax to boast that he is the son of Telamon, the relationship is a huge burden on him.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, we will see, later, that Ajax reproduces this

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<sup>1</sup> Garvie (1998) 150: ‘Here the chorus’s wish anticipates the option considered by Ajax himself at 460-6. But he will reject it. To run away would not be the mark of a hero.’

<sup>2</sup> Holt (1981) 278 rightfully makes the insightful point that the first monologue is precoupled with Ajax’ notion of being well-born, thereby signalling the theme’s central importance to the play: ‘Ajax’s first monologue shows him to be fairly obsessed with his standing and responsibilities as a member of his family – that is, with being εὐγενής, “noble”, or more literally, “well-born”. When he first catalogues his woes, the first item on his list, elaborated at some length, is his failure to win honours comparable to those which his father won in an earlier war at Troy (434-40).’

<sup>3</sup> Strauss (1993) 26: ‘The patronymic declared possession. The son’s name would appear in the nominative case, the father’s name in the genitive. The patronymic suggests a strong connection between one’s father, one’s name, and one’s identity, especially one’s public identity.’

<sup>4</sup> Strauss (1993) 81: ‘Sophocles describes here how the image of the father could be an excessive censor in the psyche of the son.’

<sup>5</sup> Hesk (2003) 60: ‘Greek myths, Homeric epic, and Attic tragedy are littered with tales of fathers who are too quick to judge and punish their sons: Theseus and Hippolytus, Phoenix and Amyntor, Bellerophon and Glaucus. Sophocles certainly wants to stress the pressure which Ajax and his brother are under with respect to their father’s appraisal.’

same dynamic of burdensome expectation in his interaction with his own son, Eurysaces.

One of the distinctive features of the Telamon-Ajax relationship is the symmetry of circumstances but asymmetry of achievement: although they have both fought in campaigns at Troy, Telamon won the highest rewards for bravery, whereas Ajax is dishonoured.<sup>1</sup> If the circumstances were different, Ajax would possibly be able to console himself with the belief that his lack of recognised success is the fault of opportunity. However, the striking similarity between their wartime experiences makes only more stark the contrast in their level of acclaimed success, and therefore intensifies Ajax's sense of failure and shame.

ὄτου πατήρ μὲν τῆσδ' ἀπ' Ἰδαίας χθονὸς  
τὰ πρῶτα καλλιστεῖ ἄριστεύσας στρατοῦ  
πρὸς οἶκον ἦλθε πᾶσαν εὐκλειαν φέρων·  
ἐγὼ δ' ὁ κείνου παῖς, τὸν αὐτὸν ἐς τόπον  
Τροίας ἐπελθὼν οὐκ ἐλάσσονι σθένει  
οὐδ' ἔργα μείω χειρὸς ἀρκέσας ἐμῆς,  
ἄτιμος Ἀργείοισιν ὧδ' ἀπόλλυμαι. (434-40)

Whose father after excelling and winning the highest army prizes returned home from this Trojan land bedecked with all glory. But I the son of that man, having come to this same spot of Troy with no less strength, and having achieved no lesser deeds by my hand, I am dishonoured and destroyed by the Argives.<sup>2</sup>

ἄτιμος is a key word. *Timē* was the social currency of the *Iliadic* heroes. It was the payment and recognition they received as a return for their noble character and brave deeds. It determined not only one's social position and privileges but was also a measure of the material reward one deserved. In this way, it was both intangible, in the form of reputation and admiration, and tangible, in the form of material recompense, whether that be choice pieces of meat, attractive spear brides, estates with fertile pastures etc. The nearest equivalent to *timē* we have in

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford (1963) xiii attempts to explain the phenomenon in more recent historical terms: 'A modern equivalent would be that a son of a bemedalled hero of the First World War should, while fighting in the same area during the Second World War, meet with the gravest disgrace and dishonour'.

<sup>2</sup> Lawall (1959) 291: 'Ajax [...] believes that a certain dynastic strain of valor – which in itself makes a man *aristos* – descends through Telamon to him and thence to his son Eurysaces. Ajax believes himself the rightful heir to Telamon's excellence and is appalled to be deprived of his 'inheritance'. Brown (1965) 13 also makes the insightful point: 'Ajax's concern is not for his father's image but for his own ability to demonstrate that he is a true son of the great hero.'

the modern world is money. Just as great wealth can secure a man a reputation, influence and material possessions, so could *timē* in the heroic world. This analogy between *timē* and money is borne out, to some degree, by the fact that one of the meanings of the word in the classical period was ‘price, value’. *Timē*, and the amount thereof, although not as numerically quantifiable as money, stills served to determine a man’s worth, status and privilege. And just as money can be inherited, so could *timē*. A son of a prestigious father would naturally have more initial *timē* than the son of a nobody. And it was the son’s role to increase, or at least maintain, the inherited *timē* through glorious accomplishments. So loss of *timē* was a form of bankruptcy, a terrible prospect for any heroic warrior. Without being trite, just as some financiers in the economic crash of 2008 thought it necessary to commit suicide at the loss of their wealth, so Homeric heroes might think suicide was the only resort to combat loss of *timē*. It is necessary to fully appreciate the significance of this concept, since if one casually understands it through its best-equivalent translation of ‘honour’, there is a great risk of underestimating its social importance.<sup>1</sup>

Ajax, in considering his possible responses to social ignominy into which he has fallen, rules out returning to his father’s home:

καὶ ποῖον ὄμμα πατρὶ δηλώσω φανείς  
 Τελαμῶνι; πῶς με τλήσεταιί ποτ’ εἰσιδεῖν  
 γυμνὸν φανέντα τῶν ἀριστείων ἄτερ,  
 465 ὧν αὐτὸς ἔσχε στέφανον εὐκλείας μέγαν;  
 οὐκ ἔστι τοῦργον τλητόν. (460-66)

And upon appearance what sort of face will I show to Telamon? How will he endure to see me naked appearing without prizes for excellence, of which he himself held the great crown of glory? This deed is not sufferable.

Why does the fear of shaming his father play such an important role in Ajax’ deliberations as to what course of action to adopt after the slaying of the cattle, even to the point where returning home is precluded as unendurable and death seems preferable?<sup>2</sup> The answer appears to be connected with the aristocratic ethos to which Ajax adheres. The respect paid to Ajax both in terms of material privilege

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford (1963) 116: ‘Without it (τιμή) a man bred to high rank and opulence would be better dead, as Ajax asserts in 479-80.’

<sup>2</sup> Sorum (1986) 367: ‘Ajax’ reasoning depends upon the tradition of the heroic family as a patriarchal institution defined not only by blood ties but also by a set of ideals and expectations whose maintenance through generations is contingent upon emulation of the past. Son must replace father in deed as well as name. From this perspective, Telamon’s family is ended once the Judgement of Arms is made, for from that point on there can be no heir.’ Finglass (2003) 272; Williams (1998) 85).

and social reputation is bound up with his status as the son of Telamon, without which, regardless of his innate prowess, he would never be the leader of the Salamis contingent nor have been a member of the Council of Heroes at Troy. His sense of self and social standing are dependent on the preservation of his identification with Telamon, but this identification has been broken by the discrepancy in recognised achievement on the plains of Troy. Ajax brings out this contrast by describing himself as 'naked' in juxtaposition with Telamon who wore the 'crown of glory'.<sup>1</sup>

Ajax expresses the need to find an act that will prove him a worthy son of his father:

πεῖρά τις ζητητέα  
τοιᾶδ' ἀφ' ἧς γέροντι δηλώσω πατρὶ  
μή τοι φύσιν γ' ἄσπλαγχνος ἐκ κείνου γεγώς. (470-2)

Some means must be sought by which I will show to my father that I am not gutless by nature born from that man.<sup>2</sup>

In relation to this passage Kamerbeek makes the interesting comment:

Without ἐκ κείνου the construction would be perfectly clear and the sense simple; the words ἐκ κείνου carry the suggestion: "that my φύσις has not fallen short of my father's". But the words as they stand do not say more than: "that I, his son, am not, in the nature of my heart at least, a coward"<sup>3</sup>

If this hint of uncertainty is correctly detected by Kamerbeek, then Ajax is portrayed as keen to show not only that he is brave but also prove beyond reasonable doubt that he is truly the son of Telamon.

Ajax ends his soliloquy with the powerful lines:

ἄλλ' ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι  
τὸν εὐγενῆ χρῆ (479-80)

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<sup>1</sup> Finglass (2003) 273: 'Although Ajax is not literally without clothes (or armour: cf. Hom. *Il.* 16.815), the choice of word evokes the shame sometimes associated with this state: denied the arms of Achilles, Ajax believes himself to be as good as naked.'

<sup>2</sup> Hogan (1991) 195: 'Homer's Achilles, who has been insulted but not humiliated, can contemplate returning home (*Iliad* 9.618-19), but Ajax, who feels ashamed at his failure and sees the possibility of even greater abuse, cannot face his father without appearing a man who has lost his stomach.'

<sup>3</sup> Kamerbeek (1953) 103. Garvie (1998) 168 does not detect this uncertainty: 'lit, "being born from him", the idea being that Ajax has inherited his father's character.' Equally, Stanford (1968) 119: 'φύσις is inborn natural temperament: γ' implies that whatever else is wrong with Ajax, his φύσις (the essential quality of a hero and aristocrat, as Pindar also emphasizes) is not deficient [...] ἄσπλαγχνος: literally "without guts": the σπλάγχνα were regarded as the seat of deep emotion, here of heroic spirit.'



But it is necessary for the nobleman either to live well or to die well.<sup>1</sup>

Achilles' choice of a short but famed life rather than a long and obscure life is possibly the inspiration for this ethos enunciated by Ajax.<sup>2</sup> Ajax feels that every external and social advantage has been taken away from him but he still possesses his innate nobility, which cannot be stolen from him, but which makes the stringent demand of death.<sup>3</sup> Tecmessa, in fact, subsequently challenges this definition of *eugeneia*, affirming that it consists of the remembrance and reciprocation of kindness.<sup>4</sup> For Tecmessa, the family is the living members and their future well-being, whereas for Ajax his notion of the family is more akin to the notion of *genos*, outlined in chapter 2, where it is a cultural construct of paternal ancestors.<sup>5</sup> Ajax does not want to disgrace the memory of his paternal forbears, particularly that of his father, while Tecmessa implores him to be mindful of his father's current and future state. The idea of birth for Ajax centres on the father-son relationship, while Tecmessa uses the figurative idea of kindness 'begetting/giving birth' (τίκτους' v. 522) to kindness.<sup>6</sup> This is obviously very different from Ajax' obsession with bloodline. Sophocles has used Tecmessa's attitude as a contrast to Ajax' to highlight the latter's distinctive qualities.

The chorus' reaction to Ajax's monologue contains a very suggestive adjective

οὐδεὶς ἐρεῖ ποθ' ὡς ὑπόβλητον λόγον,  
Αἴας, ἔλεξας, ἀλλὰ τῆς σαυτοῦ φρενός (481-2).

No one will ever say, Ajax that you have spoken a counterfeit word, but one  
born from your own mind

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<sup>1</sup> Garvie (1998) 168 makes an interesting comment regarding the verb τεθνηκέναι: 'The tense is perfect, strictly "to be dead". Ajax thinks not so much of the manner of his death as of his reputation after he is dead.'

<sup>2</sup> Hogan (1991) 195: 'Achilles' famous choice is between a short, glorious life and a long but quiet existence (*Iliad* 9.410-16).' Kamerbeek (1953) 103 also relates the passage to the famous declaration of Achilles and claims that Ajax' ethic is heroic as opposed to bourgeois.

<sup>3</sup> Stanford (1963) 120: 'Knows that there is one thing which no one can take from him, his nobility of birth and nature. But, as he sees it, this nobility now demands his death.'

<sup>4</sup> Holt (1981) 279: 'Ajax's case for dying and Tekmessa's case for living rest on conflicting ideas of εὐγένεια.'

<sup>5</sup> Sorum (1986) 367: 'For her the family is the immediate home and the individuals she loves. Her obligations are to the present and future, not to the past. She invokes "Zeus of the hearth" and the bed she shares with Ajax, not "Zeus of my ancestors" upon whom Ajax calls.'

<sup>6</sup> I owe this observation to Holt (1981) 279: 'The idea that favour ought to be reciprocated is a commonplace, but it usually appears without the birth-metaphor which is so appropriate to the context here.'

The word ὑπόβλητον has the literal meaning of ‘bring in another’s child as one’s own’.<sup>1</sup> The implication of this choice of word is that Ajax, in the heroism and courageousness of his willingness to die rather than undergo the shameful disapproval of his father, affirms that he is of noble stock and a legitimate son of Telamon, whereas living a life of shame would make his paternal background suspect.<sup>2</sup> It is understandable that among the aristocrats in ancient Greece, where there were no DNA tests and ancestry followed the paternal line, there would be a constant anxiety concerning the legitimacy of offspring. Homer was very aware of this parental uncertainty and gave a depiction of it in the *Odyssey* when Telemachus in dialogue with Athena, disguised as Mentès, declares that his being the son of Odysseus is the hearsay of his mother rather than a fact he knows himself.<sup>3</sup>

It could maybe seem excessive that Ajax needs to kill himself in order to prove himself the worthy son of Telamon, if it was the case that there was no equivocation in this regard. However, there are certain passages in the play which suggest that Ajax has fallen below the standard set by his father, and not just in relation to the slaying of the cattle.

ὄς ἐκ πατρώας ἤκων γενεᾶς ἄριστα  
 πολυπόνων Ἀχαιῶν,  
 ὄργαις ἔμπεδος, ἀλλ’ ἐκτὸς ὀμιλεῖ.  
 ὦ τλαῖμον πάτερ, οἶαν σε μένει πυθέσθαι  
 παιδὸς δύσφορον ἄταν,  
 ἂν οὔπω τις ἔθρεψεν  
 αἰῶν Αἰακιδᾶν ἄτερθε τοῦδε. (636-45)

Who, although hailing most excellently from paternal ancestry out of all the betoiled Achaians, he is no longer steadfast to his habitual disposition, but he associates outside himself. O wretched father, what a soul-destroying disaster awaits you to discover, such as not one life of the Aiaccids has ever reared besides this man.

<sup>1</sup> Stanford (1963) 121: ‘ὑπόβλητον literally means a child substituted for another. This metaphor was probably suggested by Ajax’s insistence on nobility of race: it was in noble houses that such substitutions were likeliest to occur, e.g. Herodotus 1, 137 [...] τῆς σαυτοῦ φρενός: “<a child> of your own heart”: this sustains the metaphor from birth.’

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, Sophocles never explicitly has Ajax express this anxiety, because creating a rumour of bastardy, however hypothetical, would detract irremediably from the greatness of his hero.

<sup>3</sup> μήτηρ μὲν τέ μέ φησι τοῦ ἔμμεναι, αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γε οὐκ οἶδ’ οὐ γάρ πώ τις ἐὸν γόνον αὐτὸς ἀνέγνω. (*Od.* 1. 215-6)

The chorus begin here by emphasising the supereminence of Ajax' ancestry, and maybe not even in exaggerative terms, considering Zeus was his great-grandfather and Achilles was also an Aiacid, being cousin to Ajax. They then suggest that he no longer sticks to a disposition which, literally, has been 'bred/reared with him'.<sup>1</sup> Already this is suggesting that Ajax' behaviour is a deviance from the standard conduct of his lineage. They continue by lamenting poor Telamon who will be receiving news contrary to what he would expect and they end finally by stating that Ajax has 'nurtured' a disaster unknown and un-lived by any other Aeacid family member.<sup>2</sup> In these terms, Ajax is an anomaly who deviates from the pattern of success of this illustrious family.

Calchas in his speech reports how Ajax objected to the advice of his father:

ἄνους καλῶς λέγοντος ἠϋρέθη πατρός.  
 ὁ μὲν γὰρ αὐτὸν ἐννέπει· τέκνον, δόρει  
 βούλου κρατεῖν μὲν, σὺν θεῶ δ' αἰεὶ κρατεῖν.  
 ὁ δ' ὑψικόμπως κάφρόνως ἡμείψατο·  
 πάτερ, θεοῖς μὲν κἂν ὁ μηδὲν ὦν ὁμοῦ  
 κράτος κατακτήσαιτ'· ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ δίχα  
 κείνων πέποιθα τοῦτ' ἐπισπάσειν κλέος. (763-9)

He was found senseless with this father speaking well. For he cautioned him, 'Child, wish to conquer with the spear, but always conquer with god.' But he arrogantly and foolishly retorted, 'Father, even he being a nobody could obtain power with the gods' help. But I even without these trust to win this fame.'

Telamon here suggests cooperation with the gods, whereas Ajax claims his independence from them. This exchange between father and son is an important vignette. Typically, one would expect Ajax to accept deferentially the advice of his father, someone who has already the experience of being successful in a comparable military campaign.<sup>3</sup> But Ajax is presented here as more of a rebellious type. We have seen that Ajax has a great fear that his father will be disappointed

<sup>1</sup> Garvie (1998) 184: 'συντρόφοις is a curious echo of 622 (621-5n.). Ajax has been nurtured together with his character, which is therefore his companion (cf. *Phil.* 203). But now that has changed, and he, lit., "associates with it [his temperament] from outside"; i.e. "his original temperament is no longer part of his character, no longer his companion" (cf. *Eur. Or.* 354). The phrase provides a fitting prelude to the speech in which Ajax will claim to have indeed been changed.'

<sup>2</sup> Finglass (2003) 327 does well to emphasise the 'uniqueness of Ajax's suffering' in his long line of illustrious male ancestors but fails to highlight the significance of the the nurture motif. Hogan (1991) 202 and Garvie (1998) 184 are better in this regard.

<sup>3</sup> Kamerbeek (1953) 159: 'The idea of the father giving good advice to his son before the latter's going to war is taken from epic poetry, cf. *Il.* IX 252 sqq., XI 782 sqq.'

with him. Is there an element where Ajax is not *gennaios*, in the sense of not being bred true to type?

### Ajax-Eurysaces

The scene between Ajax and Eurysaces is a moment full of pathos but also significant in regards to how excellence is transmitted from father to son. The vignette is pregnant with suggestions that relate to the educational debate of whether nature or nurture takes precedence in the formation of excellence. A sophisticated position fusing, in an almost paradoxical way, the two principles can be extracted from the scene. Moreover, as we shall see, this scene would have had particular resonance because the aristocratic ideology that lies behind it is at variance with the democratic ideology latent in one of the preplay ceremonies.

αἶρ' αὐτόν, αἶρε δεῦρο· ταρβήσει γὰρ οὐ  
νεοσφαγῆ που τόνδε προσλεύσσω φόνον,  
εἵπερ δικαίως ἔστ' ἐμὸς τὰ πατρόθεν.  
ἀλλ' αὐτίκ' ὠμοῖς αὐτὸν ἐν νόμοις πατρὸς  
δεῖ πωλοδαμνεῖν κάξομοιοῦσθαι φύσιν. (545-9)

Pick him up and bring him here: he will not be afraid seeing this recent massacre, if he is truly mine by paternal decent. Immediately it is necessary to break him into the savage customs of his father and for him to become like me in nature.

As a literary point, there is clearly intertextuality between this scene and that of Hector and Astyanax in the *Iliad* (6.468 ff.). Ajax' son is expected not to display fear, unlike Hector's.<sup>1</sup> Ajax' confidence in his son's unflinching response at the sight of slaughtered carcasses<sup>2</sup> is conditioned by the premise that Eurysaces is really and truly his son. There is always an element of uncertainty concerning fatherhood, unlike motherhood. This moment acts, in many ways, as a test to see whether Eurysaces is Ajax' biological son.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford (1963) 129: 'possibly in contrast with Hector's son who in *Il.* 6, 468-9 yells and leans back in fright (ταρβήσας) at his father's helmet.' Garvie (1998) 175 for much the same commentary. The passage has generated a refreshing consensus of literary interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Garvie (1998) 175: 'It is almost as if he were standing among, not the slaughtered animals, but his enemies on the battlefield [...] Eurysaces is to establish his parentage by looking at the blood which shows his father's shame.'

<sup>3</sup> Stanford (129) understands the line as Ajax distinguishing his parental transmission from Tecmessa's: "'on his father's side"-whatever may be said about his mother's breed: not, presumably, intended as an insult to Tecmessa, but simply a further expression of Ajax's intense pride in his own εὐγένεια.' Finglass (2003) 296 seems closer to discerning a litmus test of biological relatedness being proposed: 'Inheritance of paternal characteristics indicates a child's legitimacy.' However, he downplays this when he says: 'Sometimes in

And then Ajax borrows a horse metaphor to express the need for Eurysaces to be 'broken in'. The interplay of nature/nurture is strong in this particular passage. There is almost a contradiction. On the one hand, Ajax assumes that his son will instinctually and without prior exposure show no fear at the bloody sight, but, on the other hand, he suggests that his son needs to be nurtured and broken into these savage ways. Sophocles seems to be fusing *phusis* and *nomos* when, typically, they were seen to be distinct and opposing principles. We see both words used in lines 548-9.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, even in the adjective that is paired with νόμοις, namely, ὠμοῖς, we see this oxymoronic effect.<sup>2</sup> And, Eurysaces is being broken in, not to tame him as with horses, but to make him more savage. Although Ajax believes in the power, to some degree at least, of bloodline, he is placing a sizeable emphasis here on the importance of nurture.

Ajax gives the following exhortation to Eurysaces for when he attains maturity:

ὅταν δ' ἴκη πρὸς τοῦτο, δεῖ σ' ὅπως πατρός  
δείξεις ἐν ἐχθροῖς, οἷος ἐξ οἴου 'τρέφης. (557-8)

Whenever you arrive at this point, it is necessary for you to show among your father's enemies the type of man you are and from what type you have been reared.

Ajax puts an obligation on his son to demonstrate his valour at the necessary time. So, once again, the son is expected to 'prove' his worth at this later time. The polyptoton of οἷος ἐξ οἴου seems designed to stress the similarity in character between father and son. Kamerbeek makes the interesting point that 'τρέφης is synonymous with γέγονας here.<sup>3</sup> But Sophocles has deliberately used this word and in this particular part of the play there is an extended engagement both thematically and lexically with the idea of nurture, so let us explore this in more depth.

Tecmessa in her plea for Ajax to stay alive had asked him to be mindful of the loss of nurture νέας/τροφῆς στερηθεὶς σοῦ (510-11) his death would inflict on their son, Eurysaces. At line 557 Ajax wishes for Astyanax to be 'nurtured (βόσκου) on light breezes'. And then at 563 he says that he will leave Teucer 'as a strong guard and foster father (τροφῆ)' (563).<sup>4</sup> All of this suggests that Ajax is very conscious of the

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similar expressions εἰ is a true 'if', but here the resulting insult to Tecmessa would be gratuitous.'

<sup>1</sup> Kamerbeek (1953) 118: 'As the scholiast puts it: μεγαλοφρονῶν δὲ νόμους τὴν φύσιν ὠνόμασεν καὶ τὸ ἔθος τοῦ γεγνηκότος. The φύσις of the father will be νόμος for the son.'

<sup>2</sup> Garvie (1998) 175.

<sup>3</sup> Kamerbeek (1953) 120: 'cf. 1229, *Phil.* 3; it does not differ much from γέγονας'

<sup>4</sup> Stanford (1963) 131: 'We can see the concept slowly rising to the surface of his mind first with 'τρέφης in 557, then with βόσκου in 558, until it fully emerges here.'

importance of nurture for Astyanax. It does not seem to be the case that Ajax considers the elite breeding of his son to be enough to ensure his success, rather, he is aware that the child will need the necessary nurture. Teucer will function as a foster-father for Astyanax, presumably instilling the same ethics and behaviour as Ajax would were he to stay alive.

It is important to bear in mind the context of the Dionysia festival when studying this scene. One of the preplay ceremonies was the parading of orphans in full hoplite costume who had been educated by the state. There is a noticeable contrast between this democratic ideology, where the state is responsible for the orphan's upbringing, and the ideology espoused by Ajax where the nurturing of Eurysaces and his preparation for warfare are seen as an entirely family affair. Goldhill is the scholar responsible for first highlighting this contrast:

And the difference between Ajax's attitudes and the fifth-century democracy could hardly be better expressed than by the juxtaposition of Ajax's admonitions to his child, Ajax's sense of military and social behaviour, Ajax's heroic extremism, and that preplay ceremony of the orphans, state-educated and armed, professing their allegiance to the *polis* and taking their proper place in the hoplite rank. The inheritance Ajax hopes to leave and leaves stands in significant contrast to the fifth-century city's representation of his action and attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

Returning to the theme of nurture, it is interesting that Ajax excludes any possibility of his nature being educated:

μῶρά μοι δοκεῖς φρονεῖν,  
εἰ τοῦ μὸν ἦθος ἄρτι παιδεύειν νοεῖς. (594-5)

You seem to me to think foolishly, if you reckon to educate my character now.

Ajax' choice of verb is apposite: the stem of παιδεύειν is παιδ- from where originates the Greek word for child. Essentially, Ajax is making the point that education is appropriate for the young, presumably because their natures are still molten, but someone at his age is no longer a sapling that can be bent in a certain

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<sup>1</sup> Goldhill (1992) 118.

direction<sup>1</sup>. He believes in the efficacy of education in the case of his young son, but is very sceptical regarding adults.<sup>2</sup>

### Teucer-Telamon

The relationship between Teucer and Telamon compounds the image of Telamon as a censorious and difficult father. However, Teucer's relationship with his father contrasts with Ajax' in respect of being the son of a foreign mother, who, to borrow a Victorian term, was a spear-bride. This suggests that in terms of ancestry the matriline is not negligible, even if the patriline is most prominent. Teucer imagines his father's angry reaction as follows:

ἢ πού με Τελαμών, σὸς πατήρ ἐμός θ' ἄμα,  
δέξαιτ' ἂν εὐπρόσωπος ἴλεώς τ' ἴσως  
χωροῦντ' ἄνευ σοῦ. πῶς γὰρ οὐχ; ὄτω πάρα  
μηδ' εὐτυχοῦντι μηδὲν ἥδιον γελᾶν.  
οὔτος τί κρύψει; ποῖον οὐχ ἔρεϊ κακὸν  
τὸν ἐκ δορὸς γεγῶτα πολεμίου νόθον,  
τὸν δειλία προδόντα καὶ κακανδρία  
σέ, φίλτατ' Αἴας, ἢ δόλοισιν, ὡς τὰ σὰ  
κράτη θανόντος καὶ δόμους νέμοιμι σοῦς.  
(1008-1018)

Or I suppose Telamon, your father and also mine, would receive me  
friendly and graciously returning home without you. How so? For whom  
even faring well it is not possible to smile sweetly. What will this man hold  
back? What reproach will he not direct at the bastard son born from an  
enemy spear-bride, who abandoned you from cowardice and unmanliness,  
dearest Ajax, or by trickery, so that with you dead I could distribute your  
rule and estate.

It seems as if Teucer sees Ajax as the legitimate son who is Telamon's primary concern. One gets the impression that Teucer suspects his father of seeing him as second-best, mainly because of his maternal descent. And Teucer even mentions Telamon's potential suspicions that he was complicit in Ajax' death for the sake of inheritance benefits.<sup>3</sup> This contrasts with Teucer's position in the quarrel scene

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<sup>1</sup> Garvie (1998) 180: 'The Sophoclean hero refuses to be taught. As at 592 the futility of her attempt is clear.' Finglass (2003) 312: 'Ajax portrays Tecmessa's pleas as mere reprimands fit for a child. [...] a capacity to learn disappears with maturity.'

<sup>2</sup> The relationship between Ajax and Eurysaces is also explored in the supplication scene instigated by Teucer, who orders his nephew to clasp his father with his hair offerings (1170ff.) This could well be a ritualistic process of linking son to father

<sup>3</sup> Hesk (2003) 108: 'Teucer assumes that he will have a worse time of it because he is illegitimate. According to tradition, Teucer's fears were realised.'

where, as we shall see, he proudly defends against aspersions of humble birth which are based on the foreign status of his mother.

### Debate scene

The debate scene between Teucer and the Atreidae is arguably the place where there is the most concentrated, thorough and overt discussion of the theme of noble birth in the play. Although the central dramatic issue of the *agōn* is the burial of Ajax, the notion of noble birth appears permanently prominent in the debate and each interlocutor, even amid the technicalities of the argument, undertakes to denigrate the nobility of his adversary. For example, Menelaus makes this jeering comment about Ajax' unruliness:

καίτοι κακοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρὸς ὄντα δημότην  
μηδὲν δικαιοῦν τῶν ἐφεστώτων κλύειν (1071-2)

Indeed, it is the mark of a villain for a subordinate to refuse to obey those in authority

He uses words which are socially charged. *Kakos*, although evolving to connote ethical qualities, never fully lost its early meaning signifying someone from the lower class. That the original meaning is intended is confirmed by another word in the same sentence *dēmotēs*, which connotes a member of the common mass, confirming that class snobbery is intended. As absurd as the accusation appears, Menelaus is asserting that Ajax was a plebeian commoner who had no right to disobey his superiors.<sup>1</sup>

Teucer begins his response to Menelaus with a scathing suggestion of the latter's superficial nobility:

οὐκ ἂν ποτ', ἄνδρες, ἄνδρα θαυμάσαιμ' ἔτι,  
ὄς μηδὲν ὦν γοναῖσιν εἶθ' ἀμαρτάνει,  
ὄθ' οἱ δοκοῦντες εὐγενεῖς πεφυκέναι  
τοιαῦθ' ἀμαρτάνουσιν ἐν λόγοις ἔπη (1093-6)

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<sup>1</sup> Garvie (1998) 223: 'For the ambiguity in the meaning of *κακός* see 132-3, 319-20nn, where the vital question of Ajax' status was already raised. The grotesquely insulting description of Ajax as a 'commoner', whose only duty is to obey his superiors' orders, leaves us in no doubt that Menelaus is wrong.' Stanford (1963) 194: "'of the people", i.e. without rank or office.' Hogan (1991) 217 correctly states that Ajax came to Troy on his own accord, not as a subordinate of Agamemnon.



I could never again wonder at a man's doing wrong who was nothing on account of birth, when they who are thought to be nobly born go wrong in talk by uttering words like these

Teucer juxtaposes two words, one implying appearance, *δοκοῦντες*, and the other essence, *πεφυκέναι*. In philosophical schools, *doxa* was associated with illusory appearance whereas *phusis* was synonymous with truth. Teucer is saying that the glitter of Menelaus' status does not compensate for his less than golden nobility.<sup>1</sup> Because Menelaus' nobility is reputed and not actual, his words are worth no more than those of humble folk.<sup>2</sup>

And Agamemnon makes his entrance immediately assailing the social status of Teucer and Ajax:

σέ τοι, τὸν ἐκ τῆς αἰχμαλωτίδος λέγω,  
ἧ̃ που τραφεῖς ἄν μητρὸς εὐγενοῦς ἄπο  
ὑψηλ' ἐκόμπεις κάπ' ἄκρων ὠδοιπόρεις,  
ὄτ' οὐδὲν ὦν τοῦ μηδὲν ἀντέστης ὕπερ (1228-31)

It is you, the son of the captive woman, that I address! You would have used high words, I think, and have walked on the tips of your toes if you had been the son of a well-born mother, since you who are nothing have championed him who is also nothing

Why do the three interlocutors, Teucer, Agamemnon and Menelaus, all make aspersions connected with low breeding? The answer seems connected with the constructed political atmosphere within which the debate is taking place. It seems as if Sophocles is rooting the debate scene in the same social context as that of the *Iliad*, namely an aristocratic setting where good birth was a prerequisite for superior political rights. The three interlocutors seem to operate as though the surest way to gain ascendancy in the debate is to have exclusive control of the claim to nobility. This dynamic finds a precedent in the *Iliad* where the right to

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<sup>1</sup> Garvie (1998) 225: 'Teucer implies that, despite his birth, Menelaus is not really entitled to be called 'noble' at all. Nobility of birth does not necessarily go with nobility of character.'

<sup>2</sup> Davies (2018) has written an excellent article discussing whether the intention of Lysander's planned reform to Spartan kingship was to open it up to all the Spartans or just the Heraclidae. The scholar argues that the former is the more likely based on a study of the sources. It is interesting that in Sparta, admittedly after the performance of the *Ajax*, the issue of monarchical rule based on good birth (*eugeneia*) or on a general appreciation of individual excellence (*aretē*) seems to have become a significant topic.

speaking on public issues was reserved for the noble warriors, while the foot-soldier was expected to comply silently with his orders and was punished if he spoke out of turn.

In book 2 of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon decides to convene an assembly where his plan of testing the morale of the troops backfires to the point where they all plan to sail back home. Odysseus is spurred by the goddess Athene to restore calm. It is interesting to note the difference in how he treats those of high social standing and those of low social standing.

ὄν τινα μὲν βασιλῆα καὶ ἔξοχον ἄνδρα κίχρη  
τὸν δ' ἀγανοῖς ἐπέεσσιν ἐρητύσασκε παραστάς·  
'δαιμόνι' οὐ σε ἔοικε κακὸν ὧς δειδίσεσθαι,  
ἀλλ' αὐτὸς τε κάθησο καὶ ἄλλους ἴδρυε λαοῦς (//. 2.188-91)

Whatever king or man of note he met, to his side he would come and with gentle words seek to restrain him, saying: "It is not right, man, to try to frighten you as if you were a coward, but sit down yourself, and make the rest of your people sit"

ὄν δ' αὖ δῆμου τ' ἄνδρα ἴδοι βοόωντά τ' ἐφεύροι,  
τὸν σκήπτρῳ ἐλάσασκεν ὁμοκλήσασκέ τε μύθῳ·  
δαιμόνι' ἀτρέμας ἦσο καὶ ἄλλων μῦθον ἄκουε,  
οἷ σέο φέρτεροί εἰσι, σὺ δ' ἀπτόλεμος καὶ ἀναλκίς·  
οὔτε ποτ' ἐν πολέμῳ ἐναρίθμιος οὔτ' ἐνὶ βουλῇ·  
οὐ μὲν πως πάντες βασιλεύσομεν ἐνθάδ' Ἀχαιοί·  
οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίη (//. 2.198-204)

But whatever man of the people he saw, and found brawling, him he would drive on with his staff, and rebuke with words, saying: "Sit still, man, and listen to the words of others who are better men than you; you are unwarlike and lacking in valor, to be counted neither in war nor in counsel. In no way will we Achaeans all be kings here. No good thing is a multitude of lords"

Odysseus' method of address and communication vary greatly depending on the social station of the addressee. We are presented with a society comprising a binary division between the elite and the masses, where the former are treated courteously and the latter with disdain. Homer makes the starkness of the contrast particularly evident with his use of the particles *men* and *de*, which serve to highlight the dualism of the class system. Homeric society is shown to be black-and-

white in terms of the social hierarchy. You are either an aristocrat or you are not.<sup>1</sup> There is no middle class as in modern society.

In the exchange between Teucer and Agamemnon concerning the burial of Ajax, there is a considerable discussion of ancestry which focuses on two pertinent debates relating to this topic: class vs. ethnicity and true nobility vs. pseudo-nobility.

Agamemnon attempts to undermine the validity of Teucer's position and his defence of his brother in condemning him as the son of a foreign mother. Agamemnon even ends his speech by saying that Teucer should bring a free-man, whose mother tongue is Greek, to speak on his behalf:

οὐ σωφρονήσεις; οὐ μαθὼν ὅς εἰ φύσιν  
ἄλλον τιν' ἄξεις ἄνδρα δεῦρ' ἐλεύθερον,  
ὅστις πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἀντὶ σοῦ λέξει τὰ σά;  
σοῦ γὰρ λέγοντος οὐκέτ' ἂν μάθοιμ' ἐγώ·  
τὴν βάρβαρον γὰρ γλῶσσαν οὐκ ἐπαίω (1259-63)

Will you not get some sense? Will you not learn who you are and bring another man who is a free man to speak for you instead of yourself? I would not understand you as the speaker, since I do not know the barbarian language

These words of Agamemnon are unabashedly ethnophobic and they imply that Teucer is a second-class citizen by virtue of his biracial heritage. Agamemnon's prejudiced attitude stereotypes foreigners as both slave-like and speakers of pigeon Greek. Aside from the haughty and unlikeable portrait of Agamemnon these words paint, they also seem, as Stanford has suggested, to refer anachronistically to the practice in classical Athens of a metic or a slave having to use a citizen born of two Athenians to speak on his behalf.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, they might be more meaningfully understood to allude to the Citizenship Law of Pericles decreed in 451 B.C. which stipulated that only those born of two Athenians were to be considered Athenian citizens. This decree would have affected, in particular, the Athenian aristocrats who, as was an accepted aristocratic custom, had been contracting international

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<sup>1</sup> Finley (1979) 56 is aligned with this view: 'A deep cleavage marked the world of the Homeric poems. Above the line were the *aristoi*. Literally "the best people", the hereditary nobles who held most of the wealth and all the power, in peace as in war. Below were all the others, for whom there was no collective technical term, the multitude.'

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Stanford (1963) 213: 'This probably involves anachronism, for it was in fifth-century Athens that persons not born from free parents were debarred from full rights of citizenship and needed to have a full citizen as their *προστάτης*'.

marriages for centuries. It is ironic that this decree came back to haunt Pericles when he was forced to seek exemption from this law for his only surviving son born of the foreign Aspasia.

Behind the words of Agamemnon and equally the decree of 451 B.C. lies the assumption that ethnicity takes precedence over class: someone's worth is measured first by their nationality, with class featuring only as a secondary mode of discrimination. It is likely that this attitude would have won some favour among a certain section of the Athenian population, especially given the fact that Athenians, as descendants of the earth-born Erechtheus, prided themselves on being an autochthonous race. The effect of the Citizenship Law was likely a reinforcing of Athenian exceptionalism, with the ordinary masses able to appropriate, by the proxy of ethnicity rather than family, the ancestral pride of aristocrats.

Teucer's response contests the ethnocentric attitude of Agamemnon's slurs in two ways. The first method appears to revolve around the idea that ethnic purity, although a cherished idea, is a very rare biological reality, especially among those of noble heritage. Teucer demonstrates the untenable and inconsistent position Agamemnon holds in pointing out that the king's grandfather was a Phrygian:

οὐκ οἶσθα σοῦ πατρός μὲν ὃς προύφῃ πατήρ  
ἀρχαῖον ὄντα Πέλοπα βάρβαρον Φρύγα; (1291-2)  
Do you not know that the father of your father, Pelops, was by origin a  
barbarous Phrygian?

The second method of Teucer is to argue that foreign ethnicity in no way detracts from noble status; although his mother may be Phrygian, she is nevertheless a princess:

ὄστις στρατοῦ τὰ πρῶτ' ἀριστεύσας ἐμήν  
ἴσχει ξύνευνον μητέρ', ἣ φύσει μὲν ἦν  
βασίλεια, Λαομέδοντος· ἔκκριτον δέ νιν  
δώρημα κείνῳ ἔδωκεν Ἀλκμήνης γόνος.  
ἄρ' ὦδ' ἄριστος ἐξ ἀριστέοιν δυοῖν  
βλαστῶν ἂν αἰσχύνοιμι τοὺς πρὸς αἵματος (1300-5)

[Telamon], who as the army's greatest prize for valour won as bedfellow my mother, who was by birth a princess, daughter of Laomedon, and she was given as a special gift by Alcmena's son? Would I, thus born the noble son of two noble parents, shame my relation.

It is significant that Teucer describes his mother as being a princess ‘by nature’.<sup>1</sup> The suggestion is that her status as the spear-bride of Telamon is circumstantial, whereas her rega; status is something innate: her nobility is something that cannot be wiped away by the vicissitude of fortune. Teucer reinforces the royal portrait of his mother, Hesione, by describing how she was deemed by Heracles to be ‘a special gift’. It is after this defence of his mother’s pedigree that he boasts to be ‘born the noble son of two noble parents’. This does seem to be a rewriting of the decree, placing the emphasis on nobility rather than ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> For Teucer, class take precedence over ethnicity: his mother’s royal status remains royal irrespective of her ethnic background. Naturally, he would prefer to be the son of a foreign princess than a Greek maid-servant, for instance.

Concerning the opposition of true nobility and pseudo-nobility, Teucer contrasts the prestigious but ignoble parents of Agamemnon and Menelaus with his own parents, where social standing and individual worth are commensurate with one another. Rather than making a superficial assessment based on their status, Teucer studies the deeds of the Atreidae’s parents to show that beneath the veneer of royalty there lies opprobrious immorality:

Ἄτρεα δ', ὃς αὖ σ' ἔσπειρε δυσσεβέστατον,  
 προθέντ' ἀδελφῶ δεῖπνον οἰκείων τέκνων;  
 αὐτὸς δὲ μητρὸς ἐξέφυς Κρήσσης, ἐφ' ἧ  
 λαβῶν ἐπακτὸν ἄνδρ' ὁ φιτύσας πατήρ  
 ἐφῆκεν ἔλλοϊς ἰχθύσιν διαφθοράν (1293-7)

And that Atreus, your parent, set before his brother a most impious meal,  
 the flesh of his children? And you yourself are the son of a Cretan mother,  
 whom your father, finding a lover with her, sent to be destroyed by dumb  
 fishes

Teucer here relates Atreus’ horrific act of serving a cannibalistic child feast to his brother Thyestes. The audience, who were well-versed in mythology, would be aware that this was an act of retaliation for Thyestes’ adultery with Atreus’ wife, Aerope. Although Teucer mentions only the most explicitly abhorrent act

<sup>1</sup> This is a more literal translation of φύσει than that of the Loeb.

<sup>2</sup> Hesk (2003) 121: ‘Teucer’s deconstruction of Agamemnon’s “Greekness” and “nobility” speaks to (and perhaps questions) the exclusionist and elitist tendencies of Athenian civic ideology in particular and Hellenic chauvinism in general. This bastard-bowman’s own good character and knock-down rhetoric undermine definitions of ‘noble’ character which rely too heavily on ethnicity or particular connections. Again, the audience are invited to look closely at their most deep-seated attitudes.’

committed by Atreus, the audience's memory might be stirred to reflect on other sins within the family. By association, they might recall the feastal crime of the founder of the family, Tantalus, who slew his son Pelops and tried to feed him to the gods. Teucer does not labour his point or go into excessive detail concerning the immorality of Agamemnon's father, otherwise he could easily have mentioned Atreus' and Thyestes' murder of their brother Chrysippus as well as Atreus' murder of his future father-in-law by trickery. Moreover, Teucer does not limit his attack to the paternal line but reinforces the image of morality by referring to the licentious behaviour of his mother, punished by her father for being caught making love to a slave. With the selection of these two examples, most illustrative of his point, Teucer wishes to show that although the family enjoys royal status, from an ethical point of view it is thoroughly degraded.<sup>1</sup>

Teucer's demonstration that the Atreidae hail from parents of counterfeit nobility, in contrast to the genuine nobility of his and Ajax' parents, does not limit itself to a purely genealogical comparison. In the same way that Christ declared, 'Judge a tree by the fruit it beareth', Teucer proves that the dissonance in martial prowess and virtue between Ajax, on the one hand, and the Atreidae, on the other, is further proof testifying to the difference in nobility between the two families. Ajax' family tree is shown to bear nobler fruit than that of his rivals, thus confirming the premise of his argument.<sup>2</sup> To this end, Teucer reminds the Atreidae of the bravery Ajax displayed while fighting at Troy, especially when he launched a counteroffensive at the time when the Greeks ships were surrounded by the Trojan army and being set alight, as well as in his readiness to face Hector in a duel (1273-87).

In light of this valour and Ajax' pedigree, Teucer maintains that the Atreidae hold no authority, and never did hold any, over his brother. The political matter of who governs whom is not separate from nobility both in terms of heredity and personhood - the ruling-elite in the *Iliad*, for example, are distinguished from the

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<sup>1</sup> Kamerbeek (1953) 244: 'And thus there is a climax in Teucer's taunts: the grandsire a barbarian, the sire a criminal, the mother lascivious-which may imply an insinuation against Agamemnon's descent.' Stanford (1963) 217: 'Relentlessly Teucer goes on to show that Agamemnon's ancestors were not only non-Greek, but also immoral.'

<sup>2</sup>Admittedly, Teucer presents first the valour of Ajax and then constructs a genealogical comparison. This sequence makes Ajax' valour primary and genealogical considerations serve *prima facie* to support this argument. However, we are not perverting the thrust of Teucer's argument since he presents an argument where the cause and effect exist in a reciprocal relationship: Ajax is noble because he comes from a noble family, and his family is confirmed to be noble by Ajax behaving nobly. Both of these assertions are present in Teucer's riposte to Agamemnon, since the latter questioned Ajax' valour as well as Teucer's, and by proxy Ajax', family.

ordinary foot-soldier by their martial prowess and their eminent ancestry. Teucer objects to the Atreidae for assuming a position of authority which is vouchsafed for them neither from being a social superior nor from being superior warriors. The Atreidae are acting as a royal family that has overextended its power beyond its constitutional rights while, at the same time, revealing itself to be a hollow embodiment of nobility: it's an unsatisfactory combination of inflated status and deflated worth. Teucer had attempted to make Menelaus aware that Ajax is in no way subordinate to him and his brother for two reasons: firstly, their rule does not extend beyond the Spartans and, secondly, Ajax came not as conscripted ally but out of adherence to the oath he swore to Helen's father (1097 et passim).<sup>1</sup>

This tension between ability and reputation seems to have a precedent in the first book of Homer's *Iliad*, namely the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, which, at a practical level, arose out of Agamemnon's initial refusal to cede Chryseis and also his threat thereafter to take for himself Briseis. But in Homer's characterisation of these two figures we see that the conflict is, fundamentally, one of principle and ideology. Agamemnon is shown to be an embodiment of the belief that kingly status gives him an authority that makes everyone else subject to his will, whereas Achilles represents the idea that innate excellence supersedes titles, ranks or any other outward display of pre-eminence. Achilles begrudges the fact that there is no proportionality between deeds of valour on the battlefield and rewards thereof. Agamemnon is given the lion share of the spoils not because of his instrumentality as a warrior but because of his position as *soi-disant* leader of the Greek army.

Homer's Achilles and Sophocles' Ajax share a strikingly similar attitude of contempt for Agamemnon. Neither of them are impressed by the grandeur of his position. Instead, they despise the supercilious and vainglorious pomp of his manner. Both refuse to obey Agamemnon in serious matters and wish to remain autonomous, not allowing Agamemnon with his large contingent of soldiers to treat them and their soldiers imperiously as vassal states. Both are provoked to absolute disobedience when they are deprived of a possession held dear to them and signalling honour paid to them. That which gives them confidence to stand up to tyrannical authority is an unshakeable belief in their own excellence. Achilles and Ajax have no doubts

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<sup>1</sup> Hesk (2003) 111: 'Ajax was probably written at a time when Athens was either at, or on the brink of, war with Sparta. Where Athens was a democratic polis, Sparta's constitution gave power to a narrow oligarchy headed by two soldier-kings [...] On the other hand, there is nothing in what Menelaus says about the need for discipline which could not have been uttered by an *Athenian* general or demagogue [...] In speaking as if Ajax were a hoplite under his direct command, Menelaus reminds all polis-dwellers that they cannot do whatever they like.'

that they are respectively the 'best of the Achaians', even if Teucer and Odysseus qualify that Ajax was best of the Achaians, after Achilles.

In the same way that Ajax' martial prowess has been linked with his illustrious ancestry, Achilles' superiority over Agamemnon in this regard seems to be attributed also to the same cause. Agamemnon himself admits that Achilles' strength as a warrior owes to the fact that he is of divine descent (*Il.* 2.178). This idea is further confirmed by Nestor who, acting as a peacemaker in the conflict, declares to Achilles:

εἰ δὲ σὺ καρτερός ἐσσι θεὰ δέ σε γείνατο μήτηρ,  
ἀλλ' ὃ γε φέρτερός ἐστιν ἐπεὶ πλεόνεσσιν ἀνάσσει (*Il.* 280-1)

Though you are powerful, and a goddess bore you, yet he is mightier, since he is king over more

There are many reasons that could be put forward for Achilles' superiority as a warrior, namely training, experience, diet, innate character or quality of his armour, to name a few, but, instead, the only explanation that is explicitly offered in the text is ancestry. The superiority of Achilles' ancestors, whose mother is a goddess and his great-grandfather happens to be Zeus, means that Agamemnon has no chance of rivalling Achilles. The only way in which Agamemnon surpasses Achilles is in the number over which he rules. However, Achilles' absence and the disastrous consequences that this will have on the Greek army shows that Agamemnon's large army means little when there is the absence of the divine-born, swift-footed, lion-hearted warrior whose individual excellence cannot be substituted by force of number.

Similarly, Sophocles' Ajax is presented by Teucer as a paragon of true nobility. Teucer has argued that the parents of the Atreidae are a pale imitation of the nobility embodied by Ajax' father, Telamon, who was the most distinguished soldier in the first Trojan campaign. Ajax followed in the footsteps of his father with respect to the brave deeds he performed at Troy, even if he went undecorated for these. The parallels that have been drawn between Achilles and Ajax point to the injustice of the awarding of the arms of Achilles to Odysseus. As the cousin of Achilles, Ajax was fit to wear the arms of Achilles, in relation to whom he was most alike in ability, temperament and ancestry. It is for this reason perhaps that Ajax felt so aggrieved by missing out on the arms. Just as Achilles wished destruction upon the Greek army to highlight the folly of Agamemnon's behaviour, Ajax attempted to slaughter the army as punishment for its leader's foolishness. Where Achilles'



caused harm indirectly through his absence, Ajax tried to do so directly with his own hands.

The Ajax of Sophocles considered the Atreidae 'nothing men' (1114) and refused, according to Menelaus, to listen to them (1070). To call someone 'nothing' is an attempt to annihilate them socially even to the point of social death since death is the absolute state of nothingness. But the justification for the severity of this insult is in the ineffectiveness of Agamemnon. Ajax and Achilles know that they are something because when they die or remove themselves from the war, the army feels painfully their absence proving that something is absent that was present. Could the same be said of Agamemnon or Menelaus? According to Ajax, no. The fact that their absence from the battlefield would have no detrimental effect on the outcome suggests that their presence is negligible. This nothingness-of-having-no-effect is not the characteristic of true nobility. Because something cannot come from nothing but nothing can come from nothing, Agamemnon being nothing must be from nothing. Teucer argued that the parents of Agamemnon were non-entities in respect of honourable behaviour. Ajax, on the other hand, is a man inferior to no other man and unlike any man that came to Troy. Far from being a nothing-man, there is no man that can match him. If we asked Homer or Sophocles why this is the case, the answer would be connected with the fact that he is a son of Telamon. Through natural determination and cultural pressure, Ajax was bound to leave his mark as a warrior. Even his staunchest enemy, Odysseus, has to recognise his nobility, calling him 'brave' (*alkimos*) (1319), 'best' (*aristos*) (1340), 'good' (*esthlos*) (1345) and 'noble' (*gennaios*) (1355).<sup>1</sup> Of the four compliments, three connote both the idea of ancestral nobility and noble behaviour. Ajax is the epitome of this twofold nobility where nobility of lineage is reflected in comportment and achievement. He is noble of character because he is born of noble parents and the nobility of his parents is confirmed by his noble character.

## Conclusion

Why does Sophocles explore the theme of good breeding in such depth and from such a plurality of perspectives? Firstly, from a literary perspective, it has enhanced the tragic pathos of the drama. The father-son relationships explored are emotionally charged scenes. Although Aristotle says that crime/injustice which happens between family members is more moving than people unrelated by blood, the same can also be said of interactions, more generally. Ajax' feelings of prospective shame have more emotional resonance than if he were speaking about his reluctance to see his neighbour.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford (1963) 227: 'Odysseus refuses to let Ajax' hostility eclipse his nobility'

From a more ideational perspective, there can be no doubt but that the topic of *breedig* was something which Sophocles considered of high relevance and importance. And there is a strong possibility that the play relates to contemporary politics. The representation of the figure of Ajax could have been inspired by Cimon, who had headed the aristocratic camp in Athenian politics. If the probable date of the *Ajax*, 442/1 BC, is correct, Cimon would not long have been dead (died 450 BC), replaced in aristocratic and conservative spirit by his relative, Thucydides son of Melesias, until the latter's ostracism in 442 BC.<sup>1</sup> Cimon himself belonged to the Philaid family, whose ancestry claimed to be able to trace itself back all the way to Ajax. The depiction of Ajax failing to maintain honour and influence in the play could reflect, in some way, Cimon, as well as Thucydides son of Melesias, who had fought a losing battle against the demagogic tendencies of Pericles.<sup>2</sup> We know, at least, that there was likely to have been a favourable relationship between Sophocles and Cimon - the first victory of Sophocles at the Dionysia was awarded, untypically, by Cimon and the nine other generals, rather than by the vote of the selected judges.<sup>3</sup> Sophocles seems to have maintained a sympathy for the aristocratic element of Athenian politics, as testified by the fact that in 411 BC, as one of the ten *probouloi*, he voted for the instauration of the oligarchic rule of the Four Hundred.<sup>4</sup> Thus the *Ajax* could be seen as a way of Sophocles passing judgement on political affairs, especially those relating to the diminution of aristocratic influence and ideology based on birth.<sup>5</sup>

But, the play can also be assessed along broader, more abstract and non-individual-specific lines. The play wrestles with defining nobility, but scholars are divided as to what definition of noble action the play promotes. Exactly what ideology is being championed, is it one of Homeric heroism or the collectivism of fifth-century polis life? According to certain scholars, sometimes termed 'hero-worshippers', Ajax stands for an epic and aristocratic individualist ethos which is no longer compatible with democratic collectivism:

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<sup>1</sup> Evans (1991) 83: 'The death of Cimon was relatively recent. His relative by marriage, Thucydides the son of Melesias, had, apparently, polarised the political spectrum in Athens into oligarchic and democratic camps, or at least, was credited with doing so by later tradition. Ostracised in 444 or 443 BC, he was fighting a losing battle against Pericles, or perhaps by the time the *Ajax* was produced, he had already lost it.'

<sup>2</sup> Evans (1991) 70: 'The temptation to connect Ajax in some way with Cimon is strong.'

<sup>3</sup> Plut. *Cimon* 8.7-8. Brown (1965) 33: 'There is clear evidence for close links between Kimon and Sophocles [...] It was Kimon who gave Sophocles his first triumph [...] Kimon was Sophocles' patron'.

<sup>4</sup> See Jameson (1971) for a detailed investigation.

<sup>5</sup> Fouchard (1997) explores the tension and polarity between aristocratic and democratic ideology. Athens, as the most notable democratic city, is a central case study.

Ajax is presented to us in this play as the last of the heroes. His death is the death of the old Homeric (and especially Achillean) individual ethos which had for centuries of aristocratic rule served as the dominant ideal of man's nobility and action, but which by the fifth century had been successfully challenged and largely superseded (in spite of its late and magnificent flowering in the poetry of Pindar) by an outlook more suitable to the conditions of the polis, an outlook which revealed its most developed form in democratic Athens.<sup>1</sup>

According to this reading, Ajax is an embodiment of heroic individualism oppressed by the demands of society. Knox is of the conviction that Sophocles uses the play to question, and perhaps even criticise, the encroachments of the ever-expanding state on the freedoms of the individual. Whitman is of a similar conviction:

Formally, it is the defense of Ajax and his right to burial, but morally it is the defense of the ultimate value of a great individual in the face of whatever claims society may have against him. And it proves that if the man is really great, society's claims must be modified; the small people must bow down to the man of true standards.<sup>2</sup>

But there are other scholars who challenge this interpretation and believe, instead, that either the case is more nuanced, or even that Sophocles is condemning the *hubris* of Ajax and his outdated notion of *eugeneia*, with the aim of replacing it with a diplomacy and emotional sympathy exemplified by Odysseus. Finglass is indicative of the nuanced reading:

I have the following reservations about this influential model. (i) It overstates the distinction between the Homeric poems and the classical period; esteem for competitive and cooperative virtues is prominent in both. (ii) It overstates the similarity between Sophocles' Ajax and the warriors of Homer [...] The effect is one of contrast, not similarity, as Ajax fails to satisfy a range of obligations common to both periods, including requirement to look after one's φίλοι, or to have regard for more than one's personal τιμή. (iii) Odysseus' world-view contains nothing Homer would have found unusual, and nothing peculiarly democratic.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Knox (1961) 20.

<sup>2</sup> Whitman (1951) 77.

<sup>3</sup> Finglass (2011) 42. Swift (2019) 38 is also nuanced and believes that the play asks the audience to 'reflect upon' the tensions arising from the fact that wealthy aristocrats continued to wield influence and contribute to the state in the form of liturgy, but at the same time challenged, or weakened, the strength of democratic ideology.'

And for the view that Odysseus is the role-model replacing the hubristic attitude of Ajax:

‘The model for Odysseus is the Achilles of *Iliad* 24, who pities his enemies Priam and Hector [...] Odysseus’ generosity represents the crowning form of εὐγένεια in the *Ajax*. However grand and awe-inspiring Ajax’ devotion to τιμή, however moving the appeal to affection given expression by Tecmessa, it is Odysseus’ combination of the sense of justice and the conditioning factor of emotional responses like pity which finally succeeds in resolving the quarrel over Achilles’ armour in its last stages.<sup>1</sup>

It is maybe impossible to ascertain with absolute certainty what was Sophocles’ particular opinion on the matter. But it is evident that the play engages with the spirit of the Homeric epics and that of contemporary society. It is important not to see the values of these two periods as exclusively opposed – many of the values championed by Homer’s heroes continued to be valued in the fifth century. However, the play does seem to show that the old values of Homeric heroism can sometimes sit uncomfortably with a more egalitarian and collectivist ideology. The play contains much rhetoric about noble birth, and in the fifth century, far from being an outdated issue, it was much discussed and even in the fourth century continued to be an important rhetorical resource, as the extant orations demonstrate.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, a cleavage between good birth and social standing seems to have manifested itself in the play, such a cleavage does not exist in the Homeric epics, even if it is present as a small fissure. The play maintains as strongly as any passage in Homer the connection between genuinely good birth, not the allure of pseudo-nobility, and good character, but there is little faith in any socio-political benefit going concomitant with it.

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<sup>1</sup> Zanker (1992) 25. McCallum-Barry (2019) 140 shares a similar view.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Lysias (30.1) complains that certain defendants had escaped punishment thanks to the virtue of their ancestors (*tas tōn pragonōn aretas*). Equally, Isocrates (20.19) argues that it is not just that ordinary citizens should receive less justice than the ‘double-named’ (*tōn diōnomasmēnōn*), i.e. those boasting a famous patronymic. This shows that birth could be of rhetorical consequence.



## Chapter 5: *Antigone*

It would be unusual if the *Antigone* did not richly engage with the theme of *phusis* and *eugeneia* since the play concerns itself with family conflict. The action preceding and influencing the drama of the play is the internecine conflict between the brothers, Polynices and Eteocles. In the play itself, the main conflict is between uncle and niece, Creon and Antigone. Rather than considering it a political play, it is perhaps more accurate to view it as a play which centralises family-related issues, and political issues are engaged with only insofar as they relate to family issues. In the midst of the drama there are three themes explored relating to breeding in the *Antigone*: 1) the antithesis between family and city; 2) the idea of inherited sin; 3) heroism and cowardice as ideals pertaining to different social strata.

### Family vs. state

The relevance of the duality of family and city to the notion of good birth resides in the fact that the family is the vehicle through which transmission of moral excellence takes place. Any devaluing view of the biological family naturally results in good breeding being held in lower regard. An important way in which democratic ideology is antithetical to aristocracy lies in the fact that the biological family is replaced by the political family: in Athenian democracy one's identity, at least at an ideological level, was no longer defined by membership of a particular family but one's franchise within the city.<sup>1</sup> This truth is well illustrated by the fact that in the democratisation of classical Athens the patronymic was largely, or at least in theory, replaced by the demotic.

By the fifth century the state had become a dominant force and had made encroachments upon the field of influence of the family and the individual. Previously, the family had enjoyed more autonomy.<sup>2</sup> From a political perspective,

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudo-Aristotle (*Constitution of Athens* 21.4) says the measure was made so that newly enfranchised citizens would not be found out. I am deliberately presenting a black-and-white sketch but the historical reality may have been more nuanced. It could be argued that Athenians defined themselves both by their patronymic and demotic. For example, one's franchise within the city depended upon family membership: that is why the candidates for the archonship were asked where their family tombs were. As Davis (1978) 105 explains: 'Classical Athens defined the membership of its citizen body, and thereby its civic space, rigorously in terms of descent. Citizens were those who were male; were sons of a citizen father [...] and had been accepted as members of their father's deme.' Nevertheless, even here, the family is subordinate to the state – family practises are appropriated by the state.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, this is a sketch of the historical development but it serves as a functional outline. It is a view shared by other scholars, including Sorum (1982) 201.

the transition from aristocracy to democracy via the interims of oligarchy and tyranny shows the reducing importance of the family. All of the three other constitutions place control in a limited number of families. However, in the democracy the family is subsumed by the state, the political family replaces the biological family, citizenship replaces blood affinity.<sup>1</sup> I speak here of ideology, not of actual practice.<sup>2</sup> This change is also evident in literature. For example, in the poems of Homer, prestigious families dominate the horizon and a centralised, impersonal state has not yet made its mark, although prefigurations of it can be detected. Tragedy as an art form is naturally predisposed to explore this tension since it dramatises epic myth in the context, *sous-entendu*, of course, of fifth-century politics. In this way, heroes of epic are transposed from the past into a more contemporary political environment and we are able to witness their discomfort and frustration with the new value system.<sup>3</sup>

The relevance of this to the *Antigone* is that it substantially influences how we interpret the play. Most scholars agree that by the fifth century the state had taken over roles previously held by the family, notably one central to the play, namely, that of burial of the war dead. Where they diverge though is how they expect the audience to have reacted to this state of affairs. Some think that the audience would have accepted the interference of the state, while others that the audience would share the outrage of Antigone.

For example, Gregory Nagy gives voice to the latter stance:

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle in the *Politics*, although recognising that the *oikia* comes first in the development of civilisation (1.5), states that the *polis* takes priority over (*proteron*) (presumably to be understood in an abstract sense, rather than a temporal sense, otherwise he contradicts his earlier statement) the *oikia*, because the *polis* represents the *telos* for the organisation of the *oikoi* (1.11). I believe his view in this regard to have been influenced by Athenian democratic ideology as well as also, of course, reflecting his obsession with the concept of *telos*.

<sup>2</sup> Sorum (1982) 202 sees it as a question of practice and lists certain policies to justify this view: 'Family structure was incorporated into state institutions, for familial descent determined the valuable right of citizenship. Marriage was the means no longer of establishing relationships or alliances between various powerful families, but of producing legitimate children to ensure the performance of the population and the economy of the polis. Thus the significance of the blood relationship was appropriated by the state, the value of the family unit was externalised, and the worth of the strong internal bonds of familial loyalty was called into question.' I agree with the general thrust but it is important not to confuse policies with reality. Even though policies might serve to diminish, in theory, the importance of the family, we see in Athenian politics that family descent still carried influence and kudos. The biological family can be incredibly resistant to political undermining.

<sup>3</sup> See Vernant, J.-P (1972a).

[Antigone is] representative of the Athenian women whose traditional care for the dead had been usurped when the demos seized control over those killed in its wars. Women who once mourned and prepared the dead for burial within the confines of their own houses had to submit to the new rituals of the state funeral.<sup>1</sup>

Sourvinou-Inwood is indicative of the former stance:

The polis sanctioned funerary discourse and practice. In Athens the war-dead were given a public funeral by the polis; in it their families play only a limited role – and the women of the family a very limited and strictly democratic one [...] the Athenian audience who took for granted the authority of the polis to dispose of the bodies of traitors and sacrileges would have seen the differential treatment of the two brothers, and the denial of proper burial to Polyneikes, as perfectly reasonable.<sup>2</sup>

The problem with Sourvinou-Inwood's approach and also that of other scholars who attempt the historical interpretation of reconstructing how the 'Athenian audience' would have reacted to the events of the play is that they assume a homogenous audience. This is a literary construction and not a historical reality. It is highly unlikely that everyone in the audience would react to the play in the same way when the audience was composed of people of different ages, socio-economic classes, political leanings, emotional sensibilities, life experiences etc.

Longstanding is the interpretation that views the conflict between Antigone and Creon as one of principle, namely, family vs. state.<sup>3</sup> That it is reasonable to see Creon and Antigone as representing the respective values of state and family is confirmed by a general analysis of the action of the play: Creon forbids the burial of his nephew, Polynices, because he had attempted to storm the city of Thebes, whereas Antigone makes it her mission to honour her brother with burial.

Creon's position is made plain by his first speech within the play where he proclaims that the interests of the city supersede that of personal relationships:

καὶ μεῖζον ὄστις ἀντὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ πάτρας  
φίλον νομίζει, τοῦτον οὐδαμοῦ λέγω.  
ἐγὼ γάρ, ἴστω Ζεὺς ὁ πάνθ' ὀρῶν αἰεὶ,  
οὔτ' ἂν σιωπήσαιμι τὴν ἄτην ὀρῶν  
στείχουσιν ἀστοῖς ἀντὶ τῆς σωτηρίας,

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<sup>1</sup> Tyrell and Bennett (1998) xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (1989) 139.

<sup>3</sup> Hegel is to be credited as the author of this idea. In his mind the two characters both represent valid values but they are guilty of 'one-sidedness'.



οὐτ' ἂν φίλον ποτ' ἄνδρα δυσμενῆ χθονός  
θείμην ἑμαυτῶ, τοῦτο γινώσκων ὅτι  
ἦδ' ἐστὶν ἡ σώζουσα καὶ ταύτης ἔπι  
πλέοντες ὀρθῆς τοὺς φίλους ποιοῦμεθα (182-190)

And whoever considers a loved one more important than his fatherland, I consider this man worthless. For I, let Zeus know who sees all things always, would neither remain silent seeing destruction instead of safety coming to the citizens, nor would I hold dear to me a man who was hated in the land, knowing that our city space is the thing that keeps us safe and with this being well-steered we make friends.

Creon uses the word *philos* twice to designate the person who does not come before the interests of the city. The word literally means 'someone dear to one' and therefore it can signify a friend, a partner or a family relative.<sup>1</sup> Given the context, which happens to centre on Polynices' disentitlement to burial, the word *philos* seems to be referring, above all, to family relations. In Creon's evaluation the welfare of the city is of paramount importance, and one's obligations to which take precedence over family commitments, since all relationships depend upon the well-governance and safety of the city.<sup>2</sup> Curiously, Pericles is portrayed expressing a similar viewpoint:

My own opinion is that when the whole state is on the right course it is a better thing for each separate individual than when private interests are satisfied but the state as a whole is going downhill. However well off a man may be in his private life, he will still be in the general ruin if his country is destroyed; whereas, so long as the state itself is secure, individuals have a much greater chance of recovering from their private misfortune.  
(Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 2.60)

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<sup>1</sup> Konstan (1997) 9 argues that *philos* as a substantive is normally restricted to the category of friendship rather than kinship or citizenship. If Konstan is correct, and the issue is up for debate, Antigone's use of the word, heavily charged as it is with the connotation of kinship, is all the more remarkable.

<sup>2</sup> Brown (1987) 147: 'For Creon true *philo*i are the friends or allies that a man makes for himself, and this can happen only when the state as a whole prospers.' Hogan (1991) 134 cites Aristotle to give some justification to the viewpoint expressed by Creon: "the polis is prior in the order of nature to the family and the individual" (*Politics* 1.2.12) [...] For Antigone friends are those within the clan, to whom one has ties of blood; for Creon friends are those with whom one has political affinities: political association and security are the conditions for friendship.' For similar interpretations, see Kamerbeek (1978) 65 and Braun (1973) 78. The latter is more condemnatory of Creon's failure to recognise that both Polynices and Eteocles are his kin, and therefore both *philo*i.

Of course we have to bear in mind that this speech of Pericles could well be a literary invention of Thucydides and, furthermore, its supposed date of delivery is about a decade after the production of *Antigone*. Nevertheless, the fact that Pericles could be believed to have delivered this speech suggests that he was known for prioritising public interests above individual ones.<sup>1</sup>

Because Creon seems to reflect the historical situation of classical Athens where the state had become superior in importance to the family and the individual, there have been some scholars who then draw the conclusion that Creon's political stance would have been perfectly palatable to the audience.<sup>2</sup> The problem is that Creon represents the state, but as a tyrant.<sup>3</sup> Creon undergoes a devolution in the play from a leader who appears to prioritise the interests of the state to a tyrant who identifies his interests with those of the state.<sup>4</sup> His first speech (175-90) seems to have nothing that an Athenian audience would be particularly shocked by, and scholars often refer to Demosthenes' quotation of the speech. However, as Kierstead has pointed out, Demosthenes describes Creon as a tyrant, meaning that for all the acceptable patriotism present in Creon's first speech, the orator was not unaware that Sophocles had depicted Creon as a tyrant.<sup>5</sup>

Even Creon's decree [*kērugma*] forbidding burial for Polynices is not a law that has been approved by an assembly of citizens, but an order made on his personal authority as leader.<sup>6</sup> The law in Athens forbade the burial of traitors within

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<sup>1</sup> Ehrenberg (1954) has the thesis that Creon in the *Antigone* as well as Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannos* are based on the historical figure of Pericles. One of the proofs he puts forward is the fact that Creon is referred to as τὸν στρατηγόν (8), which happens to have been the official title Pericles held for much of his political career. In general, Ehrenberg sees Sophocles and Pericles having opposed outlooks, the one inclined to divine reverence the other to rationalism. Creon in the play apparently exemplifies the shortcomings of the rationalistic viewpoint. He cites the above-quoted Thucydidean passage as a parallel to Creon's utterances. The parallels are interesting but should not be pushed to the point of reducing the plays to *romans à clefs*.

<sup>2</sup> Sourvinou-Innwood (1989) 135.

<sup>3</sup> Kierstead (2017) 290: 'The text almost never associates Creon with democracy per se, as opposed to the state in general. And the state he rules, it is made clear, is an illegitimate one precisely because it is antidemocratic.'

<sup>4</sup> Stewart (2023) argues convincingly that the Greek word *tyrannos* always had negative connotations, even in Tragedy, against the theory that the word can be neutrally used.

<sup>5</sup> Demosthenes 19.248. Kierstead (2017) 292: 'It is clear, then, that though Demosthenes approved of the lines' patriotism, he also thought that Creon was a tyrant, and that associating Aeschines with him would damage his rival in the eyes of an Athenian jury.' Furthermore, Kierstead's article (p. 301) makes the excellent observation that in contrast to the Guards, whose way of operating reflects democratic institutions, namely, open public debate and lottery, Creon gives autocratic directives.

<sup>6</sup> Harris (2012) 291.

Athenian territory but did not outlaw burial in foreign land.<sup>1</sup> Creon, however, goes further than this law in prohibiting all burial for Polynices and wishing for his corpse to be carrion for dogs and birds (198-206). It is revealing that Creon's decree is not described by anyone else in the play as a *nomos* and the ending of the Ode to Man with the injunction to honour the established laws is likely to be directed against Creon.

Why has Sophocles made tyranny such an important theme in the play when, in theory, Athens has been free of this constitution for over half a century and was enjoying unprecedented democracy? The answer is connected with the figure of Pericles. As Thucydides stated, Athens was a 'democracy in name, but rule of the first man', referring here to Pericles, a man who as general had effective control of Athens' foreign policy and even carried out measures such as suspending the Assembly in times of war.<sup>2</sup> It is possible that Pericles' unofficial but effective position as head of state made the topic of tyranny continue to be relevant in fifth-century Athens, although a *soi-disant* democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Antigone, as we see in the play, cares nothing for Creon's statesman-like and autocratic approach, forbidding, as he does, burial by edict. According to her value system, all her loyalties and obligations rest with her brother:

οὕτως ἔμοιγε τοῦδε τοῦ μόρου τυχεῖν  
παρ' οὐδὲν ἄλγος· ἀλλ' ἄν, εἰ τὸν ἐξ ἐμῆς  
μητρὸς θανόντ' ἄθραπτον ἠνσχόμην νέκυν,  
κείνους ἄν ἤλγουν· τοῖσδε δ' οὐκ ἀλγύνομαι (465-8)

Thus for me to fall upon this fate [death as punishment for contravention of the edict] causes no harm; but, if I had allowed him born from my mother to lie an unburied corpse in death, I would have been hurt by these things, but by those things I feel no pain.

Antigone regards the duty to honour a dead family relative with burial as an unwritten law of divine sanction, backed by Justice, and superior to the decree of any individual man:

κηρύγμαθ', ὥστ' ἄγραπτα κάσφαλῆ θεῶν  
νόμιμα δύνασθαι θνητὸν ὄνθ' ὑπερδραμεῖν.

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<sup>1</sup> Xenophon, *Hellenica* 1.7.22.

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides 2.65.9.

<sup>3</sup> Although it could be argued that the idea of sole rule would still be of interest given interactions with many other communities that had monarchs, emperors, tyrants, kings, etc.

οὐ γάρ τι νῦν γε κάχθές, ἀλλ' ἀεί ποτε  
ζῆ ταῦτα, κούδεις οἶδεν ἐξ ὄτου 'φάνη (450-57)

For it was not Zeus who ordered these injunctions, nor did Justice residing with the gods below set up such laws among men. Nor did I think that your decrees had such strength with the result that you, a mere mortal, could override the unwritten and steadfast laws of the gods. Nor did they appear yesterday, but these laws are eternal, and no one knows from when they appeared.

The play sides with Antigone's insistence on divine and traditional justice at the expense of Creon's tyrannical rule.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the play, based on Haimon's report (690 ff.) and Antigone's conviction, suggests that the ordinary citizenry support Antigone's actions. Even the Guard who apprehends her feels compassion for her. Whereas, Creon inspires fear, not respect, in his subjects. The implication could be that there is a natural alliance between aristocratic figures, such as Antigone, and the populace. We know that Sophocles had some connection with Cimon and he might have been impressed by the philanthropy of this aristocratic figure. It is reported by Plutarch that Cimon would allow the regular people to pick fruit from his orchards. Less specifically, the theme of cooperation between the great and the small is quite strong in Sophocles' plays – Ajax and his sailors, Oedipus and his citizens.<sup>2</sup>

The conflicting interpretations of what constitutes a *philos* is an important aspect of the family vs. state dichotomy. Both Creon and Antigone seem to operate in accordance with the traditional moral dictum of 'honour your friends, and harm your enemies' but where they diverge is in how they determine whether someone is a *philos* or *echthros*. For Antigone, someone who is a family relative by blood remains always a *philos* regardless of their behaviour, whereas for Creon it is not the person's family status but their political conduct which counts. For Antigone a family relative is a *philos* by nature and no social circumstance can change this fact. Griffith has neatly highlighted this difference in mentality between the two characters:

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<sup>1</sup> Even Sourvinou-Inwood (1989 148) who attempts to argue that the audience's socially-informed values would make them disapprove of Antigone's behaviour, concedes in her conclusion: 'Despite all this, the play is saying, that cause was right, and the polis is in the wrong.'

<sup>2</sup> Sommerstein (2017) 275: 'As a dramatist, Sophocles frequently gives the impression that the rank and file of a community are helpless without strong and wise leadership, but he can also suggest that a leader is worth nothing if he neglects his people's interests or ignores their opinions.'

For Ant. a φίλος is naturally and unalterably ‘one’s own’ (9-10, 511-25, 522-3, 904-15nn.), and therefore always deserving of ‘love’ (73, 523, 898-9nn.) and ‘honour’. By contrast, Kreon proposes an unorthodox definition of φιλία that is none the less in some respects quite familiar from Athenian political debate (162-210, 508-25): natural ‘ties’ (family and other prior personal connections) should count for nothing, and we should ‘select’ (188 θείμην, 190 ποιούμεθα, 191 νόμοισι) our φίλοι and ἐχθροί/πολέμοι purely on the basis of their conduct towards our community.<sup>1</sup>

Antigone’s strong association of *philia* with blood-ties is illustrated by her choice of language which is visceral and hyper-pleonastic when describing family relatives. For example, in the first line of the play she addresses Ismene: ὦ κοινὸν αὐτάδελφον Ἰσμῆνης κάρα (1). The literal translation of which would be ‘Oh common self-sibling head of Ismene’.<sup>2</sup> At lines 466-7, as we have already seen, she refers to Polynices as ‘him born from my mother’ τὸν ἐξ ἐμῆς/μητρὸς, highlighting the sameness of the womb from which they were born. Later she uses an even more visceral term to refer to her brother: οὐδὲν γὰρ αἰσχρὸν τοὺς ὁμοσπλάγγνους σέβειν (511) ‘There is no shame in honouring those born from the same uterine’. And when Creon challenges Antigone by asking whether Eteocles was not also of the same blood, she responds: ὁμαίμος ἐκ μιᾶς τε καὶ ταύτοῦ πατρός (513) ‘of the same blood of one mother and the same father’. ὁμαίμος alone can be used as a substantive for sibling but Antigone thinks it important to add the somewhat superfluous, but in her mind important, qualification that they share the same parents.

Creon by contrast demonstrates a scornful disregard for blood-ties. In the *agōn* with Antigone Creon retorts to her insistence on honouring her dead brother with the assertion that no sentiment of family attachment to her will save her from death:

ἀλλ’ εἴτ’ ἀδελφῆς εἶθ’ ὁμαίμονεστέρα  
τοῦ παντὸς ἡμῖν Ζηνὸς ἐρκείου κυρεῖ,

<sup>1</sup> Griffith (2000) 41.

<sup>2</sup> See Cairns 2017, 97: ‘The regular Greek term for ‘sibling’ (*adelphos/adelphê*) itself means ‘from the same womb’, but Antigone’s compound *autadelphos* emphasizes yet further the ‘self-sameness’ if the womb from which she and Ismene emerged’. Equally, Brown (1987) 136: “‘common self-sister head of Ismene” [...] Antigone is not speaking about her emotions but about the physical act of kinship. Kinship is what matters to Antigone.’ Hogan (1991) 127: ‘Family ties and family loyalty are primary themes.’ Kamerbeek (1978) 37: ‘It is significant that the first line of this play so heavily stresses the notion of blood-relationship’

αὐτή τε χή ξύναιμος οὐκ ἀλύξετον  
μόρου κακίστου<sup>1</sup> (486-9)

But whether she be the daughter of my sister or closer to me by blood than anyone who worships our Zeus of the household, she and her sister will not escape the most grievous fate

And in his *agōn* with his son, Haimon, Creon sarcastically wishes for Antigone to carry on worshipping sacred kinship: πρὸς ταῦτ' ἐφυμνείτω Δία/ ξύναιμον (658-9) 'In the face of these things let her keep harping on about Zeus protector of kindred blood'.

The contrast between Antigone and Creon in relation to the dichotomy of family and polis is not, in fact, completely clean-cut. Both Antigone and Creon display inconsistencies, one might even say contradictions, with regards to their respective cause. Beginning with Antigone, as much as she champions blood-ties, she does, however, display an intolerant and dismissive attitude towards her sister, Ismene.<sup>2</sup> As for Creon, his avowed disregard for family ties is undercut by the fact that he expects filial loyalty from Haimon and that his position as leader is due to being the next of kin.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the drama of the play demonstrably validates Antigone's attachment to the sacred kinship ties over political interests. Antigone's death is not an indictment against her stance but the death of a martyr sacrificing her life for her principles.<sup>4</sup> The ruin that befalls Creon, on the other hand, is presented as punishment for his impiety. The fact that this is the case becomes most clear in the

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<sup>1</sup> Griffith (1999) 207: 'A metonymy for the sacred family unit itself.' Brown (1987) 163: 'Zeus Herkeios was Zeus of the Courtyard, the Zeus who was worshipped at an altar in the courtyard of a Greek house, and in whose worship the whole household was united.'

<sup>2</sup> Lardinois (2002) 62: 'The attitudes of Antigone with regard to her family can be questioned along similar lines. First, she distances herself in the prologue from her sister Ismene: twice she actually says that she hates her (ἐχθίωv, I.86; ἐχθρὰ I.94).' Sorum (1982) tries to argue that this rejection of Ismene is not voluntary but necessitated by the fact that Antigone has adopted a masculine stance, inasmuch as entering into the political sphere of action, and so is forced to reject the female element in her family, namely, her sister. Furthermore, according to this reading, her lack of regard for her husband-to-be, Haimon, is the result of her prioritising her father's family (p. 206). This explanation with regards to Haimon seems satisfactory, but justifying Antigone's harsh treatment of Ismene by way of her masculine position is not convincing, as Ismene and Polynices should be of equal importance to Antigone, insofar as both are siblings from the same maternal womb.

<sup>3</sup> Lardinois (2002) 64 draws attention to Creon's contradictory position, at first rejecting the claims of the family in favour of the polis, even though his kingship depends on kinship (γένους καὶ ἀγχιστεία), and, furthermore, he is emotionally devastated at his family misfortune.

<sup>4</sup> Antigone's death is not a dramatic necessity.

dialogue with Teiresias where it is made known that Creon's actions have led to the city becoming polluted. Even Creon realises that he was mistaken and tries, all too late, to rectify the errors of his way.<sup>1</sup>

Why is it the case that kinship takes precedence over civic collectivism? The play appears to show that, contrary to Creon's thinking, the city depends upon the family, the most fundamental and natural social unit. The city is built in the image of the family and not the other way round. If the family as a whole is not given its due reverence then the city, a composite entity of many families, will not experience good health.<sup>2</sup> Creon's statement that a man cannot hope to govern well a city if his household is not in order comes back to haunt him. His conception of governing the household was to tyrannise over it and not respect the obligations of kinship and, similarly, at a political level, he proves himself a tyrannical ruler who is heedless of the citizen body.

### Inherited sin

The play explores the theme of inherited sin/suffering. Although this is different from good birth, *eugeneia*, which is underpinned by the belief in the heritability of moral excellence, the belief in inherited suffering is a related concept because both positions subscribe to heredity, the one to the transmission of something positive, the other something negative. For this reason, those who are sceptical of the claims of good breeding are also likely to doubt inherited suffering. But the *Antigone* presents an assertive picture portraying Antigone's suffering as somehow interlinked with, or even caused by, the deeds/misdemeanours of her forbears.<sup>3</sup>

In the second stasimon the chorus explore in quite some detail the theme of inherited sin. The suggestion made is that once a family becomes polluted, the descendants experience generational suffering - the initial cause of the suffering creates a domino effect with each subsequent generation paying for the sins of their ancestors.

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<sup>1</sup> Griffith (2000) 47: 'Insofar as the play contains a clear religious 'message', it clearly vindicates the claims of the old familial cults: Creon was wrong.' It is hard not to draw this conclusion - the great Goethe was of the same conviction.

<sup>2</sup> Cairns (2017) 103: 'Creon, as representative of the polis and in line with his perception of the city's needs, seeks to control two inter-related institutions, of the *oikos* (household) and of marriage, whose regulation is integral to the health of a well-functioning *polis*.'

<sup>3</sup> Gagné (2013) 344 argues strongly that 'Tragedy is filled with the idea that crimes committed in the present are grounded in the crimes committed in the past'. His book has an interesting chapter (p. 362-76) dedicated to how this topic is explored in the *Antigone*, looking at the imagery Sophocles conjures up in relation to the theme and identifying intertextuality with Solon's *Elegy to the Muses*. See Sewell-Rutter (2010) for another book studying the theme of hereditary guilt specifically in Greek tragedy.

οἷς γὰρ ἂν σεισθῆ θεόθεν δόμος, ἄτας  
οὐδὲν ἐλλείπει γενεᾶς ἐπὶ πλῆθος ἔρπον·

[...]

ἀρχαῖα τὰ Λαβδακιδᾶν οἴκων ὀρῶμαι  
πήματα φθιτῶν ἐπὶ πῆμασι πίπτοντ',  
οὐδ' ἀπαλλάσσει γενεὰν γένος, ἀλλ' ἐρείπει  
θεῶν τις, οὐδ' ἔχει λύσιν. νῦν γὰρ ἐσχάτας ὕπερ  
ρίζας ὃ τέτατο φάος ἐν Οἰδίπου δόμοις,  
κατ' αὖ νιν φοινία θεῶν τῶν νερτέρων  
ἀμᾶ κόνις λόγου τ' ἄνοια καὶ φρενῶν ἐρινύς. (584 ff.)

For those whose house is shaken by the gods, nothing of destruction ever leaves it but it spreads through the whole family [...] I see ancient sufferings of the house of the dead Labdacids falling on new sufferings, nor does one generation free the next, but some god is present and does not release them. Recently a light shone in the house of Oedipus on account of this last sapling, but now the deadly dust of the gods below, irrationality and frenzy of mind have cut her down

The chorus do not explicitly describe the misdemeanours and concomitant suffering pertaining to the house of Labdacus. It seems likely though that they have in mind Laius' rape of Chrysippus when he was the guest of Pelops. Pelops then cursed Laius praying that he would never bear a son and, if he did, that he should be killed by him. It is well-known that Oedipus does indeed end up killing his father unwittingly and then marrying his mother. The offspring of this incestuous marriage, as we see in the *Antigone*, are not free from suffering: Polynices and Eteocles die at each other's hands while Antigone is sentenced to a miserable martyr's death. The chorus looking at this family history of generational suffering draw the conclusion that there must be some divine force that has afflicted the family with a virus of misery with which every member becomes infected through heredity.

The chorus in their *kommos* with Antigone suggest that her current misfortune could be seen as repayment for some ancestral crime. This statement hits a nerve with Antigone who then sings of the ill-fated marriage between her parents:

Χο. πατρῶν δ' ἐκτίνεις τιν' ἄθλον.

Αν. ἔψαυσας ἀλγεινοτάτας ἐμοὶ μερίμνας,  
πατὴρὸς τριπόλιστον οἴκτον τοῦ τε πρόπαντος  
ἀμετέρου πότμου κλεινοῖς Λαβδακίδαισιν.  
ἰὼ ματρῶναι λέκτρων  
ἄται κοιμήματά τ' αὐτογέννητ' ἐμῶ πατρὶ δυσμόρου ματρός,



οἶων ἐγὼ ποθ' ἄ ταλαίφρων ἔφυν  
πρὸς οὓς ἀραῖος ἄγαμος ἄδ' ἐγὼ μέτοικος ἔρχομαι (857-67)

Chorus: You are paying out some torture inherited from your ancestors

Antigone: You have touched on a care most grievous to me, the thrice-ploughed lament for my father and for all our fate, to us the famous Labdacids. O madness of my mother's marriage-bed and the incestuous intercourse of my mother with my ill-fated father, from such as these am I, wretched, sprung: to them I go as a metic, cursed and unmarried.

The chorus suggest that Antigone could be paying out a punishment for a crime whose original offender might be her father. It seems a strange idea that descendants should be punished for the crimes of their forbears because the punishment in this way misses the person directly responsible and falls on innocent relatives. In archaic Greek thought it seems that this belief helped to maintain faith in a moral order of divine retribution and give an answer to the phenomenon of some criminals managing to get through life with seeming impunity.<sup>1</sup> The idea is that although someone might seem to get away scot-free, this is not the case because the karma of their actions falls upon their offspring. Because it is a natural human tendency to wish well for one's offspring, any misfortune that falls upon them because of the misbehaviour on the part of the parent is tantamount to a form of affliction for the parent.

Antigone does not deny the suggestion proposed by the chorus. In fact, it prompts her to trace the root of her suffering back to the incestuous marriage of her parents.<sup>2</sup> Incest in the Greek world as well as in most societies is an act viewed with horror and considered an enormous taboo. Socrates in a conversation with Hippias sees the prohibition of incest as a natural law with an automatic in-built punishment, namely, the creation of dysgenic offspring.<sup>3</sup> Viewed from this perspective, Antigone's suffering could be thought of as the causal effect of the sin, although unwittingly committed, of the incestuous union between her mother and father. Antigone appears to have a conception of her suffering not wholly unconnected from this viewpoint.

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<sup>1</sup> This idea is found notably Solon's *Elegy to the Muses*.

<sup>2</sup> Brown (1987) 196: 'As we know (1-6), she is acutely aware of belonging to an accursed house, and she now feels that her fate (though not, surely, her actions) can be explained in terms of this. It is debatable how far her character and motivation throughout should be seen as influenced by her consciousness of being a child of Oedipus. The most obvious function of the present passage, however, is to explore the tragic pattern and paradoxes in the story of the House of Labdacus.'

<sup>3</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.4.

It is even possible to make a connection between Oedipus' committal, although unconscious, of incest and Antigone's intense love for Polynices which can potentially be seen in a quasi-romantic light. As much as Antigone talks about her obligations to her family as a whole, it does seem as though she has a particular obsession with Polynices. Her prioritising of this brother does not go unnoticed by Creon who accuses her of honouring one brother at the expense of the other (512). Moreover, Antigone's constant devotion to Polynices does not seem to be replicated for Ismene who receives harsh treatment for her prudent behaviour.<sup>1</sup> And then there are the possible erotic connotations of Antigone's language with regard to Polynices:

ἀλλ' οἶδ' ἀρέσκουσ' οἷς μάλισθ' ἀδεῖν με χρή (89)

But I know that I am pleasing those whom it is especially necessary to please

In relation to this line, Cairns comments: 'There are pleasures other than sexual, but, naturally enough, an Athenian wife would be expected to please her husband in all kinds of ways, and Creon uses a word from the same root when he warns Haemon not to lose his senses on account of the pleasures to be found in marriage (648).'<sup>2</sup> Also, earlier, Antigone had spoken of 'lying with' her brother:

φίλη μετ' αὐτοῦ κείσομαι, φίλου μέτα,  
 ὅσια πανουργήσασ'. ἐπεὶ πλείων χρόνος  
 ὄν δεῖ μ' ἀρέσκειν τοῖς κάτω τῶν ἐνθάδε.  
 ἐκεῖ γὰρ αἰεὶ κείσομαι (73-6)

I will lie there, a loved one with a loved one, having committed holy deeds.  
 The time is greater during which I have to please those below than those above. For I will lie down there forever.

It is possible to see this image of two people lying together in a sexual light. Is an echo found in Antigone's lament (864) for 'her mother's incestuous lying (*koimēmata*) with the child she herself produced'?<sup>3</sup>

This allegation of incestuous love for Polynices felt by Antigone is conjectural and Sophocles does not emphatically or explicitly tarnish his protagonist with this crime. It could though be understood to be hinted at and this subtle hint of incest might be there to draw out the fact that the problems in the Labdacid family are generational, the daughter experiencing the same problems as her father. It is possible that the famous passage recalling Herodotus 3.119 where Antigone

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Ismene's reluctance is due to the pressures of the patriarchal society.

<sup>2</sup> Cairns (2017) 104.

<sup>3</sup> Cairns (2017) 105.

rationalises why she would only have done what she did for a brother serves the purpose of cutting the possibility of making too much out of the hint of incest:

οὐ γάρ ποτ' οὔτ' ἄν, εἰ τέκνων μήτηρ ἔφυν,  
οὔτ' εἰ πόσις μοι καθθανῶν ἐτήκετο,  
βίᾳ πολιτῶν τόνδ' ἄν ἠρόμην πόνον.  
τίνος νόμου δὴ ταῦτα πρὸς χάριν λέγω;  
πόσις μὲν ἄν μοι καθθανόντος ἄλλος ἦν,  
910καὶ παῖς ἀπ' ἄλλου φωτός, εἰ τοῦδ' ἤμπλακον,  
μητρὸς δ' ἐν Ἄιδου καὶ πατρὸς κεκευθότοι  
οὐκ ἔστ' ἀδελφὸς ὅστις ἄν βλάστοι ποτέ.  
τοιῶδε μέντοι σ' ἐκπροτιμήσασ' ἐγὼ

I would not have undertaken this labour in contravention of the citizenry, if I had been the mother of children, or if a husband had been rotting after death. In regard to what law do I say these things? With my husband dead there could have been found another, and a child from another man, if I lost one, but with my mother and father dead in Hades it is impossible that there would be another one. For such a reason I gave you preeminent honour

Antigone does not consciously or willingly, just like her father, want to enter into a consanguine relationship. If how she acts and talks has the flavour of incest it is linked with family pollution rather than agency or active volition on her part.<sup>1</sup>

### Heroism and cowardice as ideals pertaining to different social strata

Antigone is a strange entity in the sense that she could be considered dysgenic inasmuch as being the product of an incestuous marriage but at the same time she is also a princess belonging to a royal family line. Her father is simultaneously a polluted outcast and a Theban king who had the wits to solve the Sphinx' riddle. The play acknowledges this duality and even perhaps gives more prominence to her noble aspect. Antigone is arguably emblematic of the Sophoclean hero, a figure characterised by a stubborn will and a strong sense of self and moral principle who will not compromise, even with the threat of death, on her ideals.

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible to read this passage as merely reinforcing Antigone's insistence upon blood-ties. A sibling has in some ways a greater biological affinity inasmuch as having come from the same womb and sharing the exact same ancestors. Braun (1973) 87: 'Certainly there is support in ancient folklore for the notion that "degree of consanguinity" should dictate the degree of loyalty. A brother was "closer" than a son. The concept, very much alive in fifth-century Athens, belongs to the "pre-Homeric" stratum of thought, specifically feminine, which reckons kinship from the womb.'

Sophocles is a playwright who relishes the use of contrast to illustrate certain character traits. He often uses a foil so that the spectator by seeing the difference between the protagonist and the foil might better appreciate the singularity and greatness of the main character.<sup>1</sup> Ismene with her caution, circumspection and deference to male authority offers an illustrative contrast to the determination and heroism of her sister. Although Ismene and Antigone are blood sisters, the suggestion is made that only Antigone embodies the nobility of her blood-line. In this way, Ismene is presented as a counterfeit representative of her aristocratic pedigree. In the beginning of the play Antigone even throws down the gauntlet on whether Ismene will prove herself worthy of her breeding:<sup>2</sup>

οὕτως ἔχει σοι ταῦτα, καὶ δείξεις τάχα  
εἴτ' εὐγενῆς πέφυκας εἴτ' ἐσθλῶν κακῆ. (37-8)

These things will be thus for you, and you will soon show whether you are noble or bad from good forbears.

However, there is another contrast presented which links heroism with the aristocratic stratum of society and cowardly survivalism with the lower stratum of society. The Guard is representative of the latter.<sup>3</sup>

It is important at the outset to state that although the Guard is depicted with ideals much less lofty than Antigone he is still treated sympathetically by Sophocles and his moral deficiencies are a source of gentle humour rather than derision. In this way Sophocles exhibits the different ideals pertaining to members of different social classes rather than sitting in haughty and condemnatory judgement of the ordinary folk. In the play we hear from the Guard how there was a decision made among the watchmen that whoever drew the short straw, as it were, should report the news of Polynices' burial to Creon. The Guard says how along the way he had many second thoughts, fearing that as a messenger of bad news he should be punished, but decided to follow through with his mission knowing that the punishment for failing to tell Creon would be greater (238-30). After a fiery exchange with Creon he leaves muttering under his breath that he will not be seen again. However, he reappears soon after bearing the perpetrator of the burial,

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<sup>1</sup> Griffith (2000) 165: 'But, whereas most messengers remain featureless ciphers, serving merely to channel news to others, this Guard is one of the more colourful characters in Greek tragedy a garrulous, cowardly, yet witty figure whose selfish preoccupations and practical perspective throw into relief the more high-minded ideals of the main character.'

<sup>2</sup> Brown (1987) 139 is on the mark with his lexical discussion: 'Like "noble" and "base" in archaic English, many words in Greek can refer either to moral character or to social class, and Antigone exploits this here. The word *kakē*, flung down as a challenge at the end of her speech, combines "bad", "cowardly" and "low-born".' Kamerbeek (1978) 43: 'Noble-minded because well-born'.

<sup>3</sup> Griffith (2000) 165: 'He [the Guard] could be a slave, or a low-class citizen soldier.'

namely, Antigone. This time he describes how Antigone was caught in the act. There is the emotive simile comparing Antigone's cry at the sight of the unburied body to the noise a bird makes returning to a nest emptied of her young (422-4). The Guard's report is ended in such a way where Antigone's altruistic bravery is presented in stark contrast with his self-centred concern for his own safety:

θηρώμεθ' εὐθύς οὐδὲν ἐκπεπληγμένην,  
καὶ τάς τε πρόσθεν τάς τε νῦν ἠλέγχομεν  
πράξεις· ἄπαρνος δ' οὐδενὸς καθίστατο,  
ἅμ' ἠδέως ἔμοιγε κάλγεινῶς ἅμα.  
τὸ μὲν γὰρ αὐτὸν ἐκ κακῶν πεφευγέναι  
ἦδιστον, ἐς κακὸν δὲ τοὺς φίλους ἄγειν  
ἀλγεινόν· ἀλλὰ πάντα ταῦθ' ἤσσω λαβεῖν  
ἐμοὶ πέφυκε τῆς ἐμῆς σωτηρίας. (433-40)

We pounced upon her, yet she was in no way frightened, and we interrogated her as to the acts before and now: she did not deny any of them, something simultaneously sweet and painful for me. For it is most sweet to escape from troubles, but grievous to lead a friend into them. But I consider all these things less than my own safety.

Antigone's resolve and composure are displayed in her unfrightened reaction to being caught and also her lack of any denial. It is clear that the Guard would not react in this way if he were in the same position as Antigone. The Guard acknowledges that the capture of the culprit is bitter-sweet since his fortune comes at the expense of Antigone. Nevertheless, the Guard does not allow himself long to be troubled by the moral ambivalence of the situation, stating clearly that above all else he puts his own safety first.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Antigone, the Guard is not weighed down, or one might even say uplifted, by the urge to live up to any high breeding. Having no known ancestors as exemplars of bravery and heroism, there does not exist the worry that his cowardly behaviour might dishonour his family. The Guard has not had inculcated in him an aspiration towards ideals which exist separate from and above base instincts. Consequently, the Guard's behaviour is ultimately instinctual, being directed by the instinct of flight and survival shared by many of the animal species. The Guard is representative of the vast majority of humans whose moral and behavioural code is

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<sup>1</sup> Griffith (2000) 198 'Again, the Guard's naïve relief at getting himself out of trouble, tempered with concern for Ant., contrasts with Ant.'s absolute commitment to her principles.'

centred around their own prosperity, well-being and safety.<sup>1</sup> The high ideals of patriotism, civic altruism and making sacrifices for the preservation of moral principles are alien to the majority who live life from their lower self rather than their higher self. The reason that Antigone is capable of remaining true to her higher self is connected with her breeding.

Antigone in defying Creon's edict and honouring her brother with the sacred right of burial knowing that the consequence for such action is death is in many ways replicating the character and behaviour of her father who, as it is depicted in the *Oedipus Rex*, had the courage and determination to learn of his parental background even if the revelation brings with it great distress.<sup>2</sup> Oedipus could have chosen to live in blissful ignorance of his family background and as corollary never become aware of his acts of parricide and incest. However, he pursues to the bitter end his process of discovery unimpeded by Iocasta's calls to desist. This determination and heroism, which to others can appear as harsh stubbornness, does not go unnoticed by the chorus as something shared between Oedipus and Antigone:

δηλοῖ τὸ γέννημ' ὠμὸν ἐξ ὠμοῦ πατρὸς  
τῆς παιδός· εἴκειν δ' οὐκ ἐπίσταται κακοῖς. (471-2)

The savage breeding of the daughter from a savage father is made plain: she does not know how to yield to evils

The chorus link Antigone's 'savage' character with that of her father, Oedipus.<sup>3</sup> Although in this instance they perjoratively describe the character trait shared between the two, they nevertheless subscribe to the idea that character traits are hereditary: Antigone is the way she is because of the way Oedipus was.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim has been to show that the *Antigone* directly and indirectly engages with the theme of breeding. My research has not restricted itself to passages exclusively concerned with good breeding. It is important not to have a narrow focus studying a specific theme in artificial isolation, but to explore other topics which are intimately and intricately related to good breeding such as the

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<sup>1</sup> Brown (1987) 149: 'But he [the Guard], being of humble rank and drawn into the action by pure accident, can bring out her isolation and uniqueness all the more effectively [...] he enables us to set the concerns of common humanity against the great tragic issues played out between the major characters.'

<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, for much of the drama he has no idea of the true account.

<sup>3</sup> Kamerbeek (1978) 99: 'It is not too far-fetched to assume that γέννημα is used = γέννησις, implying the 'character' inherited by her 'descent'.'

structural entity of the family, the transmission of properties, whether that be sin/suffering, positive traits or negative traits, via the vehicle of the family. Two principles have emerged from this study of the *Antigone*: 1) the family is of central importance, the interests of which supersede that of the state; 2) hereditary transmission is not a fanciful idea but the explanation behind much of the behaviour and suffering of individuals. In relation to this last principle, it is clear that the play combats the opposing notion that character and suffering are the products of aleatory chance. The *Antigone* seeks to demonstrate that character and suffering are not arbitrary, but, rather, the family is the arbiter of them.

## Chapter 6 : *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Eugeneia*

### Introduction

This chapter will study the theme of good birth in *Oedipus Tyrannus* in terms of four topics: 1) transgressions against the sanctity of the family: patricide and incest; 2) importance of knowing one's family; 3) noble birth and women; 4) low-status characters. One main strand of scholarship on the play has emphasised establishing whether and to what degree Oedipus is guilty.<sup>1</sup> The play has also been studied from a psychological perspective owing in large part to Freud's theory of the 'Oedipal Complex' which took inspiration from the play. This chapter will study the play in terms of good birth.

### Transgressions against the family

The subject at the heart of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* seems to be the family. The involuntary crimes that Oedipus commits and his inevitable subsequent suffering suggest that the family is a sacred entity sanctioned by natural law. The paradox of the play is that the crimes of patricide and mother-son incest are utterly condemned while at the same time preserving the innocence of Oedipus, at least in terms of intention.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the play's condemnation of these offences is intensified by the fact that Oedipus committed them unknowingly and unwittingly, thereby presenting the family to be of such sanctity that crimes against it are not mitigated by considerations of intention. In this way, the family becomes an absolute value guarded by a categorical imperative of not harming it.

There is a Greek notion that is fundamental to understanding Sophocles' presentation of Oedipus' crime and punishment, namely 'pollution'.<sup>3</sup> The idea

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<sup>1</sup> Harris (2010) and Sommerstein (2011) have dedicated articles to this issue.

<sup>2</sup> The question of Oedipus' guilt has been much discussed in scholarship. Dodds' article 'On Misunderstanding the "Oedipus Rex"' became the authoritative approach arguing that from a legal perspective Oedipus was innocent, but that he was still polluted. Harris (2010), however, has subsequently argued that the Athenian justice system and pollution beliefs were in harmony concerning intention. According to his analysis, Oedipus in the play is presented as guilty of deliberate homicide and as polluted. I think this scholar, although presenting a strong case, misses the point a little; the point stressed by Sophocles is that Oedipus did not knowingly kill *his father*. Sommerstein (2011) has argued convincingly that Oedipus, based on his own narrative of the killing, is legally innocent.

<sup>3</sup> The classic book on pollution is *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Ancient Greek Religion* (1983) by Robert Parker. In terms of etymology he says that 'the basic sense of the *mia-* words is that of defilement, the impairment of a thing's form or integrity'. And from a conceptual point of view he says that *miasma*, *miairos* refer to 'a condition that has some, and usually all, of the following characteristics: it makes the person affected ritually impure, and thus unfit to enter a temple: it is contagious: it is dangerous, and this danger is not of familiar secular origin.' However, Harris (2015) 11 and Harris (2018) presents a



behind this is that transgressions of a natural law result in the offender becoming 'polluted' irrespective of whether his crime was committed unknowingly or by accident rather than intentionally. In this way, moral law is comparable to physical law, and crime and punishment can be seen as moral terms for cause and effect. To put it simply, as surely as you will scorch your hand if you put it in fire, you will become polluted if you sleep with your mother. It seems quite certain that Sophocles presents Oedipus as polluted. The plague at the beginning of the play appears to be a form of natural punishment for Oedipus' crimes, even though there has been a long lapse of time between the two. At l. 97 Creon even says there is 'pollution in the land'.<sup>1</sup> It was a primitive belief that pollution could cause a plague. The anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl describes thus the typical feared consequences of incest among primitive peoples: 'The plantations will no longer yield their produce... The scourge it lets loose will spare no one, for famine, epidemic, hurricane, earthquake are calamities that no one can escape. Hence the need for concerted action.'<sup>2</sup> Behind this fear seems to be the belief that a disturbance of the natural order at the micro-level of the family will manifest itself at the macro-level of the cosmos.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Sophocles combines a depiction of outward confirmation of Oedipus' pollution, the plague, with an internal awareness of shame on the part of Oedipus which leads him to stab his own eyes. Oedipus is so conscious of the atrocity of what he has done that his conscience oppresses him heavily and relentlessly. His conscience responds in the same way as the natural world, i.e., it takes no heed of what his intentions were. Oedipus, after his inquiries, is plagued with the knowledge of what he has done and he does not contrive to deny responsibility for

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strong case that Parker is wrong to believe that pollution was less significant in fifth-century Athenian political and religious life.

<sup>1</sup> March (2020) 174 highlights the belief that a polluted person could be the cause of negative natural phenomena, such as the plague in our play: 'The murderer (or murderers), polluted by the deed of bloodshed, becomes himself a pollution, spreading infection throughout the whole community.' Hogan (1991) 27 does well to clarify that it is the act not the intention which counts towards pollution: 'Nowhere in the play is repentance an issue, either for the god, for whom it is meaningless, or for Oedipus, for whom it is futile. That is, the god cares not for the guilt but for the fact.' Also, mention of the plague would no doubt evoke the plague that ravaged Athens in 430 BC.

<sup>2</sup> Lévy-Bruhl (1935) 202-4 ff. 225.

<sup>3</sup> Dawe (2002) 96 states strongly that patricide and incest were regarded as taboo because of the danger they posed to the sacred entity of the family: 'The latter taboo [incest] is the great universal one, the most dreaded among all primitive societies and everywhere compounded with dire pollution. Patricide, while not so universal a taboo, was for the Greeks almost as culpable an offense, for in committing it one shed kindred blood. Thus these two taboos represented their life-and-death attitudes toward familial blood: it is sacred, and one must neither procreate with it nor destroy it.'

the crimes. His conscience dwells on what he has done and not how he has done it. Oedipus knows that he is polluted.

Why does Sophocles depict the crimes of incest and patricide as invested with such horror and taboo? The playwright must have been convinced by the wisdom of the age-old repugnance towards these acts. The family is the fundamental building block of society. Without the family, any ordered communal living is hard to imagine. However, incest and patricide are those things most destructive of the stability of the family.

### Patricide

If the *Oedipus Tyrannus* can be correctly understood as, among other things, a defence of the family, it is likely that Sophocles wanted his audience to understand patricide as symbolic of a general attempt to undermine the authority of the father. The urge to kill one's father and the urge to undermine him are the same urge, even if the former is more intense than the latter. The functionality of the family in ancient Greece was often thought to depend on a patriarchal structure. The condemnation of Oedipus' involuntary act of patricide can be read as a praise of the father figure.

Is there evidence to suggest that the father as a figure of authority within the family was being challenged in the fifth century? In the *Clouds* of Aristophanes a central feature of the comedy is Pheidippides' disobedience and aggression towards his father, Strepsiades, after receiving an education at the Thinkery. Because the play is essentially a parody of sophistic teachings and practices, the suggestion is that the education taught by some of the Sophists was subversive of the traditional family structure. And in the real life of fifth-century Athens, Alcibiades is a figure frequently represented as challenging paternal authority.<sup>1</sup> It could be possible that one of the objectives of Sophocles in writing the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was to counter this tendency. His play dramatises the undesirable consequences of the subversion of the father, admittedly in the extreme form of patricide. Cicero (*De Senectute* 22) reports that Sophocles' sons brought a charge of mismanagement of his estate caused by impaired intellect. The playwright defended himself against the charge by reciting the *Oedipus At Colonus* from memory. As much as the anecdote is dated later than the play in question and it is possible that the whole story is apocryphal, it is interesting that within Sophocles' nuclear family there was rumour of a subversion of the father-figure, meaning that this defence of the patriarchy could have been of personal as well as political relevance to the poet. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* presents patricide as a violation of natural law, with the result that

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<sup>1</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.40. Strauss (199) 4: 'Alcibiades was raised by the leading man of Athens, Pericles. The sources are full of anecdotes of Alcibiades talking back to Pericles and in due course to virtually every older male in sight.'

Oedipus ends up reigning over a plague-ridden city and finally blinding himself out of an awareness of the horror of his deed.

### Incest

Why is incest so detrimental to the integrity of the family? One reason seems to be that incest confuses the natural family positions. Oedipus in procreating with his mother has given birth to children to whom he is father and sibling. And to the children of his children he will be grandfather and uncle. In a non-incestuous family, the relation between two people is singular, with each person never having more than one family title in relation to another. Even though you can perform multiple roles in the family in relation to different people, you only ever have one position with regards to an individual within your family, e.g. the father of your father is only ever your grandfather and not your uncle, brother, cousin etc. How can someone embody the solemnity and gravitas of the father figure if his children consider him to be their brother, and so interact with him with the familiarity that they treat their other siblings? In the case of parent-child incest there is an inevitable flattening of the family hierarchy. Oedipus exists not only in a vertical relation to his children but also in a horizontal one as a brother. This horizontalisation of the family structure would have a tendency to veer to the ills associated with anarchy, such as ill-discipline, unruliness and disorder.

This idea is referred to in the play. The first time it is announced by the blind seer Teiresias who prophesies to Oedipus:

φανήσεται δὲ παισὶ τοῖς αὐτοῦ ξυνῶν  
ἀδελφὸς αὐτὸς καὶ πατήρ, κάξ ἦς ἔφυ  
γυναικὸς υἱὸς καὶ πόσις (457-9)

The same man will appear to his own children as brother and father, and to the women from whom he was born both son and husband.

Teiresias highlights that Oedipus, contrary to the natural order of things, holds two family roles in relation to both his children/siblings and his mother/wife. Oedipus, at the end of the play, once he has become aware of the adroitness of the prophecy, gives voice to this same idea:

ὦ γάμοι γάμοι,  
ἐφύσαθ' ἡμᾶς, καὶ φυτεύσαντες πάλιν  
ἀνεῖτε ταύτοῦ σπέρμα, κάπεδείξατε  
πατέρας, ἀδελφούς, παῖδας, αἴμ' ἐμφύλιον,  
νύμφας, γυναῖκας μητέρας τε, χῶπόσα  
αἴσχιστ' ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ἔργα γίγνεται.(1403-9)

O marriages, O marriages, you produced me, and having produced me you took up the seed of this same man, and you brought forth fathers, brothers

and children, all kin-folk blood, as well as brides, wives and mothers, all deeds which are most shameful among men.

Just like Teiresias, Oedipus decries the disarray into which his family structure has been thrown as a result of his incestuous relationship with his mother. And he seems to link the instinctive sense of shame and disgust felt by mankind towards such acts with the breakdown of the family structure caused by them. Admittedly, he does not present them in an explicitly causal relationship, that is, he does not say: 'Men feel disgust at incest because family roles become confused'. Nevertheless, the paratactic structure, where reference to what is presented as the universal feeling of taboo shared by mankind towards incest is added at the end of the description of family ataxia, implies heavily that there is a connection between the two.

Were there contemporary practices and theories in circulation in fifth-century Athens against which Sophocles might be offering an objection through his condemnation of incest? The *Clouds* of Aristophanes has a scene where Pheidippides and Strepsiades argue over the best playwright; Pheidippides enrages his father by quoting a passage of Euripides mentioning incest between siblings of the same mother:

ὁ δ' εὐθύς ἦσ' Εὐριπίδου ῥῆσίν τιν', ὡς ἐκίνει  
ἀδελφὸς ὤλεξικακε τὴν ὁμομητρίαν ἀδελφὴν (1371-2)

And he immediately sang some passage of Euripides how a brother was screwing, O averter of ill, his sister from the same mother

This story of incest is from Euripides' lost play, *Aeolus*. There is a line that survives from that play that caused a scandal, 'Nothing is shameful unless it seems that way to the person who does the act.' It seems that this line was spoken in order to justify, from a position of moral relativism, the act of incest. Incest was not just something dramatized on the stage but certain acts of incest were also legal and practised in Athens: there was a serious issue in classical Athens because young women were regularly married off to ageing uncles and it was legal to marry your own half-sibling provided you had different mothers. Admittedly none of these legalised acts of incest are as serious as the incest performed by Oedipus. However, siblings from different mothers still involve a very close degree of consanguinity.

The problem endemic to consanguineous relations among first degree relatives is the high risk of dysgenic offspring. The explanation for this seems to lie in the fact that first degree relatives share fifty per cent of their DNA and so when they produce children there is a lack of genetic variety. A child of a non-incestuous relationship has four different grandparents. But for Antigone, Iocasta is both her mother and her grandmother. Oedipus' family tree should only form fifty per cent

of Antigone's family tree, but, in her case, it forms a hundred per cent of her family tree because Iocasta's line, which is already part of Oedipus' family tree, has been used again to form Antigone's maternal line. This means that Antigone has half the number of ancestors that she should have. Because nature is working with half the necessary ingredients to make a child, the success rate of healthy children drops to half.

Even though they precede the discovery of DNA, the Greeks were well aware of risk of dysgenic offspring caused by incest. Socrates in a discussion with Hippias states that the evidence for incest violating a natural law is manifest in the health defects it causes among the progeny.<sup>1</sup> And nor was this knowledge unknown to societies earlier than Greece; the horror felt by primitive man at the thought of incest was probably largely provoked by this awareness. Remember that in a technologically underdeveloped society with no healthcare system, a child born with health defects would be a burden too heavy to be borne by the parents.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* does seem to allude to the notion that procreation between first degree relatives results in a lack of genetic variety. Oedipus recognises with horror that he has been found to be a 'cultivator in the same place from which he was cultivated' (ἀροτήρ ἐφάνθη ἐνθεν αὐτὸς ἡρόθη) (1485). The field has been oversown, the allocated piece of land that was meant for one crop has been used for two. In farming, it is important to space the seeds apart as well as to alternate the pieces of land being farmed each season, following the principles of conservation agriculture, in order to avoid the soil becoming overworked. Oedipus in the procreation of his children has been guilty of sowing his seed right on top of where his father sowed the seed producing Oedipus. The minerals in the soil sufficient to produce one good harvest have been used to produce a second in quick succession. Essentially, Oedipus acknowledges through the farming metaphor that his children have been made with a lack of genetic variety. This idea is voiced again a few lines later where he says, speaking of himself in the third person:

τὴν τεκοῦσαν ἤροσεν  
ὄθεν περ αὐτὸς ἐσπάρη, κάκ τῶν ἴσων  
ἐκτήσαθ' ὑμᾶς, ὣν περ αὐτὸς ἐξέφυ (1497-9)

He has inseminated his mother, from whom he was sown, and he has obtained you from the same things that he himself was sprung

### Knowledge of your family

In addition to condemning heinous crimes against the family, the play also seems to explore the importance of an awareness of who your family is. The play gives a positive and negative example of this. Oedipus in his unrelenting and stubborn

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<sup>1</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.4.

determination to know his family is presented as a heroic figure. However, the play also dramatises the extremely negative consequences of Oedipus' misconceptions about and ignorance of his real family, even though his ignorance has been involuntary.<sup>1</sup> Oedipus' life is almost presented by Sophocles as an example that you cannot live successfully without an awareness of your family background.<sup>2</sup> Someone might object that Sophocles' example of Oedipus in this regard is extreme and that many people could live ignorantly of their family without encountering the same tragic suffering. This is not untrue. However, Sophocles seems to test the validity of an idea by looking at it *in extremis*. What is worse: an extreme ignorance of your parents or an extreme knowledge of who they are? The case of Oedipus shows that the former is worse. It is really when things are pushed to their extreme that their validity either holds or snaps.

Why is knowledge of your parents and therefore of your wider family so important? The simple answer would be that it helps a person to understand who they are, and it is taken as given that self-knowledge is desirable. If we abstain from looking at the question in an overly abstract way, and instead focus on an assessment based on human behaviour, we see that people have an innate urge to know their parents. This manifests itself in adopted children where it is very frequent for them, once they become adults, to feel a compulsion to meet and connect with their biological parents, in spite of being brought up lovingly by adoptive parents. It shows that the role of parents is not purely tied up with nurture, because if it were, adoptive parents would be exchangeable with biological parents to the point where the child would feel that they had not in any way been short-changed. However, what is commonly the case is that the adopted child feels that their identity needs to be explained with connection to their biological parent. They often find it uncanny how much of their appearance and personality resembles their biological parents even though there has been no direct influence through nurture. This would suggest that certain things are transmitted through heredity. Therefore, to

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<sup>1</sup> Haywood and Post (2022) have written a very interesting article comparing Sophocles' account of the Oedipus story with Herodotus' narration of Croesus' downfall. The two stories dramatises, among other things, the consequences of deficient knowledge, including self-knowledge. Based on the article, the parallels between the accounts are striking enough to suggest influence between the two authors.

<sup>2</sup> Kamerbeek (1967) 108 commenting on l. 468 makes the very insightful comment: 'In these prophetic words the course of the play and Oedipus' tragedy is powerfully stated and summarized. Of course their contents may be paraphrased e.g. thus: "Today your descent will be revealed and today you will perish" or "the disclosure of your descent today will be your undoing"' It does appear to me that the central drama of the play is Oedipus' discovery of who he is. The plan is an ancient and tragic equivalent of our TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?*

realise why you are the way you are it is important to know who your biological parents are and what they are like.

Is this not exactly what we see in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*? Oedipus narrates to Iocasta how when he was at a dinner in Corinth someone said that he was not the biological child of his father, Polybus (πλαστός ὡς εἶην πατρί) (780).<sup>1</sup> He then asked his parents whether this was true. Although they firmly denied it, Oedipus, because of a long-lasting niggling doubt combined with a persistent rumour circulating around the city (ὄμως δ' / ἔκνιζέ μ' ἀεὶ τοῦθ'· ὑφεῖρπε γὰρ πολὺ) (785-6)<sup>2</sup>, decided to go to Delphi to ask the oracle. Sophocles has given here a sensitive portrayal of the inner feelings of an adopted child once they reach an age of self-consciousness. Although when young they might have certain doubts, they are not in a position to investigate them. But the adult Oedipus, instead of thinking to himself that he has been well brought up by Polybus and Merope and that it is immaterial whether they are his biological parents or not, feels a strong compulsion to find out the truth and so visits the Delphic oracle. Polybus and Merope are typical of the adoptive parents who would wish that their child would remain innocently naïve and desire nothing more than what they have provided. However, sadly for them, inasmuch as not being biological parents, they can never completely embody all that the child yearns for.

Moreover, the prioritisation of blood parents over adoptive ones, engendered by the fact that the crimes of incest and patricide are defined in relation to Oedipus' biological parents, is fundamental for the effectiveness of the play.<sup>3</sup> But how is a parent to be defined? Is it the person who raised you lovingly or the person who created you?<sup>4</sup> Because by the former criterion, it is Polybus and Merope who would be considered the parents rather than Laius and Iocasta, by whom Oedipus was mutilated and exposed for death. But if by the latter criterion, evidently Laius and Iocasta are the parents. David Konstan has argued that the play demands the reader to adopt the blood-tie perspective even though, according to the critic, the crimes of patricide and incest would be considered more terrible had they been committed against his adoptive parents. Oedipus killing Polybus, who loved him

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<sup>1</sup> March (2020) 241: 'He said that Oedipus was a πλαστός (feigned/fabricated/suppositious) son for his father'. Kamerbeek (1967) 160: 'The phrase πλαστός πατρί is ambiguous: it could be meant to convey that Merope having had a child by another passed it off for Polybus' or that Polybus himself pretended to be the real father of a foundling.'

<sup>2</sup> There are different ways to translate ὑφεῖρπε γὰρ πολὺ. One is to translate it as 'it [the rumour] was spreading a lot' or as March (2020) 242 translates it 'for it was really getting under my skin'. I prefer the latter.

<sup>3</sup> Konstan (1994) 5: 'The plot of *Oedipus the King* is constructed in such a way that it demands the biological view of the family as a condition for the intelligibility of the action.'

<sup>4</sup> Menander, *Sententiae Mono* 1.452: 'A father is not the one who bore you, but the one who raised you.'

dearly and was believed to be his father, should be more traumatising than an unknown man who had attempted to have him killed. Equally, according to Konstan, Oedipus sleeping with Merope, from whom he had experienced tenderly maternal care, should be worse than him sleeping with an unfamiliar woman who had never cared for him.<sup>1</sup>

The play, however, for all its recognition of Polybus' and Merope's role in the raising of Oedipus, makes it clear that it is the blood parents who count.<sup>2</sup> And the tie of blood is so important that crimes committed against biological parents are not mitigated by the fact that the said parents have neglected their nurture role. It is possible that the question of what defines a parent was a lively issue at the time of Sophocles' writing, since adoption was relatively commonplace in fifth-century Athens.

The tragedy for Oedipus is that his search to find out his true parents is drawn to a halt by the shocking and disturbing response of the oracle. Petrified by the prospect of killing his father and sleeping with his mother, he completely loses sight of the initial reason why he ventured to Delphi. Although one could accuse Oedipus of assuming that the oracle refers to Polybus and Merope, his reaction is only human. The emotion of horror that the oracle would provoke would make it almost impossibly hard to sit back and analyse the oracle, questioning what is meant by 'father' and 'mother'. Unfortunately for Oedipus, ignorance, whether wilful or involuntary, of your biological parents makes genuine self-knowledge unattainable. And without self-knowledge disastrous things can happen. This is the message of Teiresias' chilling assessment of Oedipus' situation:

σὺ καὶ δέδορκας κού βλέπεις ἴν' εἶ̃ κακοῦ,  
οὐδ' ἔνθα ναίεις, οὐδ' ὅτων οἰκεῖς μέτα.  
ἄρ' οἴσθ' ἀφ' ὧν εἶ̃; καὶ λέληθας ἐχθρὸς ὧν  
τοῖς σοῖσιν αὐτοῦ νέρθε κάπι γῆς ἄνω (413-6)

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<sup>1</sup> Konstan (1999) 76: 'If Oedipus had murdered his foster father, Polybus, and slept with his foster mother, Merope, the king and queen of Corinth who reared him, that would have been wrenching.'

<sup>2</sup> This perspective, admittedly, is not replicated in the *Electra* where Clytemnestra appears to lose her status as mother for want of maternal love. It could be the case that the biological father is of a more absolute status than that of the biological mother. However, the incest with Iocasta is painted with equal, if not more horror, than the crime of patricide. Konstan (1994) 8 suggests that Sophocles changed his mind in the later play and links the overthrow of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra with the restoration of democracy after the rule of Four Hundred (treating 411 BC as a *terminus post quem* for the dating of the play). According to the critic, Sophocles learned to realise that leadership and family are only such if they act as such.



And you have not seen nor do you see in what evil you are, nor where you live, nor with whom you live. Do you know from where you are? And you are unaware that you are hateful to those above and those below.

Due in part to this ignorance, Oedipus in his famous speech (1076-85) proclaims himself the 'child of Fortune' and becomes a spokesperson for the belief popular among the Sophists that a person's nature was not determined by their parents but a thing of chance. Many of the Sophists appear to have alleged that there is basically no correlation between a child's nature and that of his parents, and that one's nature is the product of chance.<sup>1</sup>

Before discovering who his real parents are, Oedipus believes that the events of his life have been steered by no other force than Fortune. He thinks it possible that he has risen to the position of king of Thebes while being born the son of a third-generation slave.<sup>2</sup> In this way he extols the power of Fortune to the point of believing that it is capable of raising someone from the lowliest birth to the highest position in society. In celebrating the influence of Fortune, he necessarily denigrates the importance of ancestry.<sup>3</sup> He presents himself in this speech as a self-made man, supported by Fortune, who has achieved political pre-eminence without any pedigree of breeding.<sup>4</sup> Success is determined by the individual and nothing else.

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymus Iamblichi τῆι τύχηι ἀποδεδόσθαι DK 89; Protagoras 326e ff.

<sup>2</sup> McAushlan and Affleck (2003) 76: 'τρίδουλος is not unique to Sophocles, and is used to mean "third generation slave" in Theopompus [...] The "third mother" similarly means my mother, and her mother, for *n* generations back [...] Unfortunately Oedipus is descended not from a line of female slaves, but from a long line of kings (268n).'

<sup>3</sup> Dugdale (2015) 434 is right at a superficial level to comment that 'his [Oedipus'] status at Thebes and his claim to the Theban throne are not dependent on his ancestry. The honors that he was accorded by the citizens of Thebes were conferred on him for what he did, not for what he was.' Certainly, this is how Oedipus himself views the matter from his position of incomplete self-knowledge. But, my argument is that Sophocles presents Oedipus as holding the position that his birth entitled him for, and therefore birth is highly deterministic. Oedipus' position as king is not the product of chance but of his royal parentage.

<sup>4</sup> It is highly surprising that none of the commentators have understood Oedipus' pronouncement of being the 'son of Fortune' in this way. They all realise that this is a key declaration but fail to contextualise it within the text itself (in the surrounding lines we see that nobility of birth is on Oedipus' mind) or within fifth-century thought, notably the beliefs of certain Sophists. March (2020) 270 is rather vague in her exegesis of this critical statement: 'Oedipus, abandoned by his birth-mother and left to die, has instead lived and prospered. Thus Fortune (Τύχη), as a caring mother seems a suitable metaphor – although the "good things" that she has given have ironically been the opposite of good.' Kamerbeek (1967) 205 is a bit nearer the mark but does not give the declaration the commentary it deserves: 'His real descent cannot, in his eyes, diminish the worth of his own personality. He feels at one with the order governing the universe.' Finglass (2018) 490 does well to comment on the implied randomness but without linking it with the sophistic doctrines there is not enough context given for a full understanding: 'His claim that Fortune is his

Some equivalence is to be found in the idea of the American Dream where any person, if they work hard enough and have a lucky breakthrough, can rise to the top no matter where they come from - being born into a poor, uneducated family is not a hindrance to success. Such a child can compete with and even win against a child born into a wealthy and influential family.

Clearly the audience is supposed to spot the irony of this speech. Oedipus' life is actually a refutation of this sophistic idea championed in his speech. Sophocles is demonstrating that this theoretically attractive notion that everyone has an equal chance of success and that life is essentially random is not true in practice. In fact, Oedipus' life is proof that your parents shape your nature and thereby determine in part the course of your life. Oedipus' real parents are Laius and Iocasta, and therefore he is a member of the ruling family of Thebes. Although he was handed over on Mount Cithaeron and subsequently brought up in Corinth, he has ended up in the position that he would naturally have held had his upbringing been as expected. Sophocles seems to be suggesting that members of these royal families are born to rule. Oedipus has inherited this predisposition for royal governance from his parents, even without the traditional nurture and grooming process, he has ended up king of Thebes.<sup>1</sup> The hereditary transmission of this right to rule is so strong that it asserts itself even in the face of obstructive circumstances. To those who might say that a king owes his title purely to being born into the right family and that anyone else born into such a family would also be a king, Sophocles in this play shows that the basis of royalty is not as arbitrary and superficial as this. If kingship is something transmitted and therefore in the blood, as it were, it is not merely the result of circumstances. Sophocles would not appear to believe that a child of a peasant family, if adopted into a royal household, could acquire and embody kingship, even if he were a king in name. Equally, if a future king was taken

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mother highlights the apparent randomness of the earliest stages of his life, when only the chance interventions of others led to his survival.' Hogan (1991) 63 is rather metaphysical in her explanation and does not hit the bull's eye: 'In making Fortune his mother and the months his brothers, he virtually equates Time and Fortune; and in noting his affinity with the changing lunar months he implicitly accepts cyclic change.' Some lines in a play are more pregnant with meaning than others and also more central to the message of the play, there can be no doubt but that there is something very climactic about Oedipus' declaration, so it is imperative for the understanding of the play that the line is given the necessary analysis.

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell (2013) 60 references the discovery of Cyrus' royal nature (Herodotus 1.114) to make the point: 'The Greeks liked the stories of humble beginnings disguising ruling qualities. As Herodotus' story about Cyrus indicates, it was nature not nurture that mattered. A *basilikos* nature could be revealed, whatever his apparent circumstances. Nevertheless, it is also probably important that although Herodotus' Cyrus was raised by a shepherd (like Oedipus) his birthright was from a ruling family (perhaps, typically, also like Oedipus).'

out of a royal household, Sophocles implies that this person would be bound to reveal himself to be different from anyone else. There exists something in him by nature and not by convention or circumstance which would distinguish the child. Oedipus is this very child.

In asserting this natural basis of kingship, are we forgetting the fact that Oedipus' adoptive parents, Polybus and Merope, formed the royal family of Corinth, and therefore the young Oedipus was brought up in a household teaching him all the practices and manners that would make him an eligible candidate to be king of Thebes, i.e. he still had the nurture element? This is hard to dispute. However, is it not authorised to suppose that Oedipus' adoption into such a prestigious household was not purely by chance but was engendered by the prestige of his biological family? This seems to be true on a practical level. It was natural that the Theban servant ordered to expose Oedipus would have dealings with a herdsman of another royal family. Slaves of a royal household are naturally more likely than those of a non-royal household to interact with servants of another royal household: they exist in the same milieu. Secondly, when the Corinthian herdsman presented Oedipus to Polybus and Merope, were they not more likely to adopt him as an heir knowing that he was the son of the Theban royal family than if he had been an orphan of a peasant family?<sup>1</sup> Even in modern times, there is often a correlation between the socio-economic status of the biological family and that of the adoptive family. Your family might abandon you but the prestige of the family does not. In light of these two arguments, it would seem erroneous to assume that Oedipus' adoption into the royal family of Corinth was purely coincidental.

Even if one is not convinced by the arguments of the above paragraph, there is an extra element that supports the notion that Oedipus' position as king of Thebes was predominantly the result of nature with nurture playing an insignificant role. Oedipus was fit to be king of Thebes not purely in virtue of being *eugenês* but also in being *eggenês*, i.e. he was innately noble and ethnically Theban. The root of both words is *genos*. Whether you are noble and Theban is essentially a genetic question. Although it might seem strange to a modern reader to consider the Thebans an ethnic entity, political identity was by no way a purely cultural affair. There would be no better proof that you were Theban than by being the son of two Theban citizens, just as in fifth-century Athens after Pericles' Citizen Law. In this way, Oedipus' parents have given him both a social as well as an ethnic status. Even though the Thebans elected Oedipus to be king without knowing that he was part of the royal family and therefore also ethnically Theban, it is likely that these properties facilitated Oedipus' acceptance into Theban society. For example, someone might not know they are ethnically Italian and yet feel strangely at home

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<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, I am assuming that both knew his ancestry.

in Italy when they go on holiday there. Oedipus, however, in his speech, admittedly out of ignorance, assumes his position in Thebes is the product of fortune while attributing no importance to his family background. The events of the play argue otherwise. Although many critics like to read a fatalism into the play as regards the crimes of patricide and incest, predicted by oracles, the real determinism that Sophocles proposes is that of the family. Parents, and their respective family trees and family curses, shape the individual. The individual is not a free agent existing independently. Oedipus has been stamped by the royal pedigree of his parents and one could almost say he was fated to be king of Thebes, even if no oracle in the play foretells such a happening.

### Noble birth and women

The *Oedipus Tyrannus* seems to explore the relationship between noble birth and women. There are two instances where Oedipus suggests that class snobbery is behind Iocasta's attempts to thwart the discovery of his family origins.

ταύτην δ' ἔατε πλουσίῳ χαίρειν γένει (1070)  
'Allow this woman to rejoice in her wealthy family'

αὕτη δ' ἴσως, φρονεῖ γὰρ ὡς γυνὴ μέγα,  
τὴν δυσγένειαν τὴν ἐμὴν αἰσχύνεται.(1078-9)  
This woman, for she has haughty thoughts as a woman, is perhaps ashamed of my low birth.

It is clear from the second instance that Oedipus is basing his impression of Iocasta's shame on female nature. It is a case of deductive reasoning on the part of Oedipus: 'Women in general entertain class pretensions, therefore this is likely to be a big concern for Iocasta, as a woman, concerning my origins'.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, Oedipus is implying that Iocasta is a snob and that her love for him was tied up with the belief that he came from a good family, but, if he proves to be of humble origin, she will feel shame and lose admiration for him. Even though the audience is aware that the conclusion of his deductive reasoning is untrue, his characterisation of womankind, the premise of his argument, must be of such a nature as to correspond with the average mentality of his audience.<sup>2</sup> Why? Oedipus is depicted

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<sup>1</sup> This is also how Kamerbeek (1967) 205 understands the Greek: 'neither "being a woman she is proud" nor "she is proud for a woman" but: "in the way that women are proud (implying not the pride in personal achievement but in noble descent, status and the like)'. March (2020) 270: 'a man can take pride in his personal achievements in the wider world, but a woman, living only domestically, must take pride in such things as birth, status and ancestry.'

<sup>2</sup> March (2020) 269 also comments on the disjunction between what Oedipus thinks to be the case and what is actually the case: 'Oedipus completely misunderstands Iocasta's

in the play as a highly intelligent person who is pre-eminent at solving enigmas, as testified by his solving the riddle of the Sphinx. It would be completely out of character if Oedipus, when presented with the enigma of Iocasta's anxiety concerning the discovery of his origins, surmised a reason that was, in the eyes of the audience, lacking plausibility. When Oedipus puts her nervousness down to female class snobbery, the audience must respond: 'Even though he is not right, it is more than reasonable for him, with respect to his limited knowledge of the situation, to assume that this is the case'. In other words, the characterisation that Oedipus makes of womankind must have been shared by the majority of the audience.

What evidence is there to demonstrate that women were perceived in this way in fifth-century Athens? In the prologue of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Strepsiades bemoans his marriage to an aristocratic lady. He contrasts the simple country life he led before marriage with his wife's luxurious and extravagant lifestyle:

έμοι γάρ ἦν ἄγροικος ἡδιστος βίος  
[...]  
ἔπειτ' ἔγημα Μεγακλέους τοῦ Μεγακλέους  
ἀδελφιδῆν ἄγροικος ὦν ἐξ ἄστεως,  
σεμνήν τρυφῶσαν ἐγκεκοισυρωμένην. (*Clouds*, 43-48)

There was to me a most sweet rural life [...] Then I, a country bumpkin, married the urbane niece of Megacles, son of Megacles, a pompous and extravagant lady who lives luxuriously like Coesyra.

The final word ἐγκεκοισυρωμένην is interesting because we see how a certain woman, Coesyra, who was a female in the Alcmaeonid family, became a symbol of female extravagance and ostentatious display of wealth. It is also interesting that this word is based on a female and not a male. For the Greeks there appears to have been a strong association between lavish materialism and femininity. Oedipus alludes to this female love of wealth when he says that he will leave Iocasta to rejoice in her wealthy family (1070).

Strepsiades then goes on to describe the tension between their different aspirations for their son. She desires him to have a distinguished name featuring the word *hippos* ('horse'), whereas Strepsiades wants it to feature the word *pheidōs* 'thrifty'. Secondly, she envisages him driving a chariot to the city, while Strepsiades pictures him as a moorland goatherd following the example of his father. It seems that in the case of Pheidippides, his mother's influence has proven more decisive.

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motives. He thinks she is trying to stop his questioning out of shame and fear that he may turn out to be humbly born.'

With regard to Oedipus' characterisation of Iocasta and Strepsiades' description of his wife, nobility seems to be tied up with having the right name, wearing the right clothes, associating with the right people etc. There is an obsession with outward tokens signalling nobility rather than something innate and internal from which nobility would emanate. Essentially, these aristocratic women are presented as having a certain degree of superficiality; their mind is focused on the world of appearances and on the perception other people have of them. Their sense of self is tightly bound up with their awareness of their high social class. We have seen Oedipus insinuate that Iocasta's pride, like other women, is dependent on social status and that her evaluation of her husband is also based on it.

In Classical Athens, which was an intensely patriarchal society, it would not be surprising for women to attach an awful lot of importance to the prestige of nobility, since class would help to surmount gender discrimination. In this way, class is a woman's passport for a better life. A man could be successful without being from a noble family, whereas for a woman this was not so easily the case. If women in Greece were exhibitionist in letting others know of their social rank, this could maybe be seen as a way of obfuscating their gender with class, i.e. enticing men not to notice that they belong to the 'inferior sex' but to a high social station. And the Greek male seems somewhat unfair in accusing aristocratic women of being too given over to luxurious extravagance. Where a man had many means of distinguishing himself, such as on the battlefield, on the sports field, in the agora, in a law court or in the assembly etc., a woman's scope for making known her social class was much more restricted. She could distinguish herself almost solely by her superior purchasing power and so she would buy fancier and more expensive clothes, perfumes and foods etc.

Oedipus alludes to this state of affairs with regards to his daughters. He asks Creon to act as a guardian to them because, unlike his sons, they will not be able to provide for themselves (1459-1466).<sup>1</sup> Normally they would be able to find a provider in the form of a husband, but Oedipus fears that no man will be willing to wed the daughters of a mother-marrying and father-slaying man. (1492-1503). It seems that there is a direct correlation for women between family prestige and socio-economic status. Where the future of Antigone and Ismene had looked highly promising before Oedipus' discoveries, now it is painted as dire. In this way women are portrayed as being dependent on their family. It is by using the leverage of their family that they secure a well-to-do husband. Moreover, the esteem they are held

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<sup>1</sup> March (2020) 308 alone of the commentators comments on this fact of the difference between the genders regarding dependence on the family: 'Antigone and Ismene, who will shortly appear onstage, though without being named. Oedipus feels to the full the harm that he has done them by bringing them into the world, and realised that their need of Creon's support is greater than that of his sons.'

in society is determined almost exclusively by their family background. So Oedipus speaks of how they, as aristocratic young girls, should be able to attend gatherings and festivals, but now that the shameful deeds of their father are known, they will return home in tears provoked by the jeering of the public (1489-91).

In summary, Oedipus' conception, which is also likely to be that of the average Athenian man, of women's relationship to nobility suggests that women took great pride in and attached great importance to the prestige of their family because they owed any social elevation to this, without which they were merely a woman, and unfortunately therefore a second-class citizen. Oedipus is willing to accept the discovery of servile origins because his male status provides him with the confidence that he will still be able to make a success of his life. However, he senses, albeit incorrectly within the play but in conformity with standard gender stereotypes, that Iocasta's uneasiness is due to her female status which, without the support of nobility, dooms her to an unenviable life. To put it simply, nobility is portrayed through the words of Oedipus as a bonus for a man but as a necessity for a woman if she wants to have any social eminence.

### Low-status characters

The play enriches its study of birth by incorporating two low-status figures who interact with Oedipus at the fatal moment of his self-discovery, and they are the Corinthian Shepherd and the Theban Shepherd. The Corinthian Shepherd, in particular, has a significant role in terms of number of lines. Finglass has drawn particular emphasis to the fact that Oedipus' recognition of his true birth is revealed by two characters of humble background:

Oedipus' recognition of himself is the direct result of the extorted testimony of a slave. Two low-status characters are involved in the recognition, the Corinthian and the Theban; both are herdsmen, the latter a slave.

The interaction between Oedipus and the Corinthian is particularly interesting because there is almost a reversal of power roles, Oedipus the King is hanging on every word of a herdsman<sup>1</sup>:

**Ἄγγελος** : ὀθούνεκ' ἦν σοι Πόλυβος οὐδὲν ἐν γένει.

**Οἰδίπους** : πῶς εἶπας; οὐ γὰρ Πόλυβος ἐξέφυσέ με;

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<sup>1</sup> Finglass (2018) 55: 'The great king of Thebes willingly accepts direction from a mere foreign shepherd, a reversal of roles untypical of high poetry. The distinction between the two figures, immediately apparent to the audience through their dress, may have been further brought out by their acting style.'

**Ἄγγελος** : οὐ μᾶλλον οὐδὲν τοῦδε τάνδρός, ἀλλ' ἴσον.

**Οἰδίπους** : καὶ πῶς ὁ φύσας ἐξ ἴσου τῷ μηδενί;

**Ἄγγελος** : ἀλλ' οὐ σ' ἐγείνατ' οὔτ' ἐκεῖνος οὔτ' ἐγώ. (1016-1020)

Messenger: For Polybus was no relative of yours at all.

Oedipus: How have you spoken? For did not Polybus father me?

Messenger: No more than this man, but equally.

Oedipus: And how is my father equal to a nobody?

Messenger: Well, neither that man nor I begat you.

The Corinthian shows little obsequiousness to Oedipus but in what could be understood as speaking out of turn tells Oedipus that he, a humble herdsman, is as much his father as Polybus.<sup>1</sup> Although the Corinthian is strictly speaking correct, Oedipus finds this inappropriate and declares how his father could be equivalent to a nobody 'τῷ μηδενί'. In modern parlance, we could say that at this point Oedipus reveals 'unconscious bias'. Although being open to the message conveyed by the Corinthian, the description of him as a nobody could belie a little bit of class snobbery.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the context of the dramatic performance, what is the significance that two low-status characters are given such prominence in a dramatic genre dominated by high-status characters? Paillard argues that these characters have been included so that the audience, which would consist in the large part of ordinary Athenians, would have figures to identify with:

If a good number of poor citizens attended the performance of the plays in fifth-century Athens and if citizens from the rural areas of Attica came to Athens to take part in the Dionysia, such categories of men could easily have affinity with the Corinthian Shepherd [...] His characterisation [the Corinthian] and the importance of his role might nonetheless have worked as an encouragement to members of lower socio-political status to take part in the sessions of the Assembly, and maybe even to speak in them, by

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<sup>1</sup> Finglass (2018)

<sup>2</sup> Paillard (2017) 223: 'v. 1019 hides an ambiguity (and a difficulty in construction and interpretation) that reveals the way in which an elite figure such as Oedipus perceives a non-elite free man. The Corinthian had told Oedipus that he himself was as much his father as Polybus was (i.e. not at all). Oedipus then asks the Shepherd how it could be that his father was to be put on an equal level as someone who is not/nothing.'



showing that characters of similar status could also play important roles in a fictive society dominated by members of royal families.<sup>1</sup>

Paillard's attempt to provide a reason for the prominent inclusion by Sophocles of these two low-status characters is admirable. However, we have to be tentative in attributing a particular motivation to the playwright. Just as one effect can be brought about by a multiplicity of causes, therefore making it difficult to identify the one that is responsible in a particular case, just so an act or speech can lend itself to different interpretations. Paillard supposes that Sophocles had a democratic motive behind these two characters. It is definitely possible and what she says seems reasonable. As long as her argument does not premise itself too much on the current scholarship at the time, which argued that the Dionysia was heavily political in nature and had the purpose of instilling good democratic qualities in the citizenry, then it deserves to be taken seriously.<sup>2</sup>

A more general but less political reading would be that good birth, which is often seen as something enviable by the population, is not always an absolute good. Oedipus in terms of noble birth greatly surpasses these two men, and yet his family situation is sevenfold more dysfunctional than theirs, and his royal status which typically symbolises fortune and privilege has proven to be the opposite for him. The two herdsmen with their lowly lifestyle and origins are actually more fortunate than Oedipus.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

To appreciate fully Sophocles' distinctiveness, it is sometimes best to compare him with his contemporary, Euripides. In the *Bacchae*, admittedly written much later than the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and therefore not having a direct influence on our play, Dionysus tells Pentheus that he does not know who he is, to which Pentheus responds: 'I am Pentheus, son of Echion and Agave' (507). The drama of the *Bacchae* is built around this idea that Pentheus is deficient in self-knowledge. The idea that knowledge of your parents constitutes self-knowledge is presented by Euripides as tragically insufficient. There is an expectation that one needs to know

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<sup>1</sup> Paillard (2018) 224.

<sup>2</sup> Goldhill (1990) has already shown that it is very difficult to fit Sophocles into this understanding of Greek tragedy except by the rather perverse, as far as I am concerned, method of suggesting that Sophocles' questioning of democratic values was actually democratic.

<sup>3</sup> Finglass (2018) 267 suggests that recognition by these low-status individuals 'undermines the gap between high and low rank around which human society is constructed.' This is an interesting but a big statement. The emphasis on good birth in all of Sophocles' other plays makes this reading hard to square, even though the scene in question seems to lend itself to such a reading. Cf. Euripides chapter where good birth will be argued to be disadvantageous.

the driving forces of one's inner nature. The notion of self-knowledge in Euripides' play is much more psychological. But what we see in Sophocles' play is that self-knowledge derived from knowledge of one's parents, which is ridiculed in the *Bacchae*, is presented as vitally important and the core foundation of self-knowledge. Oedipus in order to understand himself does not enter into any psychological introspection but applies himself fully to the discovery of family origins. The tragedy that befalls him could have been averted had he known who his parents were. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* highlights the importance of knowing one's ancestry by showing the worst-case scenario of not knowing it.

## Chapter 7: *Electra*

The *Electra* explores the theme of noble birth in three ways: 1) the relationship between parents and children, especially whether the role of the father takes precedence over that of the mother; 2) Electra's and Orestes' struggle to reclaim possession of their ancestral home; 3) Electra's noble endurance and resistance to the usurpers Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. A lot of scholarship has focused on the question of whether the play condones the act of matricide.<sup>1</sup> It is understandable why this has been the case, because in terms of the myth's basic plot outline this is the central act. However, Athenian playwrights were very adept at repurposing mythology, that is to say, using the myth as a vehicle for exploring issues that might not immediately be associated with the traditional myth. It is my argument that Sophocles has taken this mythic story and, unlike Aeschylus, who made the matricide the central feature of his trilogy, Sophocles has made the portrayal of inherited noble character, ancestral wealth and parental status the prominent features of the story. This chapter will show that a very rich interpretation of the play can be made without even mentioning the legitimacy of matricide. It is natural that a piece of literature as well thought out as a Greek play will deal consciously with certain themes, but is it the case that the theme of matricide has been assumed to be central when in fact other themes, so far uninvestigated by scholarship, provide a more fertile field of inquiry? And the the theme of good birth, which was a much discussed topic in fifth-century Athens, is much more likely to have had resonance for Sophocles' theatrical audience than the theme of matricide, an act so invested with taboo that it is very rarely actualised, spoken about or even thought about.

### To be the child of the mother or father

A conception of inherited excellence could easily ascribe equal importance to the mother and the father believing that the child inherits half of their characteristics from the one and half from the other. What we see portrayed in the *Electra* though is the insistence that the father supersedes the mother and that the children not only owe their loyalty to their father, Agamemnon, but they should also seek to be known as *his* children rather than the children of their mother, Clytemnestra. Admittedly, the situation is not neutral in the sense that Clytemnestra has killed

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<sup>1</sup> The debate can be divided into roughly three camps: (1) the apologists, those who believe Sophocles sees nothing wrong with the act of matricide: Jebb (1894), Woodard (1966), Burnett (1998), March (2001); (2) the ironicists, who believe that Sophocles uses irony to subtly condemn the act: Sheppard (1927), Kells (1973); (3) the equivocators who suggest that Sophocles' stance is ambivalent: Segal (1966), Winnington-Ingram (1980), Schein (1982), Buxton (1984), Hartigan (1996).

their father and therefore it is natural that the children should feel some resentment towards her and sympathy for their dead father. Nevertheless, Electra's complete rejection of Clytemnestra and absolute loyalty towards Agamemnon cannot be explained merely by the incidents of family drama, especially because Agamemnon is not without sin, instead, the cause behind this unilateral loyalty must lie in a value system that privileges the father at the expense of the mother.

In the play Clytemnestra seems surprised at how little love and support Electra and Orestes have for her considering that she is, notwithstanding her crime of mariticide (for which, in her mind, there are mitigating circumstance), still their mother. Clytemnestra in her *agōn* with Electra complains how Electra is constantly running her mouth about the wickedness of her mother without taking any account of her father's wrongdoing in the family drama. Clytemnestra justifies her act of mariticide as an act of retribution for her husband's sacrifice of her daughter, Iphigenia:

ἡ γὰρ Δίκη νιν εἴλεν, οὐκ ἐγὼ μόνη,  
ἧ̃ χρῆν σ' ἀρήγειν, εἰ φρονοῦσ' ἐτύγχανες·  
ἐπεὶ πατὴρ σὸς οὔτος, ὃν θρηνεῖς ἀεὶ,  
τὴν σὴν ὄμαιμον μοῦνος Ἑλλήνων ἔτλη  
θῦσαι θεοῖσιν, οὐκ ἴσον καμῶν ἐμοὶ  
λύπης, ὅς ἔσπειρ', ὥσπερ ἡ τίκτους' ἐγὼ (528-34)

Justice killed him, not I alone, and it was necessary for you to assist, if you had any sense: since your father, whom you are always mourning, dared, alone among the Greeks, to sacrifice your full sister to the gods, he impregnated me but did not endure an equal share of pain as me, who gave birth to her

Clytemnestra attempts to highlight and challenge the patricentricity of Electra by showing how little she is affected by the death of her sister as compared with that of her father. In the final two lines of this passage an attempt is made to promote the role of the mother above that of the father by referring to the well-known idea that a father's role in the reproductive process is constituted by a mere act of insemination, whereas the mother not only carries the foetus in her womb but also has to endure the pains of labour.<sup>1</sup> The implication of the statement is that as a reward for the superior amount of commitment and pain required of a mother in

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<sup>1</sup> Dugdale (2008) 42: 'Here Clytemnestra argues that the pain she suffered in giving birth to Iphigenia makes her right to enjoy her daughter greater than Agamemnon's right to kill her, since the pain he experienced was less (an understated way of describing the pleasure he experienced in procreation). In fact, the claim that a mother had greater rights than a father to make decisions with regard to their child runs counter to the expectations of Greek society, which gave the father jurisdiction over members of his household.'

the begetting of children, the mother deserves, or at least should expect, this to be reciprocated by her children. Clytemnestra's complaint is that this is not the case. This idea, though with a slightly different point of perspective, seems to be repeated by Clytemnestra at the news of her son's supposed death:

ὄστις τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς γεγώς,  
μαστῶν ἀποστάς καὶ τροφῆς ἐμῆς, φυγὰς  
ἀπεξενούτο καὶ μ', ἐπεὶ τῆσδε χθονὸς  
ἐξῆλθεν, οὐκέτ' εἶδεν, ἐγκαλῶν δέ μοι  
φόνους πατρώους δεῖν' ἐπηπεῖλει τελεῖν;  
(776-80)

Who [Orestes] being born from my spirit, yet removed from my breast and my nurture, he became a fugitive and no longer saw me, once he had left this land, but charging me with his father's death he made terrible threats

Here Clytemnestra appears to refer to the more active involvement of a mother in child rearing at the early infancy stage. It is the mother, not the father, that provides nourishment for the child through breast-feeding and it is often equally the mother who occupies herself with the other needs of the early infant: winding, bathing, toileting etc. Clytemnestra starts with this idea to then juxtapose it with Orestes' ungrateful response of abandoning her and threatening her, she who reared him, with revenge.

Electra takes exception with Chrysothemis for not prioritising honours due to their father. In her mind, her sister has decided to ally herself with their mother instead of dedicating herself to avenging her father's death.<sup>1</sup> Electra in her first staged confrontation with her sister levies this accusation:

δεινόν γέ σ' οὔσαν πατρός οὔ σὺ παῖς ἔφυς,  
κείνου λελησθαι, τῆς δὲ τικτούσης μέλειν.  
ἅπαντα γάρ σοι τάμὰ νουθητήματα  
κείνης διδακτά, κούδ' ἐκ σαυτῆς λέγεις. (341-44)

It is terrible that you being the daughter of this father from whom you grew, you forget this man, but take care of she who gave birth to you. All your injunctions to me have been learnt from her, you say nothing from your own heart

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<sup>1</sup> Kells (1973) 105 'Chrysothemis has represented the younger (the sophistic) ethic of Greece that one should adapt oneself to circumstances, 'live as Rome does'; Electra now asserts the older ethic, that of the true-born aristocrat (εὐγενής), that one should remain loyal to one's highest family traditions, and never budge on a matter of principle.'

Electra contrasts the verbs φύω and τίκτω. This verbal juxtaposition seems to refer to the dominant idea of how conception took place. To use an agricultural metaphor, the father's act is the equivalent of a seed being planted in the ground, and the woman is like the earth providing the possibility for this seed to germinate. In essence, the mother's role, whose womb is merely a ploughland for the germination of the father's seed, is seen as passive and subordinate to the role of the father, whose sperm is more closely identified with the child's nature, inasmuch as the child's nature is contained within his sperm and only has need of the woman's womb as a place of growth and development.

This debate seems to have been a subject of particular interest in ancient Greece. There are multiple ancient authors who speak to this particular controversy.<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus has Apollo in his dispute with the Erinyes claim that there is only one parent, and that is the father:

οὐκ ἔστι μήτηρ ἢ κεκλημένου τέκνου  
τοκεύς, τροφὸς δὲ κύματος νεοσπόρου.  
τίκτει δ' ὁ θρώσκων, ἢ δ' ἄπερ ξένω ξένη  
ἔσωσεν ἔρνος. (*Eumenides*, 658-701)

There is no mother who is parent of the so-called child, but she is a nurse of the newly-sown embryo. The one mounting produces it, but she as a stranger to a stranger protects the young sprout

This is quite a radical statement by Apollo denying any parental input by the 'mother' in the creation of the child.<sup>2</sup> It is quite clear from the metaphorical language that conception is compared, in some ways, to the agricultural process of seed sowing, where the earth incubates the seed but is external to the seed and its constituent nature. But the passage is actually even more radical than this since the father is the subject of the verb typically employed to describe the woman's role in the reproduction process, τίκτω. In this way, and as counterintuitive as it may appear, the woman is demoted to the passive role of guarding the embryo, like a bird sat on an egg that it has neither produced nor laid.

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<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus is not the author of this idea, because it was already in circulation before his time. Aristotle tells us that Anaxagoras and some earlier philosophers had claimed that the 'seed comes from the male, while the female provides the space' (Arist. *GA* 763b31-3). Equally, the Ancient Egyptians seems to have subscribed to a similar view: 'For they have taken the general position that the father is the sole author of procreation and that the mother only supplies the foetus with nourishment and a place to live, and they call the trees which bear fruit "male" and those which do not "female," exactly opposite to the Greek usage' (Diodorus Siculus 1.80).

<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is necessary to bear in mind the context: Apollo is trying to argue that Orestes is not guilty of any blood-killing. However, the idea must have had some currency, as we shall see, otherwise it would have no argumentative force.

Euripides has Orestes argue along similar lines too:

πατήρ μὲν ἐφύτευσέν με, σὴ δ' ἔτικτε παῖς,  
τὸ σπέρμ' ἄρουρα παραλαβοῦσ' ἄλλου πάρα·  
ἄνευ δὲ πατρὸς τέκνον οὐκ εἴη ποτ' ἄν.  
ἐλογισάμην οὖν τῷ γένους ἀρχηγέτη  
μᾶλλον με φῦναι τῆς ὑποστάσης τροφάς. (*Orestes*, 552-6)

My father planted me, and your daughter gave birth, as a field taking the seed from another: for without the father there would never be a child. Therefore, I reasoned that it was better for me to ally myself with the author of my stock than the appointed nurse

A similar analogical reasoning is applied as in the Aeschylus passage, but less radical since the mother is still allocated agency of the verb, *τίκτω*. Nevertheless, the language is similar enough to make one wonder whether Euripides is imitating Aeschylus. This brief study of the three tragedians shows up an important point, Euripides and Aeschylus have their characters more explicitly state the exclusive role of the father in the creation of the child. However, Sophocles' dramatic narrative focuses on this idea in a longer and more focused way. Where Euripides and Aeschylus have had a tendency to verbalise this idea, Sophocles dramatises it.

Returning to Electra's dissatisfaction with her sister, Chrysothemis is upbraided on another occasion for not showing unequivocal loyalty towards their father:

νῦν δ' ἐξὸν πατρὸς  
πάντων ἀρίστου παῖδα κεκληῖσθαι, καλοῦ  
τῆς μητρός· οὕτω γὰρ φανεῖ πλείστοις κακή,  
θανόντα πατέρα καὶ φίλους προδοῦσα σούς (365-8)

Now it being possible for you to be called the child of the best father of all men, be called your mother's daughter; thus you will appear bad to all, betraying your dead father and your loved ones.

Electra speak of her father in eulogistic terms, specifically, through the employment of the superlative *aristos* 'the best'. She makes it clear to her sister that the choice is between identifying with her illustrious father or her shameful mother. It is an either/or situation in Electra's mind with no possibility of supporting both parents at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Agamemnon as the patriarchal figure is seen as co-extensive with the family since Electra equates betraying him with betraying the rest of the family, *hoi philoi*.

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<sup>1</sup> March (2001) 164: 'Because Chrysothemis repudiates her father by ignoring her duty to him. For the thought, cf. Eur. *El.* 933-5.'

There are several passages where strain and tension in the mother-daughter relationship between Clytemnestra and Electra is emphasised. Electra appears to distance herself from Clytemnestra rejecting her status as mother:

ὅταν [...] ἴδω δὲ τούτων τὴν τελευταίαν ὕβριν,  
τὸν αὐτοέντην ἡμῖν ἐν κοίτῃ πατρός  
ξὺν τῇ ταλαίνῃ μητρί, μητέρ' εἰ χρεῶν  
ταύτην προσαιδᾶν τῷδε συγκοιμωμένην·  
ἢ δ' ὣδε τλήμων ὥστε τῷ μιάστορι  
ξύνεστ' (267, 271-6)

Whenever I see the extreme hubris of these two, the murderer lying in the bed of my father with my wretched mother, if it is necessary to call her mother who shares a bed with this man; so abominable that she partners this polluter

It seems that Electra accepts that biologically speaking it is undeniable that Clytemnestra is her mother but in terms of behaviour and nurture it is debatable. The conception of a mother within the nuclear family structure as a loving partner of the father is not borne out by Clytemnestra. Equally, Clytemnestra does not fulfil the definition of a mother identifiable with a loving and supportive carer of one's children. Electra's point is that Clytemnestra, irrespective of the fact that she gave birth to her, does not behave as a mother.<sup>1</sup> This stance is made clear in another passage:

καί σ' ἔγωγε δεσπότην  
ἢ μητέρ' οὐκ ἔλασσον εἰς ἡμᾶς νέμω (597-8)

And I consider you no less a mistress than a mother to me

The verb *nemein* is not used accidentally. As the cognate verb of *nomos*, the intention is to make it clear that in terms of *nomos* Clytemnestra is not a mother. Electra acknowledges that her disavowal of Clytemnestra as her mother is a question of opinion and belief as opposed to a natural truth. Electra's rejection of her mother is provoked by the latter's behaviour which transgresses the normal customs, traditions and expectations (*nomoi*) of motherhood.

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<sup>1</sup> March (2001) 157 understands the relevant passage similarly: 'Thus, by her behaviour to her children, she has forfeited the right to the name of mother.' Finglass (2007) 182: 'The juxtaposition with πατρός (272) emphasises the polarisation of Electra's relations with her parents.'



It is interesting that later in this argument Electra speaks from the perspective of nature (*phusis*):

κήρυσσέ μ' εἰς ἅπαντας, εἴτε χρῆς κακὴν  
εἴτε στόμαργον εἴτ' ἀναιδείας πλέαν.  
εἰ γὰρ πέφυκα τῶνδε τῶν ἔργων ἴδρις,  
σχεδόν τι τὴν σὴν οὐ καταισχύνω φύσιν (606-9)

Announce me to all, if you like, as bad, loud-tongued or full of shamelessness. If I am by nature knowing in these things, barely at all do I disgrace your nature

In this passage Electra acknowledges, in spite of the sarcastic tone, that there might well exist some similarity in nature between her and she who gave birth to her. As much as Electra aims to distance herself from her mother and reject her as such as a reaction to unmaternal behaviour, the biological fact remains that Clytemnestra is her mother and a part of her nature might be inherited from her. This does not necessarily contradict what was said earlier about the pre-eminence of the father as a parental figure, especially in regards to conception and transmission of hereditary traits, because it is possible to maintain that, although the father's input is more determining, the mother's influence is not altogether absent. Electra is aware that whether she likes it or not Clytemnestra has had some influence in the configuration of her nature. At the same time, the sarcastic and mocking tone of the statement undermines the seriousness of the statement.<sup>1</sup>

This theme within the play did not escape the notice of the psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, who named the 'Electra Complex' after this play:

A daughter develops a specific liking for her father, with a correspondingly jealous attitude towards the mother. As everyone knows, Electra took vengeance on her mother Clytemnestra for murdering her husband Agamemnon and thus robbing her – Electra – of her beloved father<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> March (2001) 179 seems rather too quick to dismiss any admission of hereditary transmission from Clytemnestra, the mother: 'There is no suggestion here that Electra has inherited her mother's evil nature. Her "bad behaviour" has been imposed on her by her situation.' Dugdale (2008) 48, on the other hand, does not dismiss the admission but he does not make clear whether Electra really means what she says: 'Electra ends her speech by sarcastically returning to this theme, implying that the faults of which Clytemnestra accuses her must be hereditary.'

<sup>2</sup> Jung (1961) 154. Roisman (2008) 123 suggests Jung took inspiration from Sophocles' version and gives the following very insightful commentary on Jung's interpretation which corroborates my point earlier that Sophocles dramatises an idea whereas the other playwrights, especially Euripides, verbalise it: 'It is Euripides' Clytemnestra who states that some children love their fathers more, others their mother (*Electra* 1101-4). But it is

### Electra's and Orestes' struggle to reclaim possession of their ancestral home

A big drama in the play centres on Electra's and Orestes' ambition to regain control and possession of their ancestral home, the golden palace of Mycenae. For royal families the ancestral home carries a lot of symbolic significance and there is strong emotional attachment towards it. The home standing firm and unravaged by the passage of time is a physical symbol of the persisting continuity of the family line. Amid the generations that come and go like seasonal leaves, the family home remains fixed like the bough of a tree. It is also in its grandeur an embodiment, visible for all to see, of the power and influence of the family. If the royal house is in a good condition and under the possession of its rightful owners, the family *ipso facto* is in a good state of health and maintains its social prestige. The token that transmission of power within the family has proceeded accordingly resides in the palace being ruled by the rightful heir, having been passed down along the patriline. Electra and Orestes feel an obligation, imposed upon them by their noble birth, to wrest the palace, the seat of power, from the usurpers Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. This taking back control is a family duty imposed by long-standing tradition.

As a result of the assassination of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra along with her consort Aegisthus find themselves enjoying the ancestral wealth of the Atreidae. Clytemnestra, though, in her prayer to Apollo, seems nervous about losing this unjustly acquired wealth:

καὶ μὴ με πλούτου τοῦ παρόντος εἶ τινας  
δόλοισι βουλεύουσιν ἐκβαλεῖν, ἐφῆς,  
ἀλλ' ὧδέ μ' αἰεὶ ζῶσαν ἀβλαβεῖ βίῳ  
δόμους Ἀτρειδῶν σκῆπτρά τ' ἀμφέπειν τάδε,  
φίλοισί τε ξυνοῦσαν οἷς ξύνειμι νῦν  
εὐήμεροῦσαν καὶ τέκνων ὄσων ἐμοὶ  
δύσνοια μὴ πρόσεστιν ἢ λύπη πικρά (648-54)

And do not allow me to be removed me from this present wealth if some contrive this through trickery, but allow me always to live thus in an unharmed lifestyle and to control the house of the Atreidae and this sceptre, living and spending my time with loved ones with whom I am now present and with those of my children who do not hold resentment or bitter grievance against me

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Sophocles' play that is dominated by Electra, his play in which her deep grief for her murdered father and hatred for her mother are given the greatest emphasis, and his play in which her running commentary on the murders nearly makes her an accomplice.'

Clytemnestra is unsettled and ill at ease fearing the possibility that her usurped power, a usurpation she almost openly confesses by stating that the palace and sceptre belong to the Atreidae, i.e. the patrilineal male descendants of Atreus, might be taken back from her.<sup>1</sup> When she wishes to spend time with the children that love her she is excluding Orestes and Electra, who she knows seek to dethrone her. Her prayer and sacrifice to Apollo have in fact been motivated by a terrible dream, the content of which we learn from Chrysothemis:

λόγος τις αὐτήν ἐστὶν εἰσιδεῖν πατρὸς  
τοῦ σοῦ τε κάμοῦ δευτέραν ὀμιλίαν  
ἐλθόντος ἐς φῶς· εἶτα τόνδ' ἐφέστιον  
πῆξαι λαβόντα σκῆπτρον οὐφόρει ποτὲ  
αὐτός, τανῦν δ' Αἴγισθος· ἐκ δὲ τοῦδ' ἄνω  
βλαστεῖν βρύοντα θαλλόν, ᾧ κατάσκιον  
πᾶσαν γενέσθαι τὴν Μυκηναίων χθόνα (417-23)

There is a rumour that she dreamt of a second reunion with your and my father having returned to the light; then this man having taken the sceptre, which once he was wielding but is now held by Aegisthus, struck it in the hearth. From this there sprung up an abundantly leafy branch, by which all the Mycenaean land was overshadowed

The meaning and premonition of the dream seems to be that the rightful owners of the palace will be restored.<sup>2</sup> The sceptre, a symbol of political power, is replanted in the ground and the leafy branch which springs up from it could be seen as representing Agamemnon's family tree, whose influence is to spread over the whole land of Mycenae. The Homeric passage that immediately comes to mind is *Iliad* 2.100-9 where Agamemnon rises to settle the tumultuous army bearing the sceptre which, we are told, has been passed down from Zeus via, among others, Pelops and Atreus. The sceptre is something that is passed down through the generations, an outward symbol perhaps of the notion of an inherited claim of being born to rule. The other relevant passage from the *Iliad* is 1.234-9 where Achilles swears by a staff that the Achaians will one day long for his return. He details that the staff has been stripped down and will never again put forth leaves

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<sup>1</sup> March (2001) 182: 'Orestes too prayed for wealth and power over the land (72), but this was his rightful inheritance.'

<sup>2</sup> Kells (1993), 112 interprets the dream focusing on the sexual ambiguity of the language: Agamemnon struck his sceptre into the earth, and from it sprang a branch, which overshadowed all the land of Argos. The sceptre is the symbol not merely of sovereignty, but also of the potency of Agamemnon. The branch which springs from it is Orestes the offspring of the intercourse of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who is to overthrow Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and establish his own dominion in Mycenae.' Jebb (1898), in typical Victorian fashion, made no comment on the sexual symbolism.

or shoots. This reminds us that the intrinsic property of a staff is to be a dead piece of wood without leaves. Clytemnestra's dream is quite striking and unusual then since from the planted staff a tree grows, representing Agamemnon's family descendants.<sup>1</sup> Although Agamemnon and his descendants have been uprooted from their ancestral seat of power, this dream forecasts that the natural politico-social order will be restored.

The dream of Clytemnestra could be considered synchronistic, it is as though her unconscious mind is aware of the efforts of Orestes to remove her from her ill-acquired position of power. From the very beginning of the play it is made clear that Orestes is on a mission to re-establish control of his ancestral house:

ἀλλ', ὦ πατρώα γῆ θεοί τ' ἐγγώριοι,  
δέξασθέ μ' εὐτυχοῦντα ταῖσδε ταῖς ὁδοῖς,  
σύ τ', ὦ πατρῶον δῶμα· σοῦ γὰρ ἔρχομαι  
δίκη καθαρτῆς πρὸς θεῶν ὠρμημένος·  
καὶ μή μ' ἄτιμον τῆσδ' ἀποστείλητε γῆς,  
ἀλλ' ἀρχέπλουτον καὶ καταστάτην δόμων (67-72)

But, O my fatherland and native gods, receive me faring well on this journey, and you, O paternal home: for I come justly as a purifier of you sent by the gods; do not send me away from this land dishonoured, but in possession of my hereditary wealth and restorer of my house

Orestes uses the adjective *patrōos* to describe both the land of Argos and the palace.<sup>2</sup> The word clearly refers to male family members, to the patriline. It means 'of my fathers', i.e. of my father, his father, then his father etc. Orestes patently regards the house as a patrilineal possession. Even when he describes the wealth he refers to it as 'old money' and thus he sees this wealth as something inextricably linked to the family having been passed down from generation to generation. There is unquestionably an aristocratic drama behind the action of the play since Orestes is presented as a young nobleman seeking to regain control of that which is his due by virtue of being a nobleman. Sophocles if he had wanted to be cynical could have depicted Orestes as a mere lover of money and power. However, he presents Orestes' desire for these two things as being heavily tied up with their family significance. His ambition to re-establish control of the palace does not seem

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<sup>1</sup> March (2001) 167 does well to comment on the unexpectedness of the event: 'The sceptre is the symbol of Agamemnon's lawful sovereignty' (Homer *Il.* 2.100-9). Leafy branch means the live branch, springing against expectation from the dead wood of Agamemnon's sceptre at the palace hearth, symbolises Orestes' return and resumption of the rule (*Il.* 1.234-6).'

<sup>2</sup> Towards the end of the play but before the act of matricide, Orestes once again speaks of the wealth squandered by Aegisthus as being πατρῶαν κτήσιν (1290)

to spring from a hedonistic and avaricious desire to live in luxury but rather to regain the property, a sacred family palace whose floorboards have been trodden by his ancestors.<sup>1</sup>

Electra is similarly motivated to regain possession of her hereditary wealth and rebukes her sister, Chrysothemis, for not being more aggrieved by the situation<sup>2</sup>:

ἢ πάρεστι μὲν στένειν  
πλούτου πατρώου κτήσιν ἐστερημένη,  
πάρεστι δ' ἀλγεῖν ἐς τοσόνδε τοῦ χρόνου  
ἄλεκτρα γηράσκουσιν ἀνυμέναιά τε (959-62)

It is possible for you to grieve deprived of the possession of your hereditary wealth, it is possible for you to moan that until now you are growing old unloved and unmarried

It seems that Sophocles has taken inspiration from the *Odyssey* of Homer in his depiction of Orestes' and Electra's struggle to regain control of their royal home. Telemachus is presented with a similar problem: his father might not be dead but in his long absence the royal palace of Ithaca has been invaded by suitors seeking to win the hand of his mother, Penelope, and take the place of Odysseus, while at the same time ousting Telemachus from any position of power. In the same way Telemachus hopes for the arrival of his father to help him in ridding the palace of suitors, Electra waits for Orestes to help her uproot the usurpers. Avoiding making a comparison overly specific, correlating one character with another, the general point of comparison is that both texts, the *Odyssey* and the *Electra*, depict a royal palace overrun by intruders and the ambition of the heirs of the palace to wrest back control of their rightful possession from these intruders.<sup>3</sup> Curiously, Homer in his description of the events on Ithaca refers to the Oresteia-story almost as a model for Telemachus to emulate (*Od.* 3.193 ff., 3.253 ff. and 4.512 ff., though this

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<sup>1</sup> March (2001) 142: 'This would have been seen, not as mercenary, but as the natural and honourable desire of a son to succeed his father to his rightful inheritance.'

<sup>2</sup> Kells (1973) 169: 'In Attic law, at least, women could not "possess" property unless through the males who were the guardians (κύριοι). But it is perhaps not wise to try to equate conditions in the "Heroic Age" too closely to later historical situations.'

<sup>3</sup> Davidson (1988), 71 argues that Sophocles' *Electra* is modelled on the 'central pattern' of the *Odyssey*: 'Sophocles felt impelled to build his treatment of the revenge of the children of Agamemnon on the platform provided by the revenge of the *Odyssey*. It would not be so much the minor Orestes story that was relevant here, though this does seem to have acted as an important poetic impulse too, but rather the major pattern of Odysseus' revenge and Homer's portrayal of honour and deceit as well as exultation and suffering, especially through Odysseus himself, Telemachus and Penelope.'

last passage does not link Orestes' plight directly with Telemachus').<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the two stories share fundamental similarities. Sophocles appears to have done the inverse of Homer, modelling his drama along the general lines of the *Odyssey*.

Sophocles has made Orestes' and Electra's revenge into a narrative of young aristocrats proving their mettle and confirming their hereditary courage. It is an archetypal narrative, but the fact that the revenge involves matricide has caused many scholars to think otherwise. The killing of the suitors is, to modern and, most likely, ancient tastes, much more palatable than matricide. Nonetheless, Sophocles has chosen to mould this particular myth into a more conventional storyline of young aristocrats coming of age and demonstrating their innate excellence. This is borne out as well as, in part, facilitated by its associations with Homer's *Telemachy*.

### Electra's noble endurance and resistance to the usurpers Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

Electra's refusal to submit to what she deems as illegitimate authority and her willingness to undergo punishment concomitant with such a stance could be said to be connected with her awareness of her noble birth. She could in theory pretend the death of her father never happened and comply with the new rulers, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and be rewarded for her obedience with a quiet and comfortable life. Instead she never ceases to lament the death of her father and constantly places herself in opposition to the new rulers, for which her reward is a miserable, impoverished and endangered existence.<sup>2</sup> In the justifications of her position Electra refers to the concept of nobility as a motivating principle. For example, in a dialogue between her and the chorus Electra justifies her grief thus:

πῶς γὰρ ἦτις εὐγενῆς γυνή,  
πατρῶ' ὀρῶσα πῆματ', οὐ δρώη τάδ' ἄν;  
ἀγὼ κατ' ἧμαρ καὶ κατ' εὐφρόνην ἀεὶ  
θάλλοντα μᾶλλον ἢ καταφθίνονθ' ὀρῶ (257-60)

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<sup>1</sup> D'Arms and Hulley (1946) 211 argue that the Oresteia-story in the *Odyssey* is presented as an exemplum to Telemachus: 'Here Telemachus is frequently compared, directly or indirectly, with Orestes. Each appears, at that stage of the poem, to have a parent to avenge and a patrimony to win. Orestes has comported himself gallantly and has won not only his kingdom but undying fame as well. Telemachus is urged by Athene, by Nestor, and by Menelaus to do the same.'

<sup>2</sup> Whitman (1966), 164 extols the heroism and endurance of Electra. Finglass (2007) 176 focuses more explicitly on Electra's nobility as being responsible for her heroic behaviour: 'Electra justifies her actions by the principle of *noblesse oblige*. Her nobility is inherited from the father whom she is championing. She will later attack Chrysothemis for not living up to her paternity (341-2), and sees Clytemnestra's nobility of birth as belied by her abusive conduct (287n.). At 1081 the chorus will hail her as εὐπατρις.'

How would some noble woman, seeing her father's suffering, not act in this way? By day and by night I see always these sufferings increase rather than diminish.

She sees it as the duty of noble woman to mourn her murdered father. She could have used another adjective, such as 'loyal' or 'dutiful', to describe this code of conduct but she has used the adjective εὐγενής. For Electra her noble breeding imposes upon her the duty to honour her deceased father in spite of any adverse consequences resulting from such behaviour.

When Orestes is thought to be dead and Electra sees no other option but to attempt the act of revenge herself she implores the help of her sister, Chrysothemis, basing her persuasion on the concepts of glory, honour and nobility. There is most certainly a strong Homeric flavour to her speech which can be identified with the heroic code:

φιλεῖ γὰρ πρὸς τὰ χρηστὰ πᾶς ὄρᾱν.  
λόγων γε μὴν εὐκλειαν οὐχ ὄραξ ὄσην  
σαυτῆ τε κάμοι προσβαλεῖς πεισθεῖσ' ἐμοί;  
τίς γάρ ποτ' ἀστῶν ἢ ξένων ἡμᾶς ἰδὼν  
τοιοῖσδ' ἐπαίνοισι οὐχὶ δεξιῶσεται  
ἴδεσθε τῷδε τῷ κασιγνήτῳ, φίλοι,  
ὦ τὸν πατρῶον οἶκον ἐξεσωσάτην,  
ὦ τοῖσιν ἐχθροῖς εὖ βεβηκόσιν ποτὲ  
ψυχῆς ἀφειδήσαντε προὔστητην φόνου·  
τούτῳ φιλεῖν χρή, τῷδε χρή πάντας σέβειν,  
τῷδ' ἔνθ' ἑορταῖς ἔν τε πανδήμῳ πόλει  
τιμᾶν ἅπαντας οὐνεκ' ἀνδρείας χρεῶν.  
τοιαῦτά τοι νῶ πᾶς τις ἐξερεῖ βροτῶν,  
ζῶσαιν θανούσαιν θ' ὥστε μὴ 'κλιπεῖν κλέος (972-85)

For everyone looks up to the brave. Do you not see what glory in the form of words you will attach to yourself and me if you obey me? Which of the citizens or foreigners having seen us will not shower us with such praises, 'See, friends, these two sisters, who saved their paternal home, who against their enemies in a well-established position they had no thought of their life and were authors of death. It is necessary to cherish these two, for everyone to honour them, for everyone in the festivals and in the assembled city to honour them on account of their bravery.' Every one of the people will say such things, with the result that never with us dead or alive will fame leave us.

I have taken the liberty to quote this passage at length because of its rather extraordinary nature. Electra speaks like a Homeric hero before battle urging her

sister on to act valiantly with promises of ever-lasting fame, honour, social prestige and special treatment. The passage could well have been inspired by the exchange between Sarpedon and Glaucus in the *Iliad* (12.310-21) where the former tells the latter that they have a responsibility to fight valiantly in the first rank in order to justify the prestige and privilege they enjoy in their native land of Lycia.<sup>1</sup> Electra's perspective is from the other direction: she proposes to her sister the rewards that will be given to them if they behave bravely. Electra ends her long exhortatory speech with this gnomic statement: ζῆν αἰσχρὸν αἰσχροῦς τοῖς καλῶς πεφυκόσιν 'To those born well it is shameful to live shamefully' (989).<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates that Electra's whole conception of hero[ini]sm is rooted in the idea of noble birth. This last informs her whole ethical outlook. She feels a *noblesse oblige* to live up to her breeding. Her axiomatic statement makes the point of contrasting αἰσχροῦς with καλῶς. In Electra's mind it is incongruous, aberrant and anomalous for someone having started life with a 'fine' birth to then go on to live life in a 'shameful' way: the beginning should have a determining effect on the rest. Although Electra as a character displays a lot of interiority and self-awareness it is clear that her ethic still has aspects pertaining to what Dodds termed 'shame-culture'. Earlier she made evident her concern for the opinion that others, citizens and foreigners, have of her and her sister. Electra cannot bring herself to submit to authority like her sister and forego courageous resistance, partly because she believes this course of action would not win the admiration or approval of others. For Electra nobility is as much an intrinsic, inner quality as it is a matter of perception. Electra maintains that her nobility will only shine forth radiantly to the citizenry if she takes upon herself the dangerous act of vengeance. To sit back and do nothing would be to dull her nobility and make others lose sight of it. At any rate, it is highly suggestive that she ends her heroic speech with reference to the notion of being well-born, leaving it to be understood that this underpins her ethical outlook.

The chorus in the ode which follows give a description of Electra's position also concentrating on the notion of nobility:

τίς ἄν εὐπατρις ὧδε βλάστοι;

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<sup>1</sup> Whitman (1966) 167 believes Tyrtæus is the inspiration behind the ethic of the passage.

<sup>2</sup> Kells (1973) 171: 'It is the watchword of the aristocratic citizens, the εὐγενεῖς, from the class of whom Sophocles' heroes and heroines are drawn. When life becomes unliveable according to his own high standards for the εὐγενής he should end it gloriously, if necessary by suicide.' He is right but the passage does not actually contain the word, instead Sophocles has used the verbal phrase τοῖς καλῶς πεφυκόσιν. It is almost as if Sophocles is deliberately choosing a neutral, objective phrase rather than a class word, which might carry a lot of social baggage, in order to show that good birth has a natural rather than societal basis.



οὐδείς τῶν ἀγαθῶν γὰρ  
ζῶν κακῶς εὐκλειαν αἰσχῦναι θέλει  
νώνυμος, ὦ παῖ παῖ.  
ὥς καὶ σὺ πάγκλαυτον αἰῶνα κοινὸν εἴλου,  
τὸ μὴ καλὸν καθοπλίσασα, δύο φέρειν ἐν ἐνὶ λόγῳ,  
σοφά τ' ἀρίστα τε παῖς κεκληῖσθαι (1081-7)  
Who could grow to be such a daughter of a noble father?

No one of the noble wishes to shame their good reputé living badly and become inglorious, O child. Thus you also have chosen a most lamentable life, having armed against that which is not fine, to carry two things in one words, in order to be called a wise and most best daughter.<sup>1</sup>

εὐπατρις seems an important word in the play.<sup>2</sup> It seems interesting that this word is used instead of εὐγενής. The reason could be that the chorus are buying into Electra's patricentric viewpoint and suggesting, as we saw earlier, that the begetting of children is essentially monoparental. If they were to say εὐηγενής, it would allow for the potential inclusion of the mother's side of the family tree. Furthermore, because Clyemnestra is vilified throughout the play and Agememnon lionised, it would be unfitting to assert that Electra's nobility comes from both parents. The phrase τῶν ἀγαθῶν could well have a class connotation and refers to the social elite who happen also to be 'good', as opposed to being an adjective merely ethical in nature.<sup>3</sup> The chorus are saying that Electra is behaving in keeping with members of her social class, for whom glory even at the cost of suffering is prioritised. The final adjective ἀρίστα as the superlative of ἀγαθός could also be seen as referring Electra's noble birth as well as her excellence. The point to take away from this is that the chorus directly connect Electra's love of glory and hatred of shame to her aristocratic background. The essential quality of being an aristocrat is presented as the refusal to live a life of εὐγενής.

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<sup>1</sup> March (2001) 203: 'Electra here has the same epithet as was applied to Orestes at 162 (by the Chorus) and 859 (by Electra herself); lit. "born of a noble father", here suggesting the father to whom she has been loyal.' Finglass (2007) 433: 'Now that Orestes is thought dead, Electra as it were receives her brother's epithet (162, 858).' Kamerbeek (1971) 146 does not seem to emphasise enough the difference between the two words: 'Just as εὐγενής means 'noble-born' and 'worthy of his noble descent', so here εὐπατρις 'worthy of a noble sire.'

<sup>2</sup> Dugdale (2008) 80: 'The Chorus praise Electra for remaining true to her nature as the daughter of a noble father. They succinctly express the values by which she lives: a desire to avoid disgrace and earn a good reputation.'

<sup>3</sup> Kells (1993) 182: 'Electra's determination in sticking uncompromisingly to her aristocratic values has been referred to at 1081. This theme is now developed. The truly aristocratic person (ὁ ἀγαθός = a variant on εὐπατρις) will prefer to go on living rather than to compromise his aristocratic standards.'

In many ways Sophocles has highlighted Electra's nobility by using Chrysothemis as a foil. But the fact that Chrysothemis, although being of the same parentage, fails to show the same mettle does seem to raise the question on the reliability of heredity. For example, the chorus at the beginning of the play emphasise the blood-relatedness of the two sisters:

ὄρῳ  
τὴν σὴν ὄμαιμον ἐκ πατρὸς ταύτοῦ φύσιν,  
Χρυσόθεμιν, ἔκ τε μητρός (324-6)

I see your blood sister, Chrysothemis, by nature from the same father, and mother

This emphasis on the blood-kindredness of the two sisters makes all the more striking the subsequent different conduct of the two - although having identical ancestry, their characters differ markedly.<sup>1</sup>

As we have seen, Electra actually challenges her sister to live up to her ancestry on several occasions. In her long speech where she implores Chrysothemis to act heroically she urges her to act freely as she was born (ὥσπερ ἐξέφυς) (970). Kamerbeek seems right to understand this phrase as signifying 'in conformity with your birth and lineage'.<sup>2</sup>

What conclusion are we to draw from the fact that two siblings born from the exact same parents can differ so markedly in their character, the one living up to her ancestry, the other falling short of it? It certainly suggests that the transmission of excellence is not absolute knowing of no deviations. In other words, it is not a foregone conclusion that a child born of royal lineage will have a character commensurate with their birth. Good birth certainly seems to make it more likely that the child will be of a superior nature but it seems necessary for this to be proven in the acid test of trying circumstances. Of Agamemnon's three surviving children, two out of the three show a nobility of character, which is sixty-six percent. And as much as there are significant question marks raised over the

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<sup>1</sup> March (2001) 161 cannot seem to put her finger on the import of the passage, and proposes multiple takes: 'This is an emphatic statement of the sisters' close blood relationship (cf. *Ant.* 1, 513), perhaps to mark the closeness of the bond that will be damaged by their quarrel (cf. 1070-3); perhaps to emphasise that Chrysothemis is in exactly the same position as Electra with regard to blood ties, while her reaction to situation will be seen to be very different; perhaps even to draw attention to the striking contrast in the physical appearances of the two women (328-403n.)' Kells (1973) 104, I think, hits the nail on the head with this particular reading: 'For it is the fact that Chrysothemis is of the same father as Electra (therefore how could she be so different?) that is important to the Chorus, not the fact (equally true) that she is of the same mother.'

<sup>2</sup> Kamerbeek (1971) 131.

character of Agamemnon in literary texts, such as the *Iliad* and the *Ajax*, it is quite clear that within this particular play, barring the accusations of Clytemnestra, we are led to conceive of Agamemnon as a great king who achieved a great military victory, thus an individual of supreme eminence.

Although Orestes does not dominate the stage in the same way as Electra, the descriptions of him do not fail to highlight that he is a nobly sired individual. In the very beginning of the play, his name is delayed until after a rather grandiose description of him as the son of Agamemnon:

ὦ τοῦ στρατηγήσαντος ἐν Τροίᾳ ποτὲ  
Ἀγαμέμνονος παῖ,<sup>1</sup>

O son of Agamemnon who was the general at Troy

And the fictitious account of his death narrated by the Tutor seems to also serve to remind the audience of Orestes' status as man of consummate pedigree. In fact, Orestes is presented in a way that the Athenian audience would typically identify as the image of a well-born man, namely, competing at Olympia in the chariot race, an athletic event that only those from wealthy families would be able to afford. More generally, athletics was a distinctive pastime of the social elite in Athens, and although they may have lost some of their military distinction with the hoplite revolution, athletics was an activity that was an important demarcator of their social status.<sup>2</sup>

The Tutor even relays how Orestes was proclaimed victor:

Ἀργεῖος μὲν ἀνακαλούμενος,  
ὄνομα δ' Ὀρέστης, τοῦ τὸ κλεινὸν Ἑλλάδος  
Ἀγαμέμνονος στρατεύμ' ἀγείραντός ποτε. (693-5)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dugdale (2008) 2: 'Orestes, like other sons of famous Greek heroes of the Trojan War (Odysseus' son Telemachus in Homer's *Odyssey* and Achilles' son Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), is to a great extent defined by his parentage, as emphasised by the postponement of his name until line 6.'

<sup>2</sup> Starr (1992) 37: 'Athletics proper became an even more regular part of upper-class life [...] team sports were virtually unknown [...] horse-racing was the exclusive activity of the well-to-do.'

<sup>3</sup> March (2001) 185 seems too sure of herself when she says: 'This is not part of the proclamation, but a general awareness among the spectators that this is the son of *the* Agamemnon. By implication, Orestes is seen as a worthy son of the great general.' Because it is a fictitious story, there was no proclamation but the Tutor does seem to want Clytemnestra to believe that this is how her son was announced, maybe to remind her that she killed one of the most famed men in all Greece. Dugdale (2008) 54: 'The winner of a competition was announced by his name, his country of origin – in Orestes' case Argos, the land in which Mycenae was located – and the name of his father.'

He was proclaimed an Argive, his name being Orestes, and son of Agamemnon who led the famed army of Greece.

Although it was customary for a victor's father to be named, we see here that a brief description of Agamemnon's military accomplishments is added, serving to remind the audience that Orestes is not the son of any old father. Even though this speech is fictitious it is nevertheless suggestive for our reading of the play that attention is once again purposely brought to the illustrious status of Orestes' father, and that Orestes mirrors Agamemnon's military prowess with his athletic ability.<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusion

We have studied how the play explores the question of parental pre-eminence, with the play suggesting that the father takes precedence over the mother, even to the point of suggesting that the mother's input into the creation of the child is inconsequential in terms of the nature of the child. We have then seen that, instead of focusing on the question of matricide and legitimacy, Sophocles shapes the drama around the idea of Electra and Orestes reclaiming their ancestral estate. In this regard, I have argued suggested that Sophocles took inspiration from the story of Telemachus' attempt to reclaim his estate on Ithaca from the suitors. The fact that the issue of matricide is essentially neglected suggests that Sophocles was much more interested in the drama of young aristocratic children, robbed of their ancestral wealth, showing the resolve and courage necessary to overthrow the usurpers of their wealth and reclaiming what is theirs by birth right. As we saw, of the three children, Electra and Orestes showed that they were up to the challenge, while Chrysothemis fell short of the mark. There are many passages highlighting and commenting on Orestes' and Electra's noble character, presenting the strong implication that good ancestry, or, more specifically, good parents, have a high likelihood of engendering good children.

Lastly, it is possible that the play relates to its contemporary political situation. Depending on the date of the play, which is uncertain, the play, if prior to the rule of the Four Hundred, could be understood as a plea to the aristocratic camp of Athenian politics to regain their ancestral power and overthrow the rule of the *dēmos*.<sup>2</sup> We know that Sophocles as one of the ten *probouloi* was responsible for allowing the instauration of the rule of the Four Hundred, a fact which strongly

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<sup>1</sup> Finglass (2007) 309: 'Here Agamemnon's military prowess is balanced by Orestes' sporting triumphs: the son's achievements have not disgraced those of his father.'

<sup>2</sup> Elftmann (1973) 227. Obviously, this interpretation all hinges on the date. Because if the play is posterior to the rule of the Four Hundred, the argument could be made that it is an encouragement for the democracy to overthrow the tyranny of the Four Hundred. However, the aristocratic description of Electra and Orestes would seem out of place in this scenario, even if the Athenians claimed a certain nobility because of their autochthony.

suggests that the playwright was no blind adherent to democracy, but rather sympathetic to aristocratic rule. I do not wish to press this interpretation too hard because it remains in the area of speculation. However, if this was indeed the political agenda behind the play, Sophocles had to veil the message very carefully, since it was obviously a highly inflammatory and subversive suggestion, and therefore it is not surprising that there is a lack of open allusion made to contemporary politics.

## Chapter 8: *Philoctetes*

### Introduction

The *Philoctetes* is particularly concerned with the theme of good breeding, as the high frequency of relevant terminology suggests. In fact, so prominent is the theme that Winnington-Ingram could claim that had this play not survived, it is unlikely that so much emphasis would have been placed on hereditary excellence in Sophocles' oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> It is for this reason that a thorough analysis of the play will be conducted, comprising six sections: 1) how the play engages with sophistic anthropology to find a natural basis for aristocracy; 2) how the *phusis-paideia* antithesis is conceptualised through the figure of Neoptolemus; 3) the father-son relationship and the indispensability of a paternal role model for the fulfilment of latent potential; 4) the two types of heroism embodied by Philoctetes and Odysseus; 5) how the play dramatises the debate of whether nobility is by *phusis* or by *nomos* via Philoctetes having existed in a social vacuum for the last ten years; 6) the play's presentation of the tension between the collective and the individual and how this relates to good birth.

### Sophistic anthropology

Contrary to Aeschylus and Euripides, Sophocles chose to portray Lemnos as an uninhabited, desolate island. The reason for this dramatic innovation seems to lie in his desire to engage with the anthropological accounts hypothesised by fifth-century intellectuals, most notably, the Sophists.<sup>2</sup> These accounts explained man's progression from a crude, animal-like existence to civilised life through chance discoveries and the application of practical intelligence.<sup>3</sup> Of all the accounts it seems that Sophocles grapples most with that posited by Protagoras, known to us through Plato's eponymously named dialogue. Protagoras shares the same belief that it was through discoveries, such as the art of fire-making, and technological intelligence that man improved his lot and protected himself from the hostile natural elements. The novelty of his description lies in its neat two-stage division. The first stage describes man surviving and meeting his needs through practical

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<sup>1</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1980) 309.

<sup>2</sup> Although I refer to the Sophists as a collective, it must be acknowledged that in spite of the similarity of their intellectual approach, there is much doctrinal difference among them. But looking at the *grandes lignes*, I collectivise them in this chapter because of their rational, empirical approach and their general confidence in formal education.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Rose (1992) in his chapter 'Sophokles' *Philoctetes* and the Teachings of the Sophists': A counteroffensive' makes the connection between Philoctetes' abandonment and the sophistic theories of pre-civilisational life. This section of my chapter builds upon this premise. For a discussion of the fifth-century texts providing a rational explanation of man's civilizational progress, see Guthrie (1971) 60 ff.

intelligence (*entechnos sophia*) (*Protagoras* 321d).<sup>1</sup> In the second stage it describes men coming together to form a community as protection from the wild animals (*Protagoras* 322b). However, this second stage is only possible through the political art, without which men would pose more of a threat to themselves than their animal foes. This second stage is understood as representing a social compact where men agree to sacrifice some of their individual wants for the benefit of the collective community, whose existence guarantees the individual's safety.<sup>2</sup> Protagoras' account is distinctive among the other accounts in that he combines a materialist explanation with a humanist one. He argues that the moral qualities of shame and a sense of justice are just as important, if not more important, for the establishment of civilised life as technical knowledge.

It will be argued that Sophocles in his presentation of the *Philoctetes*, while adhering to this basic outline of man's development, recasts it to include a hierarchical rather than egalitarian quality to man's development. We will see that Sophocles replaces this so-called 'social compact' agreed by all men with *philia* felt between distinguished men. The egalitarian aspect of Protagoras' account can be clearly seen in the discussion between Hermes and Zeus concerning the distribution of shame and justice:

‘πότερον ὡς αἱ τέχναι νενέμηνται, οὕτω καὶ ταύτας νείμω; νενέμηνται δὲ ὧδε· εἷς ἔχων ἰατρικὴν πολλοῖς ἰκανὸς ἰδιώταις, καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι δημιουργοί· καὶ δίκην δὴ καὶ αἰδῶ οὕτω θῶ ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἢ ἐπὶ πάντας νείμω;’ ‘ἐπὶ πάντας,’ ἔφη ὁ Ζεὺς, ‘καὶ πάντες μετεχόντων· οὐ γὰρ ἂν γένοιτο πόλεις, εἰ ὀλίγοι αὐτῶν μετέχοιεν ὥσπερ ἄλλων τεχνῶν (*Protagoras* 322c-d)

‘Am I to distribute these things [shame and justice] like the technical skills were distributed? The distribution happened thus: one man possessing the art of medicine was sufficient for the many laymen, and so on for the other craftsmen. Am I thus to place justice and shame among men, or should I distribute them to all?’ ‘To all,’ said Zeus, ‘and let everyone have a share of them, for there would be no cities, if only a few men had a share of them as of the other technical skills’

Protagoras then makes clear that this anthropological story answers Socrates' objection that the Athenians are misled to allow all and sundry to speak about political affairs, notably in the Assembly, contrary to what is practised with the

<sup>1</sup> This is represented in the fable by Prometheus stealing fire-fuelled technical expertise: κλέπτει Ἥφαιστου καὶ Ἀθηνᾶς τὴν ἔντεχνον σοφίαν σὺν πυρὶ (*Plato, Protagoras* 321d)

<sup>2</sup> Rose (1992) 274 believes to see these two stages in sophistic anthropology, more generally, and outlines them thus: ‘[1] the origin of the species and the early struggle to survive in isolation or relative isolation before the invention of the polis; [2] the establishment of a social compact that enabled the development of cities.’

technical arts where experts hold authority (*Protagoras* 332e-323a). Protagoras' account justifies the existence of democracy by arguing that political virtue, far from being elitist, is the possession of every man, that is, the *dēmos*. His account places a lot of faith in mankind's ability to behave with justice and shame assuming that all, if given the required instruction, should be examples of such qualities.

Sophocles' play seems to challenge this aspect of Protagoras' theory. While the description of Philoctetes' survival before the arrival of Neoptolemus could be said to recreate in dramatic form Protagoras' description of man's plight before the full attainment and application of practical wisdom, there is, marking a significant divergence, no presentation of something resembling a social compact agreed by all the characters and, moreover, no suggestion that everyone recognises justice and shame.<sup>1</sup> It is arguably in this context and from this perspective that Philoctetes' condemnatory outbursts against Odysseus and, by extension, the Atreidae are to be understood as well as his friendly disposition towards Neoptolemus. Philoctetes maintains an aristocratic and elitist view towards morality, where the few are good and the many bad, with Agamemnon and his ilk representing pseudo-nobility.

Philoctetes characterises Odysseus as a person devoid of all shame and morality who would stop at nothing to bring to execution his criminal enterprises. In response to Neoptolemus' fictitious story about how he was dispossessed of his father's arms at the hands of Odysseus and the Atreidae, Philoctetes delivers this judgement:

καί μοι προσάδεθ' ὥστε γινώσκειν ὅτι  
ταῦτ' ἐξ Ἀτρειδῶν ἔργα κἀξ Ὀδυσσέως.  
ἔξοιδα γάρ νιν παντὸς ἄν λόγου κακοῦ  
γλώσση θιγόντα καὶ πανουργίας, ἀφ' ἧς  
μηδὲν δίκαιον ἐς τέλος μέλλοι ποεῖν. (*Philoctetes* 405-9)

This resonates with me with the result that I recognise that these are the deeds of the Atreidae and Odysseus. I know that he would touch on every kind of evil speech and wickedness with his tongue, from which he intends to lead to completion nothing just.

Philoctetes would laugh at Protagoras' idea that Hermes distributed shame and justice to all men - in his eyes, Odysseus and the Atreidae are heartless villains. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Rose (1992) 280: 'The first stage is concentrated in the full presentation of Philoktetes' battle to survive on Lemnos in total isolation with the sole aid of his bow and the knowledge of fire making [...] the constant recurring references in the play to beasts, cave dwelling, rocks, weather, the difficulties of obtaining food, the absence of all but the most primitive herbal medicine, and the pathos of isolation keep relentlessly before the audience the most basic conditions of the prosocial struggle to survive.'



for this reason that he can neither envisage nor bring himself to form any bond of friendship with them.

The situation is different with Neoptolemus. In the beginning, Philoctetes feels an immediate attachment and affection towards Neoptolemus based on his being the son of Achilles as well as their shared mistreatment, unknown as a lie to the son of Poias, by the Greek army. This friendship built on an unstable foundation comes to a crashing halt when Neoptolemus reveals the truth to Philoctetes (915-6).<sup>1</sup> However, the end of the play depicts a genuine friendship between the two when Neoptolemus, experiencing feelings of remorse at his deceitful manipulation of Philoctetes, turns his back on his allegiance to Odysseus and returns the bow to its rightful owner (1291-2). Philoctetes not only sees this as a sure token of Neoptolemus' trustworthiness and loyalty but also as confirmation of the young man's noble nature:

τὴν φύσιν δ' ἔδειξας, ὦ τέκνον,  
ἐξ ἧς ἔβλαστες, οὐχὶ Σισύφου πατρός,  
ἀλλ' ἐξ Ἀχιλλέως, ὃς μετὰ ζώντων ὄτ' ἦν  
ἦκου' ἄριστα, νῦν δὲ τῶν τεθνηκότων (1310-13)

You have shown your nature, child, from which you were sprung, not from a father such as Sisyphus, but from Achilles, who among the living had the greatest reputation, and now equally among the dead.

The reference to Sisyphus is clearly an insult directed against Odysseus who in some accounts was considered to be the son of this mythic character. Philoctetes is suggesting that Odysseus in the same position as Neoptolemus, in conformity with his breeding, would have unhesitatingly stolen the bow. Why does Philoctetes believe that Neoptolemus has revealed himself to be the true son of Achilles through this act of returning the bow?<sup>2</sup> To understand the statement, it is important not to neglect the most prominent and celebrated side of Achilles, his martial prowess, because Philoctetes ignores this side to prioritise in his evaluation of Achilles his honesty, decency and high regard for friendship. The most obvious example from the *Iliad* of Achilles' capacity for intense friendship is witnessed in his desire for revenge for his great friend, Patroclus. Promises of lavish wealth and

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<sup>1</sup> Biancalana (2005) 167 says that the friendship of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus is based on a mutual hatred of the Greek generals, and so the friendship is identifiable with 'class hatred'. I do not agree with this interpretation - Neoptolemus has no cause to hate the Greek generals, his expressed hatred is fictitious. Based on the play itself, it does feel as though there is a depth of genuine feeling and empathy between the two characters, such that it deserves, without qualification, to be called friendship.

<sup>2</sup> Kamerbeek (1980) 174: 'Because the φύσις is Achilles' as well as Neoptolemus' τὴν φύσιν... ἐξ ἧς can be said instead of τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς φύσιν ἐξ οὔ.'

glorious fame were not enough to draw the dishonoured Achilles back into the fray of battle, the motive of honouring a friend alone could prove enough. Only the need to honour a friend was sufficient for him to forget the dishonour done to him. In Philoctetes' eyes, Neoptolemus in valuing their friendship over any hope of good reputation among the Greek army has shown himself to abide by the same value system as his father, for whom friendship was of primary importance.

The *Philoctetes* appears to demonstrate that close companionship is the prerogative of the well-born.<sup>1</sup> Neoptolemus' breeding gives Philoctetes confidence that the young man has a high capacity for forming strong relationships.<sup>2</sup> Even during the first stage of the relationship, based on false pretences, Philoctetes assumes that Neoptolemus' kindness towards him is in keeping with his father's character:

ἀλλ' οὐδὲν ἔξω τοῦ φυτεύσαντος σύ γε  
δραῖς οὐδὲ φωνεῖς, ἐσθλὸν ἄνδρ' ἐπωφελῶν (904-5)

But you do and say nothing out of keeping with him having fathered you by helping a good man

Although Philoctetes could base his assessment of Neoptolemus' character on his manner and behaviour alone, judging him for who he is, it is clear that knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Konstan (1997) 1: 'Friendship is thus what anthropologists call an achieved rather than an ascribed relationship, the latter being based on status whereas the former is in principle independent of a prior formal connection such as kinship or ethnicity.' In other words, friendship is not a natural relationship but one that needs to be cultivated, with some men having a much greater capacity for friendship than others.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the motif of friendship runs through the *Philoctetes*. The bow, such an important possession, is symbolic of friendship. Philoctetes was given the bow by Heracles for lighting his funeral pyre and Neoptolemus receives it from Philoctetes as a reward for his virtue (ἀρετῆς ἕκαστι) (669).

This conception of *aretē* places much more emphasis on cooperation rather than on competition, the more traditional connection. Here, excellence is about helping your fellow man rather than fighting to be superior to your peers. The excellence which allows Neoptolemus to handle the bow is presented implicitly as hereditary, rather than just personal. Biancalana (2005) 167 points out how the bow is able to symbolise the transmission of hereditary excellence:

The significance of the bow as more than a superior bow because it has descended from Athena to Heracles to Philoctetes is a mystification of aristocratic genealogy and power, and a claim to such power because of the mystification. Many noble families claimed descent from Heracles. Their mythological descent helped them oppose both kings and lower classes and justified their successful bid for power.

The bow in this way resembles the sceptre of Agamemnon, passed down from Zeus (*Iliad* 2.102 ff.), but the bow prioritises actual excellence, whereas the sceptre can be reduced to political authority, not necessarily coupled with excellence, as the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon reveals.

of Neoptolemus' parentage strongly informs his judgement. He assumes that Neoptolemus' wish to help another man of good character is connected with him being the son of Achilles.<sup>1</sup>

In relation to the anthropological account framing the play, the friendship between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, two men of high standing and good birth, appears to stand in for the egalitarian social compact agreed by all, with the corollary that shame, justice and friendship belong to the few rather than to all. More precisely, the dramatisation seems to offer the hypothesis that in the early stages of man's development, the act of coming together to form socio-political groups was initiated by men of superior feeling and humanity.<sup>2</sup> These men then naturally formed a prototypical aristocracy because of the principle of strength in number. If in the situation of men living a scattered life, a few men came together forming a strong alliance and friendship it is natural that they would hold power over the other men who were still leading isolated lives. This could be seen as the implicit meaning of Hercules' lion simile<sup>3</sup> which, when applied to the anthropological story, could be interpreted as representing the superior strength and power to be obtained by those men able to form iron bonds of friendship. In this way, it could be argued that the *Philoctetes* co-opts sophistic anthropology turning it on its head so as to give to aristocracy a natural basis. Where Protagoras presents his mythos to show that the Athenian political system is in line with man's early history, the *Philoctetes* seeks to find a same level of anthropological justification but comes to almost the opposite conclusion, affirming a hierarchised society on the basis that aristocratic networking underpinned man's civic development instead of communistic egalitarianism.

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<sup>1</sup> Most commentators have been sensitive to Philoctetes understanding Neoptolemus' behaviour to be in line with the pattern set by his father. Jebb (1898) 147: 'Nothing that deviates from his example. The father (Achilles) is the παράδειγμα which regulates the son's conduct. Thus the use of ἔξω is justified: it expresses a departure from the lines of the pattern.' Webster (1970) 125: 'φύσιν the standards of breed, cf. 79, 87f. τοῦ φυτεῦσαντος "your father who gave you this φύσις". ἔξω "outside your father" is a simple brachylogy for "outside what would have been suitable (προσεικότα) for your father". Cf. above 597, 682.' Kamerbeek (1980) 130. The translation in L.-Sc. "nothing unlike thy sire" is correct, and so is Mazon's 'rien qui soit indigne de ton pere'.

<sup>2</sup> Rose (1992) 321 argues to the same effect: 'Yet the bond established between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes is neither explicitly educational nor explicitly a social compact; it is rigorously cast in the mould of traditional heroic, aristocratic male bonding.'

<sup>3</sup> ἀλλ' ὡς λέοντες συννόμῳ φυλάσσετον  
οὔτος σὲ καὶ σὺ τόνδ' (1436-7)

But like lions of the same pride this man must guard you and you this man

### *Paideia-phasis*

The *Philoctetes* explores the educational antithesis highly debated in the fifth century of *phasis-paideia* through the figure of Neoptolemus.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Sophists are known for creating stories of young, noble men being instructed in their *paideia*, for example, Prodicus' Choice of Heracles and Hippias' dialogue between Nestor and Neoptolemus.<sup>2</sup> Sophocles seems to be engaging with this tradition, but where the Sophists downplayed the importance of inherited nature, the dramatist emphasises it.

The traditional myth was that Odysseus and Diomedes went to bring back Philoctetes, and so it is reasonable to suppose that this change to the myth, substituting Neoptolemus for Diomedes, was made by Sophocles because of the possibilities of engagement with educational theories that this young character would facilitate.<sup>3</sup> To give a simplified outline of the debate, the proponents of *phasis*, represented typically by the traditional aristocrats<sup>4</sup>, believed that one's nature, inherited from one's forbears, was the prerequisite for excellence with the complement of association with good men, whereby good behaviour would rub off via a process of osmosis, as it were, while the proponents of *paideia*, typically the Sophists, maintained that formal education, complemented by natural capacity rather than inherited nature, was essential for excellence.<sup>5</sup> In the play these two positions are represented by Philoctetes and Odysseus respectively.

Because Philoctetes' and Odysseus' respective views of excellence are radically different, it would be inappropriate to see a competition between these two characters hinging on who can most effectively produce excellence in Neoptolemus. In order to compete, you have to be seeking after the same thing, but, the two have wildly different views of excellence. Therefore, the metric of focusing on which character has a more long-lasting effect on Philoctetes allows for a better assessment: do the callings of Philoctetes to follow one's nature affect and shape

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<sup>1</sup> Elftmann (1973) 239: 'It is not an exaggeration to say that while the education of Neoptolemus may not be the main story of *Philoctetes*, it is a process that is carried forward through much of the play, and that there is a corresponding vocabulary of words of "teaching" and "learning" employed to describe this process throughout the work.'

<sup>2</sup> Rose (1992) 311: 'The use of stories about the offspring of famous noble heroes to illustrate educational doctrines seems a particular feature of sophistic training. Rather than attacking the pretensions of the aristocrats, they chose to set them in a new context that stressed the need for the noble *phasis* to be supplemented by *paideia*.'

<sup>3</sup> Whitby (1996) 35 highlights Sophocles' originality here and compares it with the *Odyssey*: 'Just as the initial Telemachy is widely believed to have been Homer's original contribution to the story of Odysseus [...] so the introduction of Neoptolemus is Sophocles' original contribution to the tale of Philoctetes.'

<sup>4</sup> These aristocratic beliefs have been outlined in the Homer, Theognis and Pindar chapters.

<sup>5</sup> See Roisman (2055) 89 for a similarly conceived outline of the debate.

Neoptolemus more than Odysseus' teachings to adopt and follow clever techniques? In conceptual terms, is *nomos* able to fundamentally alter and modify *phusis*, or is *phusis* so determining that it is essentially impervious to any outside influences of *nomos*? What carries more weight in defining a person's character, *phusis* or *nomos*?

Certain key words employed by Odysseus make clear his position. In the prologue when he is attempting to persuade Neoptolemus to use trickery to bring Philoctetes back to Troy he says:

ἔξοιδα, παῖ, φύσει σε μὴ πεφυκότα  
τοιαῦτα φωνεῖν μηδὲ τεχνᾶσθαι κακά (*Philoctetes* 79-80)

I know, child, that you are disposed by nature neither to say nor contrive such evil acts.

Here he is contrasting the discrepancy between Neoptolemus' natural character (*phusis*) and the art (*technē*) he is asking him to practise.<sup>1</sup> Odysseus is essentially, although implicitly, suggesting that Neoptolemus, regardless of his natural predispositions, should let himself be fashioned by his teachings, even if they are antithetical to his nature. The unease this provokes in Neoptolemus is manifest in the young man's reaction:

ἔφυν γὰρ οὐδὲν ἐκ τέχνης πράσσειν κακῆς,  
οὔτ' αὐτὸς οὔθ', ὥς φασιν, οὐκ φύσας ἐμέ (88-9)

It is not my nature to do anything by evil art, nor he, as they say, who begat me

Neoptolemus makes it clear that what Odysseus is recommending is contrary to his nature. There is also provided an explanation of where one's *phusis* come from. It is not by chance that the verb *ekphuw* with its *phu-* stem is used in relation to Achilles' role as father. The passage is making the connection, through the use of two verbs sharing the *phu-* stem, between one's nature and one's parentage.<sup>2</sup> One's nature is not, according to this model, the artefact of arbitrary chance but the

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<sup>1</sup> In relation to the passage Jebb (1898) 20 stresses that the φύσει is not superfluous: 'φύσει is excusably added to πεφυκότα, since the force of the latter had become weakened by usage (πεφυκένοι oft. meaning little more than εἶναι): as here, πεφυκότα...τεχνᾶσθαι (without φύσει) would not necessarily mean more than "apt to contrive,"-whether the aptitude was innate, or acquired.' Webster (1970) 74 highlights the connection between nature and begetting: 'φύσις in Sophocles is generally tied to φύειν 'beget' rather than φύεσθαι 'be born, grow'. Neoptolemus' essential nature is derived from Achilles, cf. 87-8.'

<sup>2</sup> Schein (2003) 136 correctly detects this assumption on the part of Neoptolemus: 'Ne. is proud of his inherited nature, which, he assumes, has an inborn essence that cannot be brought by instrumentalist indoctrination to "act through evil contrivance".'

product of one's father. The father sows a seed, and this seed constituting the offspring's nature is intrinsically related to the father from whom it was sown.

Philoctetes' position can be summed up in the aphoristic command he enjoins upon Neoptolemus after the revelation of the trickery wrought against him, where he urges the young man to live true to his nature:

ἀλλὰ νῦν ἔτ' ἐν σαυτῷ γενοῦ<sup>1</sup> (950)

Become yourself again even now

Neoptolemus is torn between these conflicting older figures, representing respectively *technē* and *phusis*. The action of the play explores this clash of forces. There seem to be three stages; (1) Neoptolemus persuaded by Odysseus' novel teachings; (2) a dilemma where Neoptolemus is torn between obeying Odysseus and siding with Philoctetes; (3) Neoptolemus rejecting Odysseus and promising Philoctetes his wholesale support. In the beginning he goes along with Odysseus' directions, won over by his promises of being famed as clever and brave. He then proceeds to build a connection with Philoctetes based on a fictitious story and tricking him into wanting to board the ship. However, after witnessing Philoctetes endure an onset of extreme pain and then wake from sleep, he feels impelled to level with Philoctetes. His inner torment is witnessed in the statement: οὐκ οἶδ' ὅποι χρῆ τᾶπορον τρέπειν ἔπος, 'I do not know where it is necessary to turn the pathless word' (897). He then further articulates his internal anguish:

ἅπαντα δυσχέρεια, τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν  
ὅταν λιπὼν τις δρᾷ τὰ μὴ προσεϊκότα. (901-2)

All things are hard to bear, whenever someone having abandoned his nature does unseemly things.

In this second stage, Neoptolemus, after having followed Odysseus' teachings, has now reached a point where the doubtful murmurings of his inner nature can no longer be ignored. He is acutely aware of the moral dilemma he finds himself in between obedience to Odysseus and staying true to himself. This ambivalence is reflected in his action where, although confessing the truth to Philoctetes, he persists in maintaining that Philoctetes must come to Troy, sharing the same objective as Odysseus but differing in approach, opting for persuasion instead of deceit. The third stage is realised when Neoptolemus returns the bow to Philoctetes. The stichomythic exchange between Odysseus and Neoptolemus makes clear that the young man has turned his back on his teaching and returned

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<sup>1</sup> Webster (1970) 127: 'ἐν σαυτῷ "in your power" like ἐντὸς ἑαυτῷ, i.e. become yourself again even now'. Schein (2003) 265: 'Phil. returns to the second person, urging Ne. to "become in yourself (again)", i.e. to return to your φύσις from which you have departed.'

to his natural tendencies. Neoptolemus, just like his father who hated like the gates of hell the man who thinks one thing but says another (*Il.* 9.312-3), rejects completely Odysseus' deceitful ways, expressing his regret at trying them out: ἀπάταισιν αἰσχροῖς ἄνδρα καὶ δόλοισι ἐλών, 'Having taken a man by shameful deceit and tricks' (1227). After this, Neoptolemus sides with Philoctetes even to the point of promising to take him back to his native land in spite of the anger this would provoke among the Greek army.

Curiously, it seems that Philoctetes, notwithstanding the fact that he has a dog in the fight and that his knowledge of the course of events as well as the motives behind them is imperfect, does seem to provide an insightful and balanced commentary on how Neoptolemus bobs and sways under the effect of the competing forces.

λαβὼν  
πρόβλημα σαυτοῦ παῖδα τόνδ' ἀγνώτ' ἐμοί,  
ἀνάξιον μὲν σοῦ, κατάξιον δ' ἐμοῦ,  
ὃς οὐδὲν ἦδει πλὴν τὸ προσταχθὲν ποεῖν,  
δῆλος δὲ καὶ νῦν ἐστὶν ἀλγεινῶς φέρων  
οἷς τ' αὐτὸς ἐξήμαρτεν οἷς τ' ἐγὼ 'παθον.  
ἀλλ' ἢ κακὴ σὴ διὰ μυχῶν βλέπουσ' ἀεὶ  
ψυχὴ νιν ἀφυῆ τ' ὄντα κού θέλονθ' ὅμως  
εὔπρουδίδαξεν ἐν κακοῖσι εἶναι σοφόν. (1007-1015)

Having taken as a screen this child, unknown to me, unworthy of you, but worthy of me, who knew nothing except to do what he was ordered, and it is now clear that he feels pain at his mistakes and my suffering. But your evil spirit with eyes always set upon darkness taught him well, although being unsuited by nature and not willing, to be clever among evil things.

In this passage, Philoctetes seems to summarise the action of the first two stages.<sup>1</sup> As much as Philoctetes invokes the memory of Achilles and promotes the principle of being true to one's *phusis*, it is clear that he is aware of the susceptibility of a good nature being perverted by bad teaching. He acknowledges that Odysseus has been successful in moulding Neoptolemus to the aims of his tuition. He realises that Neoptolemus' youthful naivety was prey to Odysseus' predatory ensnarement. As much as the play and the words of Philoctetes affirm the principle of *phusis*, they

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<sup>1</sup> At the returning of the bow, Philoctetes also verbalises the third stage, as we have seen, namely, the returning of the bow represents Neoptolemus confirming his nature as the son of Achilles (1310-3).

also seem to create doubt and put a question mark over the solidity of *phusis*.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Pindar who has an unshakable confidence in this principle of *phusis*, this play shows the conflict between *nomos* and *phusis* is a hard-fought war.<sup>2</sup> Neoptolemus' return to his true self is in many ways the result of his association with Philoctetes, rather than an internally driven necessity. Without Philoctetes as a model of honest and respectful behaviour one gets the feeling that Neoptolemus might have been irrevocably converted to Odysseus' way of operating.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the play shows the importance of nurture in maintaining nature.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the formal teaching of the Sophists, the nurture provided by Philoctetes represents the traditional aristocratic association between an older man and a youth. Philoctetes could be said to play the same role as Phoenix did to Achilles.

### Father-son relationship

The *Philoctetes* engages with the phenomenon of the father-son relationship via the figure of Neoptolemus. The oddity of the situation is that Neoptolemus has never met his father, who sailed to and died at Troy before he was born. The play depicts Neoptolemus attempting to form an idea of his biological father through the descriptions of him by Odysseus and, more importantly, Philoctetes.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the idea of the non-biological father-figure, one might even say, foster-father, is explored through Philoctetes' paternal attitude towards Neoptolemus. The father-son relationship being the essential component of the patriline, which in structure is a chain formed of father-son links, is naturally a very important aspect of the theme of noble birth, especially because excellence, if it is transmissible, is thought to pass via this route.

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<sup>1</sup> Rose (1992) 313 is left with the same impression: 'Despite all the Sophoklean emphasis on Neoptolemus' inherited nature, Sophokles has controlled the action in such a way as to dramatise the educational dictum of Antiphon: "One must necessarily become, with respect to character [τους τροπους], of the same sort as the person with whom one spends the greatest part of the day" (D-K 87 B 62).'

<sup>2</sup> Rose (2003) 314 is of the same belief: 'Sophokles in the *Philoctetes* is far nearer to Plato's sense (particularly in the *Republic*) of profound anxiety for the fate of the well-born in the corrupting environment than to Pindar's confident affirmation that "thanks to birth the noble temper shines forth in sons from their father" (*Py.* 8.44-45).'

<sup>3</sup> Roisman (2005) 103 also detects the play's lack of faith in *phusis* with its 'reservations about the notion that noble lineage guarantees a noble *phusis*. Instead, by showing Neoptolemus as a nobly born youth who succumbs to the demoralisation and corruption of his environment, it may even undercut the entire idea that noble lineage predisposes an individual to noble conduct.'

<sup>4</sup> Blundell (1988) 147 adopts an Aristotelean reading of the play suggesting that practice actualises potential.

<sup>5</sup> Elftmann (1973) 238: 'There was no one left behind by Achilles to coach and guide the boy in his father's ways: Neoptolemus must forage on his own for whatever information about his father that he can come by, and must base his attempts to match his father's qualities upon the stories that he happens to hear.'



Neoptolemus mentions to Philoctetes that he felt a great urge to see his father's corpse before burial:

ταῦτ', ὦ ξέν', οὕτως ἐννέποντες οὐ πολὺν  
χρόνον μ' ἐπέσχον μή με ναυστολεῖν ταχύ,  
μάλιστα μὲν δὴ τοῦ θανόντος ἰμέρω,  
ὅπως ἴδοιμ' ἄθαπτον· οὐ γὰρ εἰδόμην (348-51)

Saying these things, stranger, they did not hold me for much time from quickly sailing, especially because I yearned to see my dead father before he was buried: for I had not seen him.

Admittedly this statement occurs in the 'fictitious' speech and so one might question whether it represents the true expression of Neoptolemus' emotional motivation for going to Troy. However, the best lie is the one which deviates the least from the truth, making itself least prone to inconsistency, and therefore one might suppose that this element of the story is authentically narrated. Moreover, it is natural, based on standard human emotional responses, that Neoptolemus wished to see in the flesh the man who had fathered him. Why exactly would Neoptolemus feel the need to see his dead father? The answer to this question seems to be answered to some extent in the lines which closely follow:

καί μ' εὐθύς ἐν κύκλῳ στρατὸς  
ἐκβάντα πᾶς ἠσπάζετ', ὀμνύντες βλέπειν  
τὸν οὐκέτ' ὄντα ζῶντ' Ἀχιλλέα πάλιν (356-8)

And with me having disembarked the whole army grouped round in a circle to welcome me, swearing to see alive again Achilles, who was no longer

Neoptolemus was presumably intrigued to see whether he resembled his father in appearance. The reaction of the Greek army suggests the resemblance to indeed be uncanny. Neoptolemus cannot be exaggerating here since Philoctetes knows well what Achilles looked like and so a lie in this regard would not wash. What conception of the father-son relationship lies behind seeing the son as the living replacement of the dead father?<sup>1</sup> The implication seems to be that the father's spirit lives on in the son. The corollary of the visible resemblance is that there must be some deeper resemblance at the level of personality and spirit. Neoptolemus' resemblance is not presented, to use a modern analogy, as that of a look-alike to a famous person, but as a suggestion that Achilles' shade has almost risen from the

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<sup>1</sup> The same idea is found in a tragic fragment (adesp. 245): οὐ παῖς Ἀχιλλέως ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνος αὐτὸς εἶ, perhaps from Sophocles' *Skyrioi*. Also Seneca's *Phaedra* (644) claims to see Theseus alive again at the sight of Hippolytus.

dead and lives on in the form of his son. The mentality of this conception seems to be of a quasi-mystical nature.

Thanks to his expedition to Troy Neoptolemus is informed about the physical appearance of his father. But not having grown up with him he must have an incomplete and silhouetted notion of what his father was like as a person. At the start of the play it is clear that he has been able to form a rough idea of his father's personality based on what others have said of him:

ἔφυν γὰρ οὐδὲν ἐκ τέχνης πράσσειν κακῆς,  
οὔτ' αὐτὸς οὔθ', ὡς φασιν, οὐκφύσας ἐμέ.  
ἀλλ' εἴμ' ἐτοῖμος πρὸς βίαν τὸν ἄνδρ' ἄγειν  
καὶ μὴ δόλοισιν (88-91)

I am of such a nature as to do nothing from evil art, nor he, as they say, who begat me. But I am ready to take this man by force but not by trickery.

The 'as they say' makes it clear that his knowledge of his father's character is second-hand.<sup>1</sup> Between the heroism of force and trickery Neoptolemus is well aware that his father was on the side of the former.<sup>2</sup> In the play it is not so much the case that Philoctetes fleshes out Neoptolemus' knowledge of his father (in fact he gives almost no detailed description of him), but rather, Philoctetes, standing in the role of Achilles as a paternal figure and representing his traditional form of heroism, provides Neoptolemus with a living role model in line with whom he can calibrate his behaviour and moral compass.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that the play dramatises the importance of a father-figure for the maturation of a young man. A son forms his understanding of what it entails to be a man from association with and imitation of his father. The father is also very important as a figure of authority, issuing enjoinders and prohibitions of what to do and not to do. Without a father-figure, and therefore without the concomitant moral inculcation, the son could find himself in a state of moral confusion not knowing clearly right from wrong and susceptible to corrupting influences.

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<sup>1</sup> Webster (1970) 75: 'This is the statement of the obligations of breed. Neoptolemus was born on the day that Achilles left Skyros for the Trojan War, so that he only knows of his father at second hand, ὡς φασιν.'

<sup>2</sup> Fragment 79 from Sophocles' lost play, *The Sons of Aleus*, contains a similar sentiment: κακὸν τὸ κεύθειν κοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρὸς εὐγενοῦς  
Concealment is bad and not the action of a noble man

This association of transparency and nobility, being not unique to *Philoctetes*, but found elsewhere might suggest that Sophocles did indeed believe in this pairing.

<sup>3</sup> Elftmann (1973) 243: 'As foster father, Philoctetes presents himself as a model for Neoptolemus to imitate, and assumes the position of a living extension of Achilles, the last surviving member of an otherwise extinct generation of heroes cast in the mold of Achilles.'

Neoptolemus' situation appears to instantiate these abstract ideas. Had he grown up with his father, Achilles, being constantly reminded that the honest brutality of force was preferable to cowardly trickery and never seeing his father compromise himself in an act of duplicity, Odysseus would be very unlikely to convert Philoctetes with his solidified morality over to his tricksome way of operating. But as it stands at the beginning of the play, Neoptolemus, wholly lacking a father-figure, falls prey to the enchantments of Odysseus. It is only through his association with Philoctetes, who, as it happens, is of an Achillean temperament, that Neoptolemus' sense of morality becomes assured.

### Two different types of heroism

The play presents Philoctetes as being cut from the same heroic cloth as Achilles, a heroism in direct opposition to what Odysseus stands for, and so Neoptolemus, in spending time with Philoctetes, is able to witness a living model of his father's brand of heroism, thus building his immunity to and distaste for Odysseus' teachings. It is important that we, firstly, demonstrate the similarity between Achilles and Philoctetes, and then once this is achieved, illustrate the contrast between these two figures and Odysseus.<sup>1</sup>

Sophocles presents Philoctetes as having been a close friend of Achilles. To Neoptolemus' introduction of himself as the son of Achilles, Philoctetes exclaims: ὦ φίλτάτου παῖ πατρός, 'O son of a most dear father' (242). And Philoctetes' distress at the news of Achilles' death (332-3, 336-8) suggests that the two were close friends.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of character similarity, both Achilles and Philoctetes are hot-tempered figures prone to strong feelings of anger. They both refuse to forgive a dishonour done to them and no offer of compensation from the party that injured them can entice them to re-join the fight at Troy: Agamemnon's theft of Briseis causes Achilles to withdraw stubbornly, while Philoctetes after being abandoned on the

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<sup>1</sup> As Knox (1964) 121 comments: 'The contrasted figures of Odysseus and Achilles had become, for the fifth-century Athenians, mythical and literary prototypes of two entirely different worlds of thought and feeling. The aristocratic viewpoint in Greek literature (in Pindar especially, who has no use for Odysseus) is Achillean, an ideal of warlike generosity, of rigid standards of honour, of insistence on τιμή, the respect of the world – all this combined with the asceticism and physical beauty of the athlete and his all-too-frequent intellectual limitations. The democratic viewpoint (typically that of a seafaring and commercial community) is Odyssean – an ideal of versatility, adaptability, diplomatic skill, and intellectual curiosity, insisting on success combined with glory rather than sacrificed for it.'

<sup>2</sup> Roisman 2005, 58: 'Sophocles brings Achilles into the play as Philoctetes' friend and model. Philoctetes is delighted to learn that Neoptolemus is Achilles' son (242-4), and trusts the young man largely on that account. He is startled and grieved to learn that Achilles has died.'

island of Lemnos by the Greek leaders becomes completely averse to participating in the campaign again. Both can be strongly motivated by fame and glory. For example, Achilles chose a short life of great renown rather than a long, uneventful and unremembered life. Equally, Philoctetes demonstrates his concern with fame when he is disappointed that Neoptolemus claims never to have heard of his name:

ὦ πόλλ' ἐγὼ μοχθηρός, ὦ πικρὸς θεοῖς,  
οὔ μιν κληδὼν ὧδ' ἔχοντος οἴκαδε  
μηδ' Ἑλλάδος γῆς μηδαμοῦ διήλθέ που (254-6)

O me terribly wretched, hateful to the gods, the fame of whom being in such a state has not reach home nor anywhere in the Greek land

The contrast between Achilles and Philoctetes, on the one hand, and Odysseus, on the other, can be conceptualised in the abstract dichotomies: individualism and collectivism, speech and action, honesty and deception.<sup>1</sup> Both Philoctetes and Achilles refuse to act as subordinates to the Greek leaders which would involve a sacrifice of their personal interest and pride, whereas Odysseus constantly acts as an enforcement officer of the leaders' orders. Odysseus in both the *Iliad* and *Philoctetes* prides himself on his eloquence as a speaker, whereas Philoctetes and Achilles are men of action. The two heroes have an aversion to lying and make it a point of principle to speak and act with honest intentions, whereas Odysseus is a wily character who is happy to invent lies to further his objectives.

That these contrasting forms of heroism are a prominent feature of the play is demonstrated by the discussion between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes listing the fate of the 'good' and the 'bad' members of the Greek army (410-52).<sup>2</sup> It is clear that Philoctetes divides the heroes into two categories, the one representing an old-fashioned, upright, courageous heroism and the other a wily and unprincipled pragmatism. In the first he classes Achilles, Ajax, Patroclus and Antilochus, in the other he places Odysseus, the sons of Atreus, Diomedes and Thersites.

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<sup>1</sup> Roisman 2005, 60: 'The Homeric dichotomies – between public and private motives and obligations, action and speech, truth and falsehood – are salient motifs in Sophocles' play and inform its characterisation and structure.'

<sup>2</sup> Taplin 2015, 143: 'One of the central features of the play: the young man's dilemma between two 'role-models' of behaviour. This is explicitly set out as the choice between two kinds of hero. Philoctetes is firmly associated with Achilles, whom he always praises. And there is also a sort of 'roll-call' at 410 ff. of others who share the same kind of old-fashioned integrity and open courage: Aias, Patroclus, and Antilochus, all of them now dead at Troy. Odysseus is, of course, the exemplar of the other, new sort of hero, the pragmatic strategist, and he is associated in the same scene with Sons of Atreus, Diomedes, and Thersites.'

In a condemning blow to Odysseus' worth, Philoctetes inquires of Thersites describing but not naming him and Neoptolemus assumes that he is speaking of Odysseus:

Φι. ξυμμαρτυρῶ σοι· καὶ κατ' αὐτὸ τοῦτό γε  
ἀναξίου μὲν φωτὸς ἐξερήσομαι,  
γλώσση δὲ δεινοῦ καὶ σοφοῦ, τί νῦν κυρεῖ.

Νε. ποίου δὲ τούτου πλήν γ' Ὀδυσσέως ἐρεῖς;

Φι. οὐ τοῦτον εἶπον, ἀλλὰ Θερσίτης τις ἦν (438-42)

Phi. I bear witness with you: and accordingly I will speak of a worthless man, clever with his tongue and cunning, in what state is he?

Ne. Of whom are you speaking except Odysseus?

Phi. No I did not mean this man, but there was a Thersites

Sophocles overturns the tradition of the *Iliad* where Homer had made Odysseus and Thersites figures of enmity rather than similarity. Where Homer makes it abundantly clear that Odysseus is Thersites' social superior, this passage presents the two as being moral equivalents and therefore as bad as each other. Odysseus in the play is downgraded to being a troublesome chattering knave in the mould of Thersites. Looking at the big picture, Homer shows an awareness that there are two types of heroism without showing a preference for one or the other, whereas Sophocles in this play seems to accept the validity of only one of them, the Achillean one.

Philoctetes ends the roll-call with this statement:

ἔμελλ'· ἐπεὶ οὐδέν πω κακόν γ' ἀπώλετο,  
ἀλλ' εὔ περιστέλλουσιν αὐτὰ δαίμονες,  
καὶ πως τὰ μὲν πανοῦργα καὶ παλιντριβῆ  
χαίρουσ' ἀναστρέφοντες ἐξ' Αἴδου, τὰ δὲ  
δίκαια καὶ τὰ χρήστ' ἀποστέλλουσ' ἀεὶ (446-50)

He [Thersites] must still be alive: since nothing base ever dies, but always the gods protect it well, and they rejoice turning the knavish and crafty away from death, but the just and good they always send off there

Earlier Neoptolemus himself had made a similar aphoristic statement:

λόγῳ δέ σ' ἐν βραχεῖ  
τοῦτ' ἐκδιδάξω· πόλεμος οὐδέν' ἄνδρ' ἐκὼν  
αἶρεῖ πονηρόν, ἀλλὰ τοὺς χρηστοὺς ἀεὶ (435-7)

I will teach you this in a short word: war does not willingly take away anyone bad, but always the good

The two express here a sentiment for which our equivalent phrase is ‘the good die young’. The *chrēstoi* are juxtaposed with the *kakoi/ponēroi*. Curiously, a similar sentiment is found in Fragment 724 from Sophocles’ lost play, *The Phrygians*, suggesting that it was a popular refrain of the author.<sup>1</sup>

At this stage of the dramatic events, Neoptolemus is presumably following Odysseus’ advice (58-66) to ingratiate himself with Philoctetes where he was even given permission to bad-mouth his co-agent. Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that Neoptolemus could be completely unmoved by this discussion whose wholesome and noble atmosphere as well as its general pathos is palpable. Moreover, his awareness, already exhibited in the prologue, of the distinction between his father’s heroism and that promoted by Odysseus cannot fail to be strengthened by this discussion in which Philoctetes emphatically sides with the Achillean heroes and wholesale rejects those after the fashion of Odysseus. Philoctetes makes clear that the situation is an either/or rather than both/and. Odysseus had made Neoptolemus believe that it was possible to flit between these two modes of operating:

τόλμα· δίκαιοι δ’ αὔθις ἐκφανούμεθα.  
νῦν δ’ εἰς ἀναιδὲς ἡμέρας μέρος βραχὺ  
δός μοι σεαυτόν, κᾶτα τὸν λοιπὸν χρόνον  
κέκλῃσο πάντων εὐσεβέστατος βροτῶν (82-5)

Be bold: we will appear just later. Now give yourself to me for a brief, shameless part of the day, and for the rest of time you will be called the most pious of mortals

Odysseus has a philosophy of the ‘ends justify the means’. In order to achieve his objectives, he is willing to forgo the strict demands of morality and justice. He does not aspire to be permanently just: justice is an item of clothing that he puts on and takes off at will rather than incorporates into his very being. Odysseus himself admits this point explicitly in the heated exchange between him and Philoctetes in the fifth episodion:

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<sup>1</sup> τοὺς εὐγενεῖς γὰρ κάγαθούς, ὧ παῖ, φιλεῖ  
Ἄρης ἐναίρειν· οἱ δὲ τῇ γλώσση θρασεῖς  
φεύγοντες ἄτας ἐκτός εἰσι τῶν κακῶν·  
Ἄρης γὰρ οὐδὲν τῶν κακῶν λωτίζεται (Fr. 724)

My son, Ares loves to kill the noble and the valiant; and they who are brash with their tongues escape destructive forces and keep out of trouble; for Ares cuts down nothing base

οὐ γὰρ τοιούτων δεῖ, τοιοῦτός εἰμ' ἐγώ·  
χῶπου δικαίων κάγαθῶν ἀνδρῶν κρίσις,  
οὐκ ἂν λάβοις μου μᾶλλον οὐδέν' εὐσεβῆ.  
νικᾶν γε μέντοι πανταχοῦ χρήζων ἔφυν (1049-52)

Of whatever type of man there is a need, such am I: where there is a contest of just and good men, you would find no one more pious than me. However, I am of such a nature to seek victory everywhere

In contrast to Odysseus' philosophy of Protean morality changing shape relative to the demands of the moment, Philoctetes is a man of principle whose morality is as solid and durable as granite. Philoctetes has no time for proponents of moral relativism like Odysseus. Certain moral precepts such as 'do good to your friends, harm your enemies', 'honour your parents' and 'defend your honour' he adheres to religiously.

It seems that through his association with Philoctetes, who obdurately adheres to principle *à la* Achilles, Neoptolemus is presented with an example of moral behaviour not only simplifying and concretising questions of ethics, inasmuch as the theory becomes embodied in a person, but also providing him with a role-model to emulate. As already stated, this association is presented as a father-son relationship. The conclusion to be drawn appears to be that the excellence latent in noble birth requires a father-figure for its maturation.

#### Nobility by *phusis* or *nomos*?

Sophocles seems to use Philoctetes' abandonment on a deserted island as a means of engaging with the debate of whether nobility is by nature or by social convention. With an aristocrat living in society it is hard to distinguish between innate nobility and the status symbols of nobility. The accusation could be levied against an aristocrat that without his wealth, his estate, his expensive clothes, his signet ring, his extravagant lifestyle, his deluxe diet etc., he would be no different from the ordinary person. And looking at it obversely, it could be thought that a regular person given the same privileges as an aristocrat could equally have an air of distinction.<sup>1</sup> Philoctetes' abandonment on the uninhabited Lemnos allows Sophocles to portray a noble character abstracted from all the accessories of society and give his suggestion as to whether nobility is environmental or innate: if nobility persists even in the vacuum of a place like Lemnos it must be innate.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> The idea is present in the story of the *Prince and the Pauper* where the prince is defined exclusively by the pomp and ceremony that surrounds him to the point where he can be exchanged with a pauper, implying that to turn a pauper into a prince all you need to do is put the same fancy clothing on him.

<sup>2</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1980) 290 sees something similar behind the artistic innovation of Lemnos as a deserted island: 'What happens to a hero of noble birth, friend of Heracles and

myth of how the judges of the dead judge the souls naked implies the same idea of removing all accessory attributes in order to examine the essential qualities.<sup>1</sup>

This contrast between Philoctetes' high social status and the destituteness of his environment is emphasised in the first choral ode:

οὔτος πρωτογόνων ἴσως  
οἴκων οὐδενὸς ὕστερος,  
πάντων ἄμμορος ἐν βίῳ  
κεῖται μοῦνος ἀπ' ἄλλων,  
στικτῶν ἢ λασίων μετὰ  
θηρῶν, ἐν τ' ὀδύναϊς ὁμοῦ  
λιμῶ τ' οἰκτρὸς, ἀνήκεστα μεριμνήματ' ἔχων (181-6)

This man is inferior perhaps to none of the high-born houses, but deprived of all things in life he lies alone apart from others, with spotted and hairy beasts, pitiable in view of his hunger and pains alike, having unbearable troubles

The warmth and diplomacy with which Philoctetes greets Neoptolemus suggest that, although he has spent ten years apart from civilisation, he has not lost his relatedness and grace. However, there is a quality much more important that Sophocles wants to portray via Philoctetes' plight on the island of Lemnos, namely, endurance. It seems to be the case that Sophocles associates endurance with nobility – endurance is a sign of nobility.<sup>2</sup> This association is formulated in words by Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*:

στέργειν γὰρ αἰ πάθαι με χῶ χρόνος ξυνὼν  
μακρὸς διδάσκει καὶ τὸ γενναῖον τρίτον (7-8)

For hardships, the long passage of time and, thirdly, nobility have taught me to be content

It is also found in a fragment from Sophocles' lost play, *Ion*:

ἐσθλοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρὸς πάντα γενναίως φέρει (Fr. 84)

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recipient of his bow, when he is cut off from human society for ten years, living with and like the beasts? To what state of mind is he brought? To answering these questions Sophocles has devoted his imagination and the resources of his art.'

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Gorgias* 523e. Even Greek sculpture works along these lines: naked statues of athletes set against the backdrop of blue sky embody the elemental/the universal. This quality is lost as soon as they are placed within the mural confines of a museum.

<sup>2</sup> It does not escape my attention, and no doubt Sophocles', that Odysseus in the *Odyssey* is famed for endurance, and given the epithet *polutlēmōn*. *polu-* can signify variety or intensity and I believe that Odysseus' endurance is characterised by variety, whereas Philoctetes' by intensity (the same wound on the same island for ten years).



It is the sign of a good man to bear all things nobly

The extremity of Philoctetes' situation, suffering a ten-year long abandonment on a deserted island with a festering wound and only meagre means of procuring for himself the basic necessities of life, implies a heroic level of noble endurance. Philoctetes is aware of his own exceptional fortitude and makes mention of it when showing his cave-dwelling to Neoptolemus:

οἶμαι γὰρ οὐδ' ἄν ὄμμασιν μόνην θέαν  
ἄλλον λαβόντα πλὴν ἐμοῦ τλῆναι τάδε·  
ἐγὼ δ' ἀνάγκη προύμαθον στέργειν κακά (536-8)

I do not think that anyone else even if he had only taken sight of these things could have endured them except for me: but I have learnt to be content with these evils by necessity

It is interesting that the same verb is used as in the *Oedipus at Colonus* passage, στέργειν, even if different reasons are given for the endurance. Although Philoctetes ascribes it to 'necessity' here, this cannot be taken completely literally since it is inconsistent with the preceding line where he boasts that only he could endure these sufferings - if it was down to necessity alone, then surely everyone could grin and bear his situation out of sheer necessity. The point to be taken from this passage is that Philoctetes is exceptional in his ability to bear hardship.<sup>1</sup> In another passage Philoctetes makes an explicit connection between a noble nature and the ability to endure an unpleasant situation:

οὐ γὰρ ποτ', ὦ παῖ, τοῦτ' ἄν ἐξηύχῃσ' ἐγώ,  
τλῆναί σ' ἐλεινῶς ὧδε τάμὰ πῆματα  
μεῖναι παρόντα καὶ ξυνωφελοῦντά μοι.  
οὐκουν Ἄτρεῖδαι τοῦτ' ἔτλησαν εὐφόρως  
οὕτως ἐνεγκεῖν, ἀγαθοὶ στρατηλάται.  
ἀλλ' εὐγενῆς γὰρ ἡ φύσις κάξ εὐγενῶν,  
ὧ τέκνον, ἡ σή, πάντα ταῦτ' ἐν εὐχερεῖ  
ἔθου, βοῆς τε καὶ δυσοσμίας γέμων (869-76)

For I never, child, could have hoped for this, that you out of pity tolerate my suffering and stay being present to help me. The Atreidae did not thus endure patiently, the lordly generals. But your noble nature from nobles,

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<sup>1</sup> This is in line with the reaction of the chorus reflecting on Philoctetes' situation:

τόδε τοι θαῦμά μ' ἔχει,  
πῶς ποτε πῶς ποτ' ἀμφιπλάκτων ῥοθίων μόνος κλύων,  
πῶς ἄρα πανδάκρυτον οὕτω βιοτὰν κατέσχευ (689-90)

This wonder holds me, how on earth, hearing the waves crashing on both sides in his isolated state, he withstands this life full of tears.

child, has made light of all these troubles, although brimming with screams and stink.

Philoctetes contrasts the behaviour of the Atreidae and Neoptolemus in response to his suffering, suggesting that the former have an illusory reputation of nobility while Neoptolemus' nobility is genuine, confirmed by his capacity to bear unpleasantness and show pity.

### Individual vs. society

There are, in truth, two stages to Philoctetes' courageous resistance in the face of suffering: the first is, what we have just been discussing, his ten-year plight occurring prior to the main action of the play but evoked through the reflections of Philoctetes and the chorus, the second, the mental state behind which is described in live time in the play, is his readiness to stay and face inevitable death on Lemnos bereft of his bow rather than sail to Troy. Whitman has poetically described Philoctetes' courage after the loss of his bow:

Philoctetes shows how far he can resist and the nobility of his resistance. All he thought was true. Manacled, robbed of his one means of livelihood, he faces the full bitterness of the hero's position. He must either submit to the world's shabby and dishonourable treatment, or die on the island while Odysseus sports his bow. Even Neoptolemus deserts him, in the hope that he will come to his senses. But Philoctetes has his senses. To yield at this moment would mean that he would have to manage somehow in time to come to forgive himself for the weakness of preferring to live. To all entreaties he returns the same bitter but heroic answer.<sup>1</sup>

This resilience in the face of extreme suffering underpins a key motif within the play, namely, the tension between the individual and society.<sup>2</sup> Philoctetes asserts his rights and honour as an individual against the demands, often unjust, of society but this resistance is only made possible by his willingness to undergo suffering

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<sup>1</sup> Whitman (1966) 184.

<sup>2</sup> Whitman (1966) 178: 'The problem is presented in terms of society versus man, a heroic contest between the great individual who, rejected by society, rejects it in turn, and society itself – with its many-sided selfishness, deception, and rewards – which demands use of the great man's talents. The question of how the great man should answer this demand raises a personal and sociological crux which is the chief motivation of the Philoctetes. For the most part, however, this problem has been ignored by scholars, while much attention has been lavished on the fine and understandable Neoptolemus. But it is Philoctetes who suffers in the cause of the individual and who in the end beats society to its knees.' Rose (1992) 320 sees it similarly: 'Sophokles does not celebrate primarily the intellectual ingeniousness of his hero but his unique courage, which sets him above his enemies.'

concomitant with taking a stand against society.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, noble birth seems to play a two-fold role in giving the individualist hero the confidence, inasmuch as he knows his own worth, to stand up against the pressure exerted by society as well as the courage, as we have seen, to withstand the punitive hardship of such a position. Let us explore the noble individualism of Philoctetes.

Philoctetes is a suffering victim of society, represented by the Greek army who expelled him from their group, choosing to rid themselves of the bother associated with his wound rather than looking to heal him, and left him as a lonely outcast on the shores of Lemnos. Within the play Odysseus still shows very little pity for the man, instead viewing Philoctetes as merely a means for the Greek army to achieve their objective, never treating Philoctetes as an individual of importance in and of himself aside from his importance to the campaign. Philoctetes is fully aware of the way he has been treated as a disposable resource:

καὶ νῦν τί μ' ἄγετε; τί μ' ἀπάγεσθε; τοῦ χάριν;  
ὄς οὐδέν εἰμι καὶ τέθνηχ' ὑμῖν πάλαι.  
πῶς, ὦ θεοῖς ἔχθιστε, νῦν οὐκ εἰμί σοι  
χωλός, δυσώδης; πῶς θεοῖς ἔξεσθ', ὁμοῦ  
πλεύσαντος αἴθειν ἱερά; πῶς σπένδειν ἔτι;  
αὕτη γὰρ ἦν σοι πρόφασις ἐκβαλεῖν ἐμέ (1029-34)

And now why do you lead me? Why do you take me away? For the sake of what? I who am nothing and am dead to you since long ago. How, o most hateful to the gods, am I not now lame and foul-smelling? How will it be possible after I have sailed there to burn sacrifices to the gods? How to pour libations? For this was your excuse for casting me away.

In this rhetorical flourish Philoctetes highlights the inconsistency, and thus dishonesty, of the attitude of the Greek leaders towards him. In essence, they have an instrumentalist view towards him: they had no concern for his wound other than annoyance at its unpleasantness, though this was disguised with pretensions of piety, when his lameness suggested his redundancy, but, when it is discovered that he is of vital importance to victory in the war, suddenly they want to make use of him, and in doing so betray the falsity of their pretext for his abandonment.

A further dramatisation of society's disregard for Philoctetes' worth as an individual is found in Odysseus' belief that possession of the bow without its rightful owner will be enough for success. In his mind, Philoctetes is completely replaceable with any other man having the same skillset.<sup>2</sup> Philoctetes' personhood has been reduced

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<sup>1</sup> Stein-Hölkeskamp (1989), in speaking of historical aristocrats, stresses in her book how the emergence of the polis was always liable to marginalise these figures.

<sup>2</sup> Neoptolemus, on the other hand, is aware of the primacy of the individual:

to his skill as an archer to the point where any other skilful archer could be put in his place:

οὐδὲ σοῦ προσχρήζομεν,  
τά γ' ὄπλ' ἔχοντες ταῦτ', ἐπεὶ πάρεστι μὲν  
Τεῦκρος παρ' ἡμῖν, τήνδ' ἐπιστήμην ἔχων,  
ἐγὼ θ', ὃς οἶμαι σοῦ κάκιον οὐδὲν ἄν  
τούτων κρατύνειν, μηδ' ἐπιθύνειν χερί (1055-9)

We do not have need of you, as long as we have this weapon since Teucer is present to us, having this craft, and I, who consider that I would wield this bow and shoot it straight in no way worse than you

Against Odysseus' collectivism, Philoctetes pits stubbornly and valiantly the principle of individualism. The intensity of his individualism is exhibited in his refusal to return to Troy to fight in the service of his arch-enemies, even if this refusal removes the possibility of being healed, of winning glory and makes certain a painful and miserable death. To Odysseus' threats of force he takes no backward step. And to the well-intentioned pleas and entreaties of Neoptolemus, even though they stir in him an internal conflict, he remains steadfast to make no compromise of his sense of self-worth and hatred of those who have wronged him. From where does Philoctetes acquire this unbreakable sense of self-worth and the belief that his rights and destiny as an individual should not be made secondary to the demands of society, especially when these are unjust? The answer appears to be connected with the notion of nature and breeding.

It must be admitted that Philoctetes does not actually formulate, unlike other Sophoclean heroes, his decision to stand firm in terms connected with birth and breeding. Nevertheless, it can be inferred not only by pattern recognition of it in the other surviving plays but also from the amount of emphasis Philoctetes places in the play on Neoptolemus' birth as an indicator of action and behaviour with the implication that he must view his own comportment as determined by and connected with his family background. Why, if this is a crucial idea within the play, has Sophocles left it to be only inferred? The problem faced by Sophocles is that Philoctetes, although a nobleman, is the son of a relatively minor figure, Poias, and so it might have seemed otiose if Philoctetes had grandiosely boasted of his high

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ἀλλ' ὄδε μὲν κλύει οὐδέν, ἐγὼ δ' ὀρῶ οὐνεκα θήραν  
τήνδ' ἀλίως ἔχομεν τόξων, δίχα τοῦδε πλέοντες.  
τοῦδε γὰρ ὁ στέφανος, τοῦτον θεὸς εἶπε κομίζειν (839-41)

Well, this man hears nothing, but I realise that the capture of this bow is in vain, if we sail away from him. For the crown is his, the gods said to convey him.

birth as the reason for his resistance.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the birth-centric view Philoctetes relies on in assessing Neoptolemus is designed also to be applied by the audience to understanding Philoctetes. Philoctetes' comments on Neoptolemus' birth say just as much about him as they do about Neoptolemus. The close friendship presented between the two almost implies that they share certain qualities by association. This close association that Sophocles creates between the two figures means that Neoptolemus' name could be interchangeable with Philoctetes' in this passage by Whitman:

Even as Odysseus goes beneath the demotic exterior and reveals its most grasping and unscrupulous side, so Neoptolemus goes beneath the aristocratic exterior, mere social *kalokagathia*, and shows once more the old Apollonian picture of arete and spiritual law, Philoctetes is drawn by his innate excellence, but that which gives them the most in common is their mutual disgust with Odysseus. For both it is a hallmark of conscience, a token of heroic understanding similar to that which is to appear again between Oedipus and Theseus in *Oedipus at Colonus*. In the character of Neoptolemus, Sophocles is still exploring and moulding what seems to have been an almost personal love for the aristocratic side of Greek culture<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly it requires a lateral step to ascribe Philoctetes' heroism to his birth, based on transposing what Philoctetes says of Neoptolemus onto the speaker himself, but it is presumably a mental manoeuvre that Sophocles could expect a reasonably intelligent spectator/reader to make.

## Conclusion

In the late part of the fifth century Athens had been experiencing tumultuous times. The Sophists with their practice of arguing contrary to traditional morality had created moral uncertainty, the Peloponnesian war had also promoted a Machiavellian ethic, the plague had brought great distress, the defeat in Sicily had

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<sup>1</sup> This reservation about Philoctetes' pedigree is maybe alluded to in the beginning of the play where the chorus say: οὗτος πρωτογόνων ἴσως/ οἴκων οὐδενὸς ὕστερος. Jebb (1898) 38 denies that any doubt is raised: "ἴσως does not imply a doubt as to whether Philoctetes is of noble birth, but merely gives a certain vagueness to the surmise that no one else was nobler." Webster (1970) 83 acknowledges a bit of reservation: "ἴσως does not mean that they do not know Philoctetes' pedigree but qualifies οὐδενὸς ὕστερος. "second, you might say, to none of the noblest families": as son of Poeas he is not on a par with Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, but he is noble-born and οὐδενὸς ὕστερος makes a perfect contrast with πάντων ἄμμορος ἐν βίῳ."

provoked despair and there had also been political disruption with the constitution of the Four Hundred, something Sophocles was partly responsible for as *proboulos*. Although it is not in the nature of Greek tragedy to engage explicitly and directly with contemporary events, it is hard to imagine Sophocles not being affected by the political events happening around him. In many ways, the Odysseus of the *Philoctetes*, who is a far cry in terms of moral integrity from his equivalent in the *Ajax*, seems to embody the spirit of late fifth century Athenian politics. It seems to me that Sophocles' suggested answer, as shown through the play, to the dire straits beleaguering Athens is to turn to those endowed with the couplet of good breeding and good character. It is true that in the depiction of Neoptolemus an awareness is shown of the vulnerability of a noble nature to perverse teaching, and therefore the play suggests that the hereditary natures of excellence need the right parenting and association.

In the portrayal of Philoctetes we witness a more emphatic promotion of good breeding. Unlike the orphan Neoptolemus, nothing in the play suggests that Philoctetes had an unusual maturation process. At his stage in life, he is not a delicate sapling but an entrenched oak tree of good breeding.<sup>1</sup> Sophocles has engaged with the anthropologic and dialectic critiques of the Sophists but in the figure of *Philoctetes* attempted to give a living refutation of them.

Nevertheless, the play dramatises an uncomfortable tension between Philoctetes and the Greek army and shows that his reintegration would have been unfulfilled without the divine appearance of Heracles. This tension might be a metaphor for Sophocles to explore the conflict between the aristocratic and democratic factions of Athens with their different respective values. To the mercantile, instrumentalist and collectivist ideology of the democracy how can Philoctetes' insistence on personal friendship be integrated?<sup>2</sup> The ideal would be for this tendency to be universalised so that it extends beyond the conspiratorial *hetaireiai* of Athens to form more of a universal brotherhood. However, the mythical intervention of Heracles to effectuate Philoctetes' reintegration suggests that Sophocles had little faith that a practical solution to political factionalism would be found soon. In this way, the play, in spite of its criticism for being a tragi-comedy, is most certainly a tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup> This view is shared by Roisman (1992) 323: 'But it is the full exploration of Philoctetes' own successful battle to overcome the worst assaults of a corrupt society, and finally, his capacity to inspire the emergence of the highest social virtues in the promising noble pupil which lay the emotional and intellectual foundations for the tremendous, utopian affirmation of aristocratic human worth.'

<sup>2</sup> Biancalana (2005) 160.

## Chapter 9: Euripides

This chapter will shed light on the views and perspectives Euripides' extant work lends on the theme of good breeding with the aim of showing points of comparison and, especially, contrast between the two playwrights. Seeing that their careers overlapped, there is, therefore, a high probability that they influenced one another. And, how an Athenian audience might react to Sophocles' depiction of noble birth is likely to be shaped in part by their exposure to it in Euripides' plays. Furthermore, this particular chapter helps to fill a gaping hole in scholarship, for other than an article by Edmund Stewart<sup>1</sup> there is next to nothing written on the topic of good birth in Euripides, a lacuna all the more astounding for the fact that Euripides' oeuvre is replete with discussions of it, as we shall see.

The number of different perspectives Euripides' characters adopt in the study of good birth is remarkable. Where Sophocles focuses mainly on breeding and the ethical behaviour that should be coupled with it, Euripides acts as more of a sociologist looking at birth in relation to money, marriage, socio-political distinction, education etc. And the multiplicity of often conflicting views around the same topic of discussion, such as nobility and money, is remarkable. One is struck by the agility of Euripides' mind. If good birth could be studied as a statue, one could say that Euripides has looked at it in the round from every possible angle. And many of his remarks have a very modern feel. Euripides has proportionately more to say about birth in a direct way than Sophocles, bearing in mind that more of Euripides' work survives than that of Sophocles'.

One major difference between Euripides' and Sophocles' treatment of birth is the prevalence of contrary views about birth in Euripides, whereas in Sophocles it is easier to argue that the poet depicted the concept in a favourable light seeing that there are far more affirmative passages compared to the relatively few questioning, critical passages.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart (2019) focuses on Euripides' *Electra* and demonstrates that the theme of inherited excellence is the cornerstone of the plot. His lengthy introduction also does well to cover the topic of birth more generally in ancient Greek thought.

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, I feel that a critic such as Decharme (1893) 162 is too bold when he says: 'A Athènes, la plus démocratique des cités grecques, il y avait des grands et des petits, des hommes bien nés (εὐγενεῖς) et hommes de basse naissance (δυσγενεῖς). Euripide prend parti résolument parti pour les seconds contre les premiers.' It is imprudent to attempt to penetrate the mind of the playwright to the point of declaring what his personal opinion was on a particular matter. Tragedy is not an essay where a thesis is disserted on, but a multivocal piece of art. In the polyphony of the dialogic form how would one detect Euripides' own opinion?

## Birth and character

The question of whether the well-born equal the good appears to have been of interest to Euripides, judging from the number of passages which speak to this particular topic. It is clear that the traditional identification of good birth with good character was being called into question in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Euripides gives expression to three main viewpoints: 1) good children are born from good parents, and bad from bad; 2) good birth is a decent predictor of/contributor to good character; 3) good birth is more or less irrelevant to good character.

### 1) Good children are born from good parents, and bad from bad

There are many passages which assert that good children could only be produced from good parents and, conversely, bad children from bad parents. The fragments in their extant form come with no argument justifying their assertion which, if such an absence is not just the result of selective transmission, might suggest that the view expressed was conventionally accepted enough for it to be presented as merely a statement. It is also possible that the context of the play in some way backed the aphoristic statement, namely, the son of a bad father behaving badly, for example.

ὦ παῖ Κρέοντος, ὡς ἀληθὲς ἦν ἄρα,  
ἐσθλῶν ἀπ' ἀνδρῶν ἐσθλὰ γίνεσθαι τέκνα,  
κακῶν δ' ὅμοια τῇ φύσει τῇ τοῦ πα  
τρὸς.<sup>1</sup> (*Alcemeon in Corinth* Fr. 75)

O child of Creon, how it was truly spoken that good children are born from good men, and of bad men children similar to the nature of their father

ἢ γὰρ δόκησις πατράσι παῖδας εἰκέσαι·  
τὰ πολλὰ ταύτη γίνεσθαι τέκνων πέρι (*Antigone* Fr. 167)

The opinion is that children resemble their fathers; things happen often this way with offspring

This last fragment attempts to present itself as a description of reality, namely, if you look around at the father-son relationships you witness that more often than not there is a strong element of resemblance.

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<sup>1</sup> Collard and Cropp (2008) 91 'Amphilochus is addressed in the belief that he is Creon's son rather than Alcmeon's.'



There is also a fragment which refutes the phenomenon of hereditary discrepancies. Although it could be proposed that on the whole good comes from good and bad from bad but sometimes anomalies happen, this fragment express a strong conviction in hereditary determinism to the point that the parented cannot differ in nature from the parents.

οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο τραῦμ', ἐάν τις ἐγξέση  
θάμνοις ἐλείοις, οὐδ' ἂν ἐκ μητρὸς κακῆς  
ἐσθλοὶ γένοιντο παῖδες εἰς ἀλκὴν δορός. (*Bellorophon* Fr. 298)

There would be no wounding, if someone whittles in marshy shrub, nor would children brave in the face of the spear be produced from a bad mother.

This is an argument by analogy: in the same way that the strong shaft of a spear cannot be made from marshy shrub, which is obviously not of a strong enough material nature, brave children would not be born from a cowardly mother.<sup>1</sup>

## 2) Good birth is a decent predictor of/contributor to good character

We now move onto the second viewpoint. There is a statement by the chorus in the *Hecuba* which invokes the idea of inherited excellence in Polyxena's heroic willingness to be sacrificed:

δεινὸς χαρακτήρ κάπῖσημος ἐν βροτοῖς  
ἐσθλῶν γενέσθαι, κάπῖ μεῖζον ἔρχεται  
τῆς εὐγενείας ὄνομα τοῖσιν ἀξίους (*Hecuba* 379-81)

What a marvellous and distinctive mark comes with being born of good parents, and the name of good birth goes to greater heights for those who are worthy

The wording suggests that there is not a hard-and-fast relationship between good birth and good character since the mention of those worthy of their birth presupposes the existence of others unworthy of their birth. However, the first line states that birth leaves a distinctive impress on the offspring. It is interesting that our word 'character' is derived etymologically from the Greek word χαρακτήρ meaning 'impress, stamp (on coins and seals)'. So these lines make a connection between birth and character but qualify that the one does not engender the other in a failsafe way.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is how Collard and Cropp (2008) 309 understand the fragment too: 'Apparently: as trimmed sapwood from a marsh will yield no spear-shafts sturdy enough to wound, so poor breeding-stock will mother no sons sturdy enough to stand their ground in battle.'

<sup>2</sup> Gregory (1999) 91 interprets the passage similarly: 'High birth is imagined as leaving a visible imprint on an individual, which is set in sharper relief by noble acts.' Also Battezzato

### 3) Good birth is more or less irrelevant to good character.

The third viewpoint which is given expression on many occasions in Euripides' extant oeuvre is that good birth is to all intents and purposes irrelevant as regards good character. The idea is that many of the well-born are bad and many of the ill-born are good, to the extent that the well-born and the good are in no way synonymous. Euripides even goes so far as to appropriate the implication of good character latent in the adjective *eugenēs* to then apply this very adjective, in a provocative manner, to those of high character but low birth, even those as lowly-born as slaves.

In the *Electra*, the Old Man at the sight of Orestes and Pylades, whose identity happen to be undisclosed to him, declares:

ἀλλ' εὐγενεῖς μὲν, ἐν δὲ κιβδήλῳ τόδε·  
πολλοὶ γὰρ ὄντες εὐγενεῖς εἰσιν κακοί. (*Electra* 550-1)

Well they are well-born, but this may prove counterfeit: for many being well-born are base.

The adjective *kibdēlos* alludes to the phenomenon of counterfeit money.<sup>1</sup> The idea is that many are nominally well-born but they lack the good character that breeding is supposed to engender and therefore they are counterfeit in the same way that a coin might appear genuine with the correct impress but it is not constituted of the right metal, for example, a deficient amount of silver in relation to the corresponding marking. The reputation of being well-born is equivalent to the impress on the coin. The problem, according to the Old Man, is that the title can be imprinted upon those unworthy of the name just as lower value metals can be given a marking indicating silver. Good breeding is presented as being an accessory quality to good character rather than an intrinsically intimate relationship.<sup>2</sup> The marriage of good birth and good character is undergoing a divorce. Moreover, the traditional notion that good birth, in the majority of cases, contributes to good character is challenged here. Where someone like Homer was aware of anomalies

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(2018) 126: 'People who prove by their deeds that they are worthy of their noble birth acquire even greater fame'.

<sup>1</sup> Cropp (2013) 182: 'The comparison between deceptive human character and counterfeit metal or coinage was well established, e.g. Theognis 117-28, 963-8, E. *Med.* 516-9. *Hipp.* 616f., Ar. *Frogs* 718-33.'

<sup>2</sup> Stewart (2019) whose articles, 'Inner Nature and Outward Appearance in Euripides' *Electra* carries out an excellent analysis of the whole play in relation to nobility, and demonstrates convincingly that the play dramatises noble character as essentially hereditary, in spite of certain passages seemingly stating the contrary. In relation to this particular passage, Stewart (2019) comments, 'He [the Old Man] is aware that what is called εὐγένεια can be nominal, rather than natural, and is aware of relying on appearances.'

to the principle of inherited excellence but maintained that in the majority of cases it holds true, here the inverse is put forward, namely, that the majority of the time (πολλοί) inherited excellence fails to achieve its purported function.

The advent of coinage in the Greek world could be argued, from a historical materialist point of view at least, to have given birth to the dichotomy of *phusis* and *nomos*. When gold is only used there is no discrepancy between the intrinsic value and the market value. However, with alloyed coins suddenly the market value is no longer restricted by and reflective of the intrinsic value. It is no coincidence that coinage/currency was called *nomisma*, that is to say, 'something believed in'. An alloyed coin gains its value not from its constituent metal but from the value that people ascribe to it.

There are other fragments which reinforce this notion that good birth and good character are not synonymous. The point is made very emphatically in a certain fragment:

εἰς δ' εὐγένειαν ὀλίγ' ἔχω φράσαι καλά·  
ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἐσθλὸς εὐγενὴς ἔμοιγ' ἀνὴρ,  
ὁ δ' οὐ δίκαιος, κἂν ἀμείνωνος πατρὸς  
Ζηνὸς πεφύκη, δυσγενὴς εἶναι δοκεῖ. (Fr. 336)

In relation to good birth I have few fine things to say: the good man appears to me well-born, while the unjust man, even if he is sprung from a father greater than Zeus, appears to me ill-born

So little faith is there here in any presumed connection between birth and character that not even the case of a hypothetical birth better than descent from Zeus would be enough to guarantee good character. The former relationship of birth and character was one of cause and effect. But now the roles have been provocatively reversed. It is good character which determines whether someone is to be considered well-born! In another fragment, we have it from the opposite angle: low birth, even descent from slaves, does not preclude someone from having a good character:

ἐγὼ μὲν ≤οὔν≥ οὐκ οἶδ' ὅτῳ σκοπεῖν χρεῶν  
τὴν εὐγένειαν· τοὺς γὰρ ἀνδρείους φύσιν  
καὶ τοὺς δίκαιους τῶν κενῶν δοξασμάτων,  
κἂν ὥσι δούλων, εὐγενεστέρους λέγω. (Fr. 495.40-3)

I do not know how to regard good birth: those men brave and just in relation to nature, even if they are sons of slaves, I say that they are better-born than hollow reputations

Why does Euripides use the word εὐγενεστέρους rather than a neutral adjective like *ameinōn* which would just signify ‘better’? It is not just a case of linguistic-cultural appropriation but rather due to the fact that the adjective *eugenēs* does seem, depending on how its meaning is understood, to be a choice of word as fitting as it is provocative. The disregard for inherited traits does not in any way diminish, as we see in this fragment, the emphasis placed on ‘natural’ qualities. Education is not being opposed to family background, far from it, in fact. Innate qualities are still given pride of place but the suggestion is that these innate qualities are not inherited from one’s forbears but are the arbitrary allocation of Chance. In this way, there is still a natural inequality where some people are *born* with a nature more courageous, more moral, more intelligent than others. In this way, they are ‘well-born’ because their excellence is not the fruit of training or practice but a gift conferred to them by Nature at birth. Euripides is actually exploiting the ambiguity latent in the adjective *eugenēs* where, as has already been stated, the *genēs* component can be derived from the verb *gignesthai* just as readily, if not more so, as from the noun *genos* meaning ‘family’. He is divesting the word of its socio-aristocratic connotations but still retaining the core element of ‘good birth’. It would be a grave mistake of interpretation to suggest that the word is being transformed into connoting exclusively moral qualities. In other words, the adjective is not used as a synonym of *esthlos* by Euripides. The word does not lose its emphasis on birth and so would be correctly translated as meaning ‘someone born with a good nature’.

It would be strange to cover the topic of birth and character in Euripides’ oeuvre without paying special attention to the Great Speech of Orestes in the *Electra*. Orestes having heard from his sister of the honourable behaviour of her peasant husband towards her and witnessing his hospitable welcoming is led to reflect on that by which manliness can be ascertained.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the discrepancy between the farmer’s social status and his noble character has been the catalyst for Orestes’ meditations:

οὐκ ἔστ’ ἀκριβὲς οὐδὲν εἰς εὐανδρίαν  
 ἔχουσι γὰρ παραγμὸν αἱ φύσεις βροτῶν.  
 ἦδη γὰρ εἶδον ἄνδρα γενναίου πατρὸς  
 τὸ μηδὲν ὄντα, χρηστά τ’ ἐκ κακῶν τέκνα (*Electra* 367)

There is nothing fixed in relation to manliness: for the natures of men have confusion, I have seen a non-entity born from a noble father, and good children from bad parents

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<sup>1</sup> *Electra* 253 ff.

Orestes is asserting that, based on his personal experience, there is no guaranteed connection between the moral status of the offspring and the parents.<sup>1</sup> Not only do some children fail to live up to the standards of their noble parents but children from humble backgrounds distinguish themselves.<sup>2</sup> This latter case suggests that good breeding is not a *sine qua non* of excellence. After having dismissed wealth, poverty and military courage as accurate criteria of manliness he concludes thus this part of the speech:

οὔτος γὰρ ἀνὴρ οὔτ' ἐν Ἀργείοις μέγας  
οὔτ' αὖ δοκῆσει δωμάτων ὠγκωμένος,  
ἐν τοῖς δὲ πολλοῖς ὢν, ἄριστος ἠὺρέθη.  
οὐ μὴ ἀφρονήσῃθ', οἷ κενῶν δοξασμάτων  
πλήρεις πλανᾶσθε, τῆ δ' ὀμιλίᾳ βροτοὺς  
κρινεῖτε καὶ τοῖς ἤθεσιν τοὺς εὐγενεῖς; (*Electra* 380-5)

For this man is neither great among the Argives nor puffed up with the prestige of his house, but one of the many, and yet he has been found to be excellent. Do not think foolishly, you who wander full of empty opinions, but in relation to men discern the well-born by their company and by their character.

Orestes is saying that the farmer is one of the ordinary folk without the prestige of a wealthy and noble family but, in terms of his behaviour and character, he is exemplary. This leads him to propose as the criteria of manliness: company and character. Once again there is the provocative use of εὐγενεῖς. Orestes is not denying that the society of men is hierarchical with some being superior to others but he is denying the assumption that associates moral elites with the social elites. There does indeed exist a race of men possessed of a superior character, presumably present from birth, and these are the genuine 'well-born'.

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<sup>1</sup> Denniston (1954) 93 has interesting commentary on these verses: 'The general identification of character of nobility of birth and nobility of character [...] is not here denied by Orestes. You cannot conceive of a 'confusion' (ταραγμός) unless you conceive of an order which the confusion disturbs. γενναίου and κακῶν are at once moral and social terms. All Orestes says is that the normal handing down of γενναιότης and κακία from father to son is at times (often, the Old Man says at 551) surprisingly interrupted.'

<sup>2</sup> Stewart (2019) 248: 'This is not a repudiation of the doctrine of inherited excellence; it only proves, as we have seen, that good breeding may skip a generation or disappear entirely.' Stewart (2019) 18: 'Orestes does begin by acknowledging that family background, even when it is known, is not necessarily an indication of good character. The natures of men are muddled [...]: good father sometimes have bad sons and *vice versa*. This is not a repudiation of the doctrine of inherited excellence, but in fact, as we have seen, it only proves that good breeding may skip a generation or diminish entirely.'

As well-constructed and persuasive as Orestes' speech is it is potentially undermined by an element of dramatic irony. Orestes has drawn his conclusions from his experience of the farmer who he *believes* to be of humble background and poor. Poor he certainly he is but as to background Orestes has potentially made a false deduction. In the prologue the farmer lets the audience know that he is of Mycenaean ancestry whose lustre has been dimmed by poverty<sup>1</sup>:

πατέρων μὲν Μυκηναίων ἄπο  
γεγῶσιν — οὐ δὴ τοῦτό γ' ἐξελέγχομαι·  
λαμπροὶ γὰρ ἔς γένος γε, χρημάτων δὲ δὴ  
πένητες, ἔνθεν ἠύγένει' ἀπόλλυται (*Electra* 35-38)

Born from Mycenaean forbears – in relation to this I am without fault:  
although distinguished by way of family, being destitute of money has led to  
the nobility being destroyed.

When the farmer says that poverty has destroyed his nobility, he does not mean to say the good blood that runs in his veins has been diluted but that the social advantages associated with good breeding have been stripped away from him as a result of poverty.<sup>2</sup> But this noble Mycenaean ancestry, of which Orestes is unaware, might well call into question some of the conclusions drawn by Orestes seeing that they were based on a false premise.<sup>3</sup> This type of dramatic irony also seems to be found in one of the fragments of Sophocles:

πολλῶν δ' ἐν πολυπληθείᾳ πέλεται

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<sup>1</sup> In relation to this passage Roisman and Luschnig (2011) 93 make the following remark: 'The question of the relative importance of descent, wealth, and character in measuring a person's worth was much debated in ancient Athens, as was the relation between character and the other two attributes. In the seventh century, when many of the landed nobility lost their wealth and claim to noble status, the incompatibility of poverty and high social standing became proverbial.'

<sup>2</sup> Stewart (2019) 245: 'He is genuinely noble and the blood of his ancestors, unlike their wealth, has not been lost in transition down the generations. We should not be surprised at the appearance of a man of hidden good birth in the costume of a peasant, since, as we have seen, this is a common feature of Euripidean tragedy.'

<sup>3</sup> Denniston (1954) 58: 'Mycenean ancestry clearly means noble ancestry. That the man is an Argive is self-evident.' Roisman and Luschnig (2011) 146: 'None of the counter-examples that Orestes gives, however, actually applies to the Farmer, who himself tells us he is of respectable lineage (35-9), though Orestes does not know this (381). Thus, while Orestes questions the assumed link between nobility of character and nobility of birth, Euripides' characterization of the Farmer actually supports it.' Stewart (2019) 13 is also very aware of the dramatic irony: 'The farmer actually has a hidden noble pedigree, and therefore has, at least potentially, inherited their excellence.' Stewart (2019) 18 also makes the excellent point that this plot construction of a character having a hidden noble background is not uncommon, and allows Euripides to dramatise 'the well-established truth that good birth will endure the vicissitudes of fortune.'

οὔτ' ἀπ' εὐγενέων ἐσθλὸς οὔτ' ἀχρείων

τὸ λίαν† κακός· βροτῶν δὲ πιστὸν οὐδέν (Fr. 667)

Among the mass of the many the descendant of noble men is not always good and that of useless people is not always bad; nothing about mortals is trustworthy

The fragment is from the lost play, *Tyro*, which dramatises the adult Pelias and Neleus, after having been exposed, taking vengeance on their mother's stepmother, Sidero. Our fragment is likely to be a remark made after witnessing the noble behaviour of these two men who were mistakenly thought to be the sons of a simple herdsman. This is a further instance suggesting caution when analysing fragments, because if an effort is not made to ascertain their context whenever possible, false conclusions can easily be drawn.

As we can see, Euripides can write passages far more questioning of the relationship between birth and character than any found, of which there are very few, in Sophocles. Euripides goes so far as to redirect the semantic meaning of words, as in the case of *eugenēs*, from an aristocratic conception to a more physiological one. Although it could be argued that the plot construction often serves to temper the radicality of the statements, it is nevertheless the case that prominent expression is given to a negation of the principle of hereditary excellence. But then there are also passages which deny that children are born anomalously to the nature of their parents. It is very difficult to square these contradictory views. His approach is much more sophistic, praising and blaming, arguing for and against the noble birth, in a way which Protagoras would have approved. One has the impression that Euripides relished the shock factor and extremism of his declarations. In contrast, Sophocles is much more consistent. One feels that Sophocles genuinely believes that birth is of primary importance for excellence but is battling with the mystery of the subject and the doubt caused by the fact that the relationship between birth and character is of high probability but not absolute.

### Nobility exists by convention

It is from the father of the sophistic movement, Protagoras, that we have the first extant conjecture concerning the development of man from a primitive and bestial state to civilised life.<sup>1</sup> The rationalisation of man's early life was turned against the belief in aristocratic pedigree. In opposition to the notion that the nobles and non-nobles formed two separate and distinct classes, it was argued that, if one went

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<sup>1</sup> The objectivity of the representation is maybe undermined by Protagoras serving as a foil to Socrates in the *Protagoras*. However, if we dismiss the dialogue as a piece of evidence, we are left with nothing of Protagoras' teachings on man's early development.

back far enough in time, one would encounter an unstratified group of early humans. In essence, the idea is that there is a common human race which only over time has been divided into different races and classes. Essentially, everyone shares the same first ancestors, just as fundamental Christians might argue that we are all descendants of Adam and Eve. Therefore, pride in one's aristocratic ancestry would be a form of short-sightedness, failing to see the common heritage that all humans share. We find in a fragment from Euripides' lost play, *Alexander*, this sentiment given poetic voice<sup>1</sup>:

περισσόμυθος ὁ λόγος, εὐγένειαν εἰ  
βρότειον εὐλογησομεν.  
τὸ γὰρ πάλαι καὶ πρῶτον ὄτ' ἐγενόμεθα,  
διὰ δ' ἔκρινεν ἅ τεκοῦσα βροτούς,  
ὁμοίαν χθῶν ἅπασιν ἐξεπαίδευσεν ὄψιν.  
ἴδιον οὐδὲν ἔχομεν· μία δὲ γονὰ  
τό τ' εὐγενές καὶ τὸ δυσγενές.  
νόμῳ δὲ γαῦρον αὐτὸ κραίνει χρόνος. (Fr. 52)

Our speech is meaningless, if we will praise noble birth among humans. For long ago when we first appeared, and the earth created humans, she bestowed us with the same sight for all. We had nothing private: the noble and the ignoble were one race. But by custom and over time noble birth became splendid.

We have seen in the *Philoctetes* chapter how Sophocles combats this anthropological critique of noble birth by co-opting in his dramatic representation the beliefs about primitive society, as outlined by sophistic thinkers, but then inverting the argumentative thrust to show that there is a natural basis for aristocracy. This divergence in how Sophocles and Euripides interpret the implications of anthropological accounts as regards social hierarchy is a notable case of stark contrast.

### Nobility and appearance

There is to be found in Euripides' oeuvre the idea that someone's physical appearance and demeanour can be an indicator of good breeding, that is to say that without even knowing the family background of someone you could deduce

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<sup>1</sup> Collard and Cropp (2008) 56: 'The chorus use a 'scientific' account of the origins of human life to show that the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' birth is merely conventional. 'Good' birth is no guarantee of true (moral) nobility, even though the same word (*eugeneia*) is commonly applied to both.' Collard, Cropp and Gibert (2004) 77 are, in my opinion, right to see influence from Antiphon the Sophist in the application of the *phusis/nomos* dichotomy to human society and from Archelaus in the anthropological account of the origin of human life (Archelaus 60 A 4 DK).



from just the sight of them whether they are well-born. This notion is best articulated by Ion upon meeting Creusa:

γενναιότης σοι, καὶ τρόπων τεκμήριον  
τὸ σχῆμ' ἔχεις τόδ', ἥτις εἶ ποτ', ὦ γύναι.  
γνοίη δ' ἄν ὡς τὰ πολλά γ' ἀνθρώπου πέρι  
τὸ σχῆμ' ἰδὼν τις εἰ πέφυκεν εὐγενής<sup>1</sup> (*Ion* 237-40)

There is nobility in you, you have this appearance bearing witness to your manners, whoever you are, lady. Someone would know in many instances upon seeing the appearance of a man whether he is well-born.

The sentiment that Ion expresses is confirmed in the play by the fact that his guess concerning the initially unknown breeding of Creusa turns out to be correct.<sup>2</sup>

This alleged correspondence between breeding and appearance might be the reason why Euripides permits himself to describe certain body parts as 'well-born': 'face' (*Medea* 1092), 'cheeks' (*Ion* 242), 'neck' (*Helen* 136), 'head' (*Helen* 1187), 'arm' (*Helen* 1376).

Interestingly there is a passage in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* where Deianeira deduces from the appearance of Iole that this last must be of noble ancestry:

ὦ δυστάλαινα, τίς ποτ' εἶ νεανίδων;  
ἄνανδρος ἢ τεκνοῦσσα; πρὸς μὲν γὰρ φύσιν  
πάντων ἄπειρος τῶνδε, γενναία δέ τις (*Women of Trachis* 307-9)

O unfortunate woman, who are you among young maidens? Without a husband or a mother? In relation to your physical appearance you are untried in these things, but someone noble.

It would appear that it was a common motif, namely, to suppose that high lineage is reflected in physical appearance. This would mean that high birth is something innate because unlike clothing, which is accessory, the body is an intrinsic part of someone's personhood.

### Nobility and money

There are essentially three ways in which the relationship between breeding and money is viewed: 1) the rich = the well-born; 2) money and nobility are separate entities but money is often more important; 3) breeding persists in spite of poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> For a similar sentiment, cf. Euripides, *Electra* 406-7, where the Farmer deduces Orestes' and Pylades' good birth from their appearance.

<sup>2</sup> Gibert (2019) 168: 'Ion takes Creusa's appearance as evidence of her "ways" and says one can generally recognize "nobility" from appearance.'

As an illustration of the first stance, where the rich and the well-born are seen as synonymous, there is a fragment which posits that those possessing old money equal the well-born:

τὴν δ' εὐγένειαν πρὸς θεῶν μὴ μοι λέγε,  
ἐν χρήμασιν τόδ' ἐστί, μὴ γαυροῦ, πάτερ·  
κύκλω γὰρ ἔρπει· τῷ μὲν ἔσθ', ὃ δ' οὐκ ἔχει·  
κοινοῖσι δ' αὐτοῖς χρώμεθ'· ὧ δ' ἂν ἐν δόμοις  
χρόνον συνοικῆ πλεῖστον, οὗτος εὐγενής. (Fr. 22)

Do not, by the gods, speak to me of good birth, for this depends on money; do not pride yourself on this, father. For it goes around in circles: the one man has it, the next man does not. We use it commonly and to whoever's house money stays the longest, this man is called well-born

The view expressed here suggests that the well-born are not those having inherited excellence of character but having inherited family wealth. When the wealth is generational the possessors of it, as children of money, are considered 'well-born', whereas those having recently acquired would presumably be known as *nouveaux riches*.

In another fragment, the idea is put forward that money, irrespective of how long one has had it, confers nobility:

ἔχειν δὲ πειρῶ· τοῦτο γὰρ τό τ' εὐγενὲς  
καὶ τοὺς γάμους δίδωσι τοὺς πρώτους ἔχειν. (*Erechtheus* Fr. 362.14-15).

Try to have possession: for this confers nobility and allows you to contract the best marriages

Nobility is once again refused to be seen as moral excellence passed down from illustrious forbears to descendants but, rather, something which can be obtained through money.

Moving onto the second position, namely, breeding and money are distinct and separate entities, but a lack of money cancels out any *soi-disant* nobility. The sentiment is expressed most clearly in the *Phoenissae* by Polynices:

τὰ χρήματ' ἀνθρώποισι τιμώτατα,  
δύναμίν τε πλείστην τῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἔχει.  
ἀγῶ μεθήκω δεῦρο μυρίαν ἄγων  
λόγην· πένης γὰρ οὐδὲν εὐγενὲς ἀνήρ. (*Phoenissae* 439-42)

Money is the most prized thing by mankind, and it has the greatest power of all things known to man. I have come in quest of it leading this large army: for the poor man is in no way noble.

Polynices is of the opinion that good birth counts for nought if it is not allied with money: a poor nobleman is worthless.<sup>1</sup>

The thrust of the last quotation is that good birth is annihilated by a lack of money. There is to be found also a more nuanced perspective, namely that birth is insufficient without money but still presented as somewhat positive:

ὅστις δὲ γαῦρον σπέρμα γενναῖόν τ' ἔχων  
βίου σπανίζει, τῷ γένει μὲν εὐτυχεῖ,  
πενία δ' ἐλάσσων ἐστίν, ἐν δ' ἀλγύνεται  
φρονῶν, ὑπ' αἰδοῦς δ' ἔργ' ἀπωθεῖται χερῶν (*Bellorophon* Fr. 285)

Whoever has proud and noble descent but is destitute, is fortunate in relation to birth but is lessened by poverty, and thinking about this he feels pain, and yet he keeps his hands away from manual work out of shame

We can see that this passage has a more favourable view of birth in relation to money than the ones before, since there is the understanding that money without birth has some unpleasantness and birth without money still represents an element of good fortune. But it is still clear that birth is considered diminished, but not annihilated, by a lack of money.<sup>2</sup>

As a corollary of this point that birth is insufficient without money, expression is given to the idea that birth combined with money is a force to be reckoned with:

μὴ πλούσιον θῆς· ἐνδεέστερος γὰρ ὦν  
ταπεινὸς ἔσται· κείνο δ' ἰσχύει μέγα,  
πλοῦτος λαβῶν <τε> τοῦτον εὐγενῆς ἀνήρ. (*Archleaus* Fr. 249)

Do not make him rich; for being poor he will be subservient, but that is a powerful force, a well-born man in possession of wealth.

The third view is that good breeding can persist even amidst a lack of wealth and is therefore to some extent at least immune to the ills of poverty:

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<sup>1</sup> Mastronarde (1994) 270 comments on these lines: 'For a man of conventional aristocratic thinking, the status of high birth is inseparable from the wealth that maintains one's standing among peers and ability to act independently.' Fr. 326 (*Danae*) and Fr. 326 (*Alcmene*) also assert that money, rather than birth, gives a man social standing. The suggestion made is that money is capable of radical social mobility to the point of inverting the hierarchy structured by birth. The Farmer in Euripides' *Electra* (35-38) claims that poverty has destroyed his nobility.

<sup>2</sup> For a similar sentiment, see *Stheneboea* Fr. 661. A lack of either birth or money is presented as insufficient, Collard, Cropp and Lee (1995) 92 make the general remark: 'The relationship between birth, wealth, poverty, and morality is one of Eur.'s constant preoccupations.'

φεῦ φεῦ, τὸ φῦναι πατρὸς εὐγενοῦς ἄπο  
ᾧσιν ἔχει φρόνησιν ἀξίωμά τε.  
κἂν γὰρ πένης ὦν τυγχάνῃ, χρηστὸς γεγώς  
τιμὴν ἔχει τιν', ἀναμετρούμενος δέ πως  
τὸ τοῦ πατρὸς γενναῖον ὠφελεῖ τρόπῳ (*Temnidae* Fr. 739)

Ah, what pride and worth does being born from a noble father hold. Even if someone happens to be poor, being well-born he retains some honour, and measuring himself against the nobility of his father his character benefits

Good birth is here said to retain some prestige and value no matter what the financial situation is. The idea is that a well-born pauper would receive better treatment and enjoy a higher social reputation than an ill-born pauper. And in terms of one's relation to oneself, the fact of being born from a noble father and therefore having him as a model by which to calibrate one's behaviour means that the well-born would be more likely to maintain dignity of character even in poverty.<sup>1</sup>

In Sophocles' extant work, at no time is the view expressed that money and birth are synonymous. In fact, Sophocles' plays only really dramatise this third viewpoint, namely that good breeding persists even in the adversity of extreme poverty. One only has to think of Philoctetes stranded and destitute on the island of Lemnos, Oedipus as the blind beggar, Electra disposed of her ancestral wealth etc., to find confirmation of this point. We cannot and should not attempt to ascertain what the personal opinion of each respective author was but we can safely say that Sophocles has given expression and dramatization only to the immunity of breeding to poverty and its independence from wealth unlike Euripides who, in the manner of the Sophists, says contradictory things about the same topic.

The question of the relation between the rich and the noble became, with the advent of coinage, a contentious topic in ancient Greece. In Theognis, there appears to be a resentment against the *parvenus* and we can imagine that Solon's classification of the Athenian population according to classes of economic income rather than birth disgruntled some members of the old, distinguished families. However, by the fifth century there seems to have been some acceptance of the

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<sup>1</sup> Collard and Cropp (2008) 243: 'The end is incoherent, but the sense of the whole is illustrated by Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1390b14-21, where it is observed that a well-born man will naturally want to gain more honour (*timē*) than he has inherited from his forebears, and will look down on those of his contemporaries who only match his own forebears in honour.' *Electra* 363 also expresses the view that nobility can persist in spite of poverty.

power of wealth.<sup>1</sup> The *Constitution of Athens* by Pseudo-Xenophon does not use terms, such as *eugenēs* or *eupatris*, to describe his high-status group, but instead uses economic and ethical adjectives, such as, οἱ χρηστοί, οἱ γενναῖοι<sup>2</sup>, οἱ πλούσιοι, οἱ βέλτιστοι. The idea is that there had been a fusion of wealth and birth. Euripides' passages engage with the ideological tensions that would arise from such a fusion. However, in the oeuvre of Sophocles, never is wealth seen as synonymous with noble birth. In fact, his protagonists are often characterised by their impoverished state. Their noble birth is never really presented as connected with or dependent upon material worth.

### Nobility and education

The question of whether education can produce moral excellence is obviously relevant to hereditary excellence, since, if the question is answered affirmatively, then heredity or innate nature no longer has a monopoly on the production of excellent individuals. As with other topics, in Euripides we find conflicting views expressed. One view is that nature takes precedence and that no amount of instruction can convert a bad nature into a good one.

μέγιστον ἀρ' ἦν ἡ φύσις· τὸ γὰρ κακὸν  
οὐδεὶς τρέφων εὖ χρηστὸν ἄν θείη ποτέ. (*Phoenix* Fr. 810)

Nature is the greatest thing: for no one bringing up well the bad would ever make it good.

There is another fragment seemingly to the same effect:

οὐ γὰρ τις οὕτω παῖδας εὖ παιδεύσεται,  
ὥστ' ἐκ πονηρῶν μὴ οὐ κακοὺς πεφυκέναί. (*Unidentified* Fr. 1068)

No one will educate sons so well that bad ones are not produced from base fathers

The reason I say seemingly is because it is possible this fragment is making a different and subtler point: education might be able to turn a bad man into a good man but it will not do so in such a way that he has the procreative power to father good sons. The idea would be that learnt behaviour is not inherited by the offspring whereas an intrinsically noble nature has the reproductive force to transmit its qualities to its offspring.

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<sup>1</sup> Capdetrey and Lafond (eds.) (2010) stress the domination of wealth as a key feature of the aristocracy, as a reaction to the viewpoint developed by Duplouy (2006) of behaviour and social recognition.

<sup>2</sup> Although, in our lexical study this word was shown to signify 'bred true to type', in this particular text the secondary meaning of 'noble of character' seems to be primary.

In the *Hippolytus* Theseus bemoans the fact that there is no way of teaching sound thinking to those who lack it:

**Θησεύς**

ὧ πολλ' ἀμαρτάνοντες ἄνθρωποι μάτην,  
τί δὴ τέχνας μὲν μυρίας διδάσκετε  
καὶ πάντα μηχανᾶσθε κάξευρίσκετε,  
ἐν δ' οὐκ ἐπίστασθ' οὐδ' ἐθηράσασθέ πω,  
φρονεῖν διδάσκειν οἷσιν οὐκ ἔνεστι νοῦς;

**Ἴππόλυτος**

δεινὸν σοφιστὴν εἶπας, ὅστις εὔφρονεῖν  
τοὺς μὴ φρονοῦντας δυνατὸς ἐστ' ἀναγκάσαι (*Hippolytus* 916-22)

Theseus: O mankind missing the mark and acting in vain, why do you teach myriad skills and contrive and discover all things, but one thing you not know nor have ever hunted down, to teach good sense to those who lack mind?

Hippolytus: You have spoken of a clever sophist, who is able to make those not thinking think well

Hippolytus' response makes allusion to the phenomenon of 5<sup>th</sup> century Sophists who were teachers of rhetoric and, for the most part, claimed to be able to teach virtue and good thinking.<sup>1</sup> Although *prima facie* Hippolytus retorts that there do exist those people of whom Theseus bemoans the absence, it is relatively clear that Hippolytus' tone is ironic<sup>2</sup> and therefore the implication is that education cannot teach intelligence to those who lack it. In this instance, the natural corollary is that nature is predominant in determining the character and thought capacity of someone.

There is a passage from the *Hecuba* which starts off by stressing the immutability of nature in contrast to farmland whose quality changes depending on certain conditions but then the passage makes the concession that education is of some benefit.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barrett (1964) 339 'In the latter part of the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. the word was applied to the Sophists, the 'experts' who professed to impart their knowledge (for a fee) to others; here, in a context of teaching, that application is evidently in mind.'

<sup>2</sup> Barrett (1964) 340: 'Hipp. is merely speaking in irony.'

<sup>3</sup> Gregory (1999) 117 makes the insightful comment: 'But Euripides is not gratuitously introducing a fashionable intellectual topic; the issue is of vital significance to a play in which two of the principals, Polyxena and Polymestor, exemplify natures inherently good and inherently evil.'

οὐκουν δεινόν, εἰ γῆ μὲν κακὴ  
τυχοῦσα καιροῦ θεόθεν εὖ στάχυν φέρει,  
χρηστὴ δ' ἄμαρτοῦσ' ὦν χρεῶν αὐτὴν τυχεῖν  
κακὸν δίδωσι καρπὸν, ἀνθρώποις δ' ἀεὶ  
ὁ μὲν πονηρὸς οὐδὲν ἄλλο πλὴν κακός,  
ὁ δ' ἐσθλὸς ἐσθλός, οὐδὲ συμφορᾶς ὑπο  
φύσιν διέφθειρ', ἀλλὰ χρηστός ἐστ' ἀεὶ;  
ἄρ' οἱ τεκόντες διαφέρουσιν ἢ τροφαί;  
ἔχει γε μέντοι καὶ τὸ θρεφθῆναι καλῶς  
δίδαξιν ἐσθλοῦ· τοῦτο δ' ἦν τις εὖ μάθη,  
οἶδεν τό γ' αἰσχρόν, κανόνι τοῦ καλοῦ μαθών. (*Hecuba* 592-602)

Is it not strange that a bad piece of land if it chances upon favourable heaven-sent conditions produces a good harvest, and a good one missing out on that of which it has need gives a poor yield, but with men the base is nothing other than bad, and the good good, and his nature is destroyed by no disaster but he is always good? Do the parents make the difference or nurture? Being well brought up gives an instruction in that which is good: if someone learns this well, he knows the shameful, learning by the standard of the fine.

Unlike a usually fertile piece of land which can become barren through drought and other adverse factors or a poor piece of land which can become productive through propitious weather and fertilisation, human nature, according to this passage, remains unchanged regardless of external influences.<sup>1</sup> Based on this introduction we would then expect nature/nurture question to be answered emphatically in favour of the former principle. However, in a concessionary, although some might say contradictory, manner the passage then says that good nurture gives an awareness of that which is fine and by corollary that which is shameful.<sup>2</sup> Whether this knowledge will be enough for the instructed to put into practice through their behaviour the precepts of their moral consciousness is not mentioned.<sup>3</sup>

For a more unequivocal praise of the capacity of education to effect a positive transformation on the student there is a passage from the *Suppliant Women*:

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<sup>1</sup> Battezzato (2018) 152: 'For Hecuba, aristocrats inevitably possess an unfaltering inborn virtue. She recalls the traditional comparison between human beings and live plants [...] only to reject it: plants depend on external circumstances, unlike noble human beings.'

<sup>2</sup> Both Gregory (1999) 117 and Battezzato (2018) 152 see Hecuba as making a concession on her initial statement.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory (1999) 117 fails to see the absence of this assertion and optimistically understands the lines to mean: 'Good character can be inculcated: in learning what goodness is, a child also comes to recognize deviations from the norm.'

γὰρ τραφῆναι μὴ κακῶς αἰδῶ φέρει·  
αἰσχύνεται δὲ τὰγάθ' ἀσκήσας ἀνήρ  
κακὸς γενέσθαι πᾶς τις. ἢ δ' εὐανδρία  
διδρακτός, εἵπερ καὶ βρέφος διδάσκειται  
λέγειν ἀκούειν θ' ὧν μάθησιν οὐκ ἔχει.  
ἂ δ' ἂν μάθη τις, ταῦτα σῶζεσθαι φιλεῖ  
πρὸς γῆρας. οὕτω παῖδας εὖ παιδεύετε. (*Suppliant Women* 911-17)

Being brought up not badly carries reverence: for every man having practised at good things is ashamed to become bad. Courage is teachable, if a baby can learn to speak and understand the things of which it does not have knowledge. Whatever someone learns, it is likely that he preserves these things until old age. Thus educate well your children.

This is a very interesting passage which bolsters itself with argumentation for its assertions. The first part says that the effectiveness of education resides in the fact that it instils a sense of shame. Moreover, the education is not just theoretical but one strengthened by practice to the point where a man behaves well out of shame and out of habit. Then there is discussion around the teachability of courage. To support the affirmative response to the question the passage invokes the phenomenon of language learning by babies, where babies universally learn something of which they have no prior knowledge. Finally, the idea is put forward that things learnt in the formative years of infancy are likely to be preserved until old age.

We have seen that Sophocles engages with this debate of the respective role education plays in attaining excellence. The general pattern that emerged is that adults of noble natures do not require education; Sophocles' protagonists are notable for their unreachability. However, Sophocles does seem to stress that children or young men of noble birth require some form of mentorship to realise their inner excellence, for instance, Ajax' son, Eurysaces, and Philoctetes. In fact, this question of the importance of education for the fulfilment of natural excellence so preoccupied Sophocles that one could argue that the *Philoctetes* itself is devoted to exploring the question. There, Neoptolemus needed the mentorship and example of Philoctetes, to realise his noble nature.

### Heroic/ethical behaviour expected of the well-born

There are many passages in Euripides' extant plays and fragments where one of the characters makes a statement on how they should behave based on their good birth. In these moments they show an awareness that a certain type of ethical behaviour is expected of them. In many instances the expected behaviour could be described as heroic. It would seem therefore that the 'heroic temper' Knox spoke of in relation to Sophocles' protagonists is applicable also to some of Euripides'



characters. At any rate, the interesting feature of the passages that we are going to look at is that good birth, in the eyes of the characters, demands conduct of a high moral calibre.

Good birth appears to impose upon its beneficiaries the need to choose death in place of an ignoble life. It could be understood that because a nobleman is expected to behave nobly, without exception, if he finds himself in a situation where this is no longer possible, death becomes the only exit from this impasse. For example, Iphigenia feels it incumbent upon herself to commit suicide so as to act in a way befitting her breeding:<sup>1</sup>

καθθανεῖν μὲν μοι δέδοκται· τοῦτο δ' αὐτὸ βούλομαι  
εὐκλεῶς πρᾶξαι, παρεῖσά γ' ἐκποδῶν τὸ δυσγενές (*Iphigenia At Aulis* 1375-6)

It is determined for me to die: I wish to do this gloriously, ridding myself of any taint of baseness.

Iphigenia is aware that her death is required by Artemis and instead of being sacrificed unwillingly she would rather honour her good breeding and die voluntarily for the greater good.<sup>2</sup>

The characters also express their inner compulsion to behave courageously not just through accepting death, as we have seen, but through the performance of brave deeds and the avoidance of cowardly acts. For example, when Creon orders Oedipus to leave Thebes, the latter knowing that banishment is tantamount to death given his physical disabilities refuses to fall down in supplication:

οὐ μὴν ἐλίξας γ' ἀμφὶ σὸν χεῖρας γόνυ  
κακὸς φανοῦμαι· τὸ γὰρ ἐμόν ποτ' εὐγενές  
οὐκ ἂν προδοίην, οὐδέ περ πρᾶσσων κακῶς (*Phoenissae* 1622-4)

I refuse to wrap my hands around your knees and appear cowardly: for I would not betray my former nobility, not even if I fare badly

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<sup>1</sup> For a similar sentiment, see *Trojan Women* 1012-14, where Hecuba rebukes Helen in their *agōn* for not committing suicide to escape the ignominy of an adulterous relationship with Paris. For the sentiment that not only must someone noble be prepared to face death but the death must be a brave one, see *Heracleidae* 503-14, *Iphigenia At Aulis* 1375-6 and *Orestes* 1060-4.

<sup>2</sup> Collard and Morwood (2017) 587: 'τὸ δυσγενές lit. "low birth", i.e. the ungenerous morality usually associated with it, and rejected by Electra's peasant husband *El.* 362-3 'I may be poor, but I'll certainly not show meanness in my nature' [...] Iph. means to display the converse, the inborn 'nobility' at once recognised by the Chorus in 1402 and again in 1411, 1421.'

Oedipus will not take the shameful and submissive position of suppliant, and thereby sacrifice his high-minded nobility, even though doing so would perhaps procure him benefit. He uses the substantive adjectival form τὸ γὰρ ἐμόν ποτ' εὐγενές to describe the cause of his reluctance, i.e. knowledge of his ancestry and the behaviour it entails forbids Oedipus from safety-seeking, honour-compromising meekness.<sup>1</sup>

Another mode of behaviour expected of those of good breeding is showing endurance in misfortune and accepting unavoidable evils with a calm and stoic mind.

ἀλλ' εὔ φέρειν χρὴ συμφορὰς τὸν εὐγενῆ (*Alcmene* Fr. 98)

But it is necessary for the well-born man to bear misfortunes well

ὅστις εὐγενῆς βροτῶν,

φέρει τά γ' ἐκ θεῶν πτώματ' οὐδ' ἀναίεται (*Heracles* 1227-8)

Whoever is well-born of men, he bears the misfortunes sent from the gods and does not refuse them

The context of Fragment 98 is not known but the lines from *Heracles* are uttered by Theseus to Heracles after the latter has murdered his children. The two quotations express the same sentiment, namely that the well-born should face suffering and misfortune with a brave face and accept what befalls him. The well-born are expected to show a readiness, or better still, willingness, to experience difficult and trying circumstances.

On the surface it would appear that Euripides' characters share the same 'heroic temper' which Knox discerned in Sophocles' protagonists.<sup>2</sup> They feel obliged to behave heroically in honour of their good breeding. However, there are certain differences. Where Sophocles' protagonists have a complete consistency of

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<sup>1</sup> Mastronarde (1994) 607 makes the interesting remark: "the nobility I had of old"; the use of ποτε reflects the uncertainty whether one's noble stature is dependent solely on one's character or is subject to erosion by external circumstances. Here Oed. tries to live up to the standard, but is not sure whether he still possesses τὸ εὐγενές [...] The Soph. Oed. characteristically has a surer sense of his lasting worth (OC 8 τὸ γενναῖον). Other acts of behaviour noble individuals are expected to avoid are weeping (*Helen* 950-3), although this is debated, and display of effeminacy (*Trojan Women* 1033-5)

<sup>2</sup> Stewart (2019) 6 appears right in his adjustment of Knox' position, 'Although he [Knox] believed it to be most clearly shown in Sophocles' heroes, it would be would be a mistake to view the inner nature that forms the basis for the 'heroic temper' as something uniquely Sophoclean. Rather, as we shall see, the idea of a heroic nature is equally central to many of the plays of Euripides.' Just because the 'heroic temper' is more emphatic in Sophocles does not mean it is absent from Euripides. And one also has to be cautious because we are basing judgements on only seven extant plays of Sophocles.

character remaining resolutely true to their principles, some of Euripides' characters display more wavering weakness of resolution. For example, we have seen Iphigenia's resolution to die bravely. But, just over a hundred lines earlier she had made the very unSophocelan statement:<sup>1</sup>

κακῶς ζῆν κρεῖσσον ἢ καλῶς θανεῖν (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 1252)

It is better to live badly than live well

Equally, Oedipus' resolution not to fall down into meek, supplicatory behaviour (*Phoenissae* 1622-4), which has already been cited, is worded in such a way that it betrays a lack of confidence in the durability of his good breeding in contrast to the confidence of Sophocles' Oedipus in his breeding: "the nobility I had of old"; the use of ποτε reflects the uncertainty whether one's noble stature is dependent solely on one's character or is subject to erosion by external circumstances. Here Oed. tries to live up to the standard, but is not sure whether he still possesses τὸ εὐγενές [...] The Soph. Oed. characteristically has a surer sense of his lasting worth (OC 8 τὸ γενναῖον).<sup>2</sup>

### Socio-political advantages, neutralities and disadvantages of nobility

#### Advantages

We find passages expressing the belief that there are certain socio-political advantages that accompany good birth. It is asserted that good birth has a protective force in the face of misfortune:

τὸ δυστυχές γὰρ ἠϋγένει' ἀμύνεται  
τῆς δυσγενείας μᾶλλον' ἡμεῖς γὰρ κακῶν  
ἐς τοῦσχατον πεσόντες ἠϋρομεν φίλους  
καὶ ξυγγενεῖς τούσδ', οἱ τοσῆσδ' οἰκουμένης  
Ἑλληνίδος γῆς τῶνδε προύστησαν μόνοι. (*Heraclidae* 302-6)

For good breeding defends against misfortune better than ill-breeding: for we having arrived at such a pitch of troubles have found friends and these kinsmen, who alone of all the Greek land have been the defenders of these children.

Iolaus, Heracles' old friend, makes this statement after the children have received hospitality and the promise of assistance from Demophon. Theseus and Heracles were cousins so Demophon, son of Theseus, and the children of Heracles are

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<sup>1</sup>Collard and Morwood (2017) 587: 'What a contrast with her 1252, her final words to Ag., "To live ignobly is better than to die nobly"! They scarcely evince the nobility of spirit which she is now determined to embody.'

<sup>2</sup>Mastrorarde (1994) 607.

cousins once removed. The point being made here about good breeding defending against misfortune better than ill fortune seems explained by the fact that those of good birth are likely to have more family members in positions of power and influence. Membership of a good family is tantamount to being part of a well-connected network of well-disposed people of high socio-political standing. Children from a humble background would never be able to dream of arriving in Athens and having a family connection with the reigning king.<sup>1</sup>

There is a fragment which echoes this passage:

φεῦ φεῦ, τὸ φῦναι πατρὸς εὐγενοῦς ἄπο  
ᾧσιν ἔχει φρόνησιν ἀξίωμα τε.  
κἂν γὰρ πένης ὢν τυγχάνῃ, χρηστὸς γενῶς  
τιμὴν ἔχει τιν', ἀναμετρούμενος δέ πως  
τὸ τοῦ πατρὸς γενναῖον ὠφελεῖ τρόπῳ (Fr. 739)

Ah, what pride and worth comes with being born from a noble father. For even if he happens to be poor, being of a good family he has some honour, and measuring himself in relation to the nobility of his father his character benefits

The fact that good birth might fill someone with pride is not difficult to understand. The advantage of this pride is that it translates into self-esteem and the person well-born thinks themselves worthy of the good things in life. ἀξίωμα is a noun which has different shades of meaning. It has the abstract meanings of 'worth, honour, dignity' but also the concrete meanings of 'rank, position'. The use of this particular noun could suggest that good birth has a tendency to convert its intrinsic value into a more concrete value such as a high socio-political position. The same sort of idea can be applied to the word τιμή. In its most abstract sense it can be translated as 'honour'. But the payment of honour can take various forms: to the gods it can take the form of sacrifice, to men it can take the form of giving them a high political position, hence why 'offering' and 'office, magistracy' are possible meanings of the word.

A fragment from the lost play *Archelaus* expresses the idea that it is advantageous to have someone of good birth in command because they inspire confidence:

ἡμῶν τί δῆτα τυγχάνεις χρεῖαν ἔχων;  
πατέρων γὰρ ἐσθλῶν ἐλπίδας δίδως γενῶς. (Archelaus Fr 231)

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<sup>1</sup> For a similar sentiment, see *Ion* 577-81 where Ion can expect to gain political dominance and wealth on his arrival at Athens thanks to his mother, Creusa, being the daughter of Erechtheus. And also *Andromache* 768-75 those belonging to wealthy and noble houses have greater resources with which to resist difficult circumstances: the founders of wealthy families have lasting legacies providing benefit for future descendants.

Why do you happen to have need of me?  
Being from good forebears you give hope.

This fragment most probably comes from an exchange between Archelaus and King Cisseus. Archelaus has arrived at King Cisseus' land as an exile. The king is currently being attacked by neighbours and seeks the help of Archelaus. The reason why he looks to Archelaus for help seems to be due to the illustrious ancestry of Archelaus, who is the son of Temenus, the grandson of Heracles.<sup>1</sup> Just the mere fact of knowing the ancestry of Archelaus has been enough for the king to entrust him with military command. The underlying assumption is that if Archelaus is anything like his ancestor, Heracles, the army will be in safe hands.<sup>2</sup>

### Neutral entity

We find the sentiment expressed that good breeding is neither a socio-political advantage nor disadvantage. It is a neutral entity of no effect, unable to confer benefits and a powerless defence in the face of misfortune. Although, strictly speaking, it is something neutral, it is often mentioned in this regard by characters with a tone of disappointment caused by an unmet expectation that good breeding should carry with it certain advantages. A good example of this viewpoint is found in the *Phoenissae*:

**Ἰοκάστη** φίλοι δὲ πατρὸς καὶ ξένοι σ' οὐκ ὠφέλουν;

**Πολυνείκης** εὖ πράσσει· τὰ φίλων δ' οὐδέν, ἦν τι δυστυχῆς.

**Ἰοκάστη** οὐδ' ἠυγένειά σ' ἦρεν εἰς ὕψος μέγαν;

**Πολυνείκης** κακὸν τὸ μὴ ἔχειν· τὸ γένος οὐκ ἔβοσκε με. (*Phoenissae* 402-6)

locasta: Did the friends and guests of your father not help you?

Polynices: Make sure you fare well: friendships count for nothing, if you suffer misfortune

locasta: did your good birth not raise you up to a great height?

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<sup>1</sup> Collard, Cropp and Gibert (2004) 354: 'The nobility of Archelaus' ancestry is conveyed by the long genealogy in the prologue and is probably referred to in the many gnomic fragments (232, 233, 242, 249) that sound this theme. Although it is assumed that he has inherited his forebears' good qualities (F 232), this must be tested through "hard work" (F 236 n.).

<sup>2</sup> Fragment 242 from the same play which reinforces the idea that it is advantageous to have a general of good birth in command. A fragment (404) from the play, *Ino*, expressed an expectation that the children of Ino, being of good birth, will obtain sovereignty, and the expectation seems to be based on the idea that the marriage of political control and good birth is not uncommon.

Polynices: Not having anything is an evil: family background does not feed you

Polynices has just returned from exile and his mother, Iocasta, is questioning him on how he fared during this time. What is interesting in relation to our topic is that Iocasta in both of her questions assumes that her son would have derived some socio-political advantage from his background. The assumption of the first question is quite justified since aristocrats typically enjoyed the advantages of *xeinia*. Because of his international social network an aristocrat would typically have connections in a foreign city upon whom he, or even his sons, as we see in the case of Telemachus' visit to Menelaus' home in Sparta, could hope to find a warm welcome and practical assistance. But Polynices claims that poverty negates the practice of *xeinia*. Whether this was true or false in practice it is hard to say. However, Polynices' response is not wholly unconvincing since *xeinia* was based on the principle of reciprocity: I will host you as a guest and one day you will host me as guest, and often there could even be an exchange of gifts. But obviously in the case of one person being impoverished, the possibility of reciprocity becomes unfeasible.<sup>1</sup>

τοὺς εὐγενεῖς γὰρ οὐ στυγοῦσι δαίμονες,  
τῶν δ' ἀναριθμῆτων μᾶλλον εἰσὶν οἱ πόνοι (*Helen* 1678-9)

For the gods do not hate the well-born, but the troubles of the masses weigh more heavily

### Disadvantages

The most common opposition to good breeding is centred around the belief that hereditary excellence is fictitious, yet those holding this view would still regard good breeding as something desirable if only it existed. However, in Euripides there are certain passages putting quite a subtle and alternative view, namely that good breeding does exist but it is a curse rather than a boon to those who possess it. Good breeding is sometimes presented as a disadvantage, as something which causes the ruin of those who are supposed to benefit from it. This view is neatly expressed by Andromache in her address to her son, Astyanax:

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<sup>1</sup> Craik (1988) 193: 'The cynical assertion that nobility is negated by poverty (reiterated emphatically in conclusion, 442) is to be seen in the context of the fifth century debate on the relative importance of *physis* "nature" and *nomos* "nurture" in the individual's makeup [...] In *Ph.*, produced 409 BC, Sophokles takes the view that a good *physis* – i.e. *eugeneia* – is inalienable: the young Neoptolemus is ultimately true to his *physis* as son of Achilles and Philoktetes – despite exile, poverty and physical agony – remains truly *eugenes* "noble". Another example of a character disappointed with the inability of *eugeneia* is Hecuba to defend against the vicissitudes of fortune is Hecuba (*Trojan Women* 614-5). Equally, *Heraclidae* 233-5 and *Orestes* 953-6.

ἢ τοῦ πατρὸς δέ σ' εὐγένει' ἀποκτενεῖ,  
ἢ τοῖσιν ἄλλοις γίγνεται σωτηρία,  
τὸ δ' ἐσθλὸν οὐκ ἐς καιρὸν ἦλθε σοὶ πατρός (*Trojan Women* 742-4)

The nobility of your father kills you, that which is a source of safety to others, but the good of your father does not come at the right time

Andromache has been told by Talthymbius that the Greek army intend to kill her son because they are afraid to let 'the son of an excellent father be reared (λέξας ἀρίστου παῖδα μὴ τρέφειν πατρός) (723). As we see, Andromache concludes from this that the excellence of her son's father, far from being of benefit to her son, such as, for example, transmitting to him that same excellence and procuring him a high social position, is proving to be his downfall. If Astyanax was born of a lowly father, from whom the Greeks did not fear the growth of a valiant offspring, he would most likely be spared by the Greeks. As it is, he is to die because of his good breeding.<sup>1</sup>

Agamemnon in *Iphigenia at Aulis* actually goes so far as to say that low birth has advantages over good birth:

ἢ δυσγένεια δ' ὡς ἔχει τι χρήσιμον.  
καὶ γὰρ δακρῦσαι ῥαδίως αὐτοῖς ἔχει,  
ἅπαντά τ' εἰπεῖν. τῷ δὲ γενναίῳ φύσιν  
ἄνολβα ταῦτα. προστάτην δὲ τοῦ βίου  
τὸν ὄγκον ἔχομεν τῷ τ' ὄχλῳ δουλεύομεν.  
ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐκβαλεῖν μὲν αἰδοῦμαι δάκρυ (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 446-51)

How low birth has something useful. For it is possible for those of such a nature to weep easily and to say all things. But for him noble by nature these things are unblest. We have pride governing our lives and are a slave to the people. I am ashamed to weep a tear

Agamemnon is naturally distraught knowing that his daughter has to be sacrificed. This emotional state causes him to make the general reflection that good breeding is a burden upon its recipients since it weighs them down with the restrictive injunctions relating to pride and dignity. Where the ordinary man can freely and naturally express his emotions, the man of good birth has to conform to a certain

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<sup>1</sup> Hippolytus, too, is said to be destroyed by his nobility (τὸ δ' εὐγενές σε τῶν φρενῶν ἀπώλεσεν) (*Hippolytus* 1389-90). Whether nobility of mind or ancestry is meant is more ambiguous in this instance. According to Barrett (1964) 409: 'Nobility, in its secondary moral sense'. But it cannot be ignored that Hippolytus is the son of Theseus, and so of undisputed noble birth.

heroic code.<sup>1</sup> Also, he makes the interesting point that, although good birth seems to confer socio-political superiority, in his case kingship, in reality it is a form of servitude, where one is obliged to serve the people rather than to be served. There can be no denying that this is a very astute and interesting suggestion.

Overall, the relevant passages in Euripides' oeuvre offer a balanced view of the socio-political utility of good birth arguing, at different times, that it is advantageous, neutral and disadvantageous. Given that the majority of the audience would have consisted of spectators not distinguished by family ancestry, the notion that good birth is not necessarily an advantage would have likely been a pleasing notion to them. What is significant when we contrast Euripides' passages in this regard with the plays of Sophocles is the fact that the protagonists of this latter playwright almost never seem to gain any social advantage from their high birth. One wonders whether Sophocles' emphasis on his protagonists' good breeding was made more palatable to the audience via this approach, since, instead of privilege and luxury, good breeding is shown to entail responsibility, self-sacrifice and willingness to endure suffering, with the result that one might end up admiring the moral fibre of the protagonists, but certainly not envy them their fate.

### Conclusion

Euripides gives a kaleidoscopic presentation of breeding examining it from many different angles. From the sheer number of passages which speak to this topic in Euripides it is impossible but to conclude that the subject was of great interest to Euripides and presumably a hot topic of discussion in the fifth century otherwise Euripides would probably not have given himself the licence to mention it so often. And therefore we should not be surprised to find it a developed and significant theme within Sophocles' oeuvre. It is possible that Sophocles was motivated by the seeming ambivalence of Euripides' towards breeding to treat the theme in a much more unequivocal manner.

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<sup>1</sup> Collard and Morwood (2017) 362: 'These lines may have been a model for Ennius *Incerta* 388-9: "In this the common people have the advantage over the king: in an appropriate place the people may weep, the king decently may not".'



## Chapter 10: Conclusion

The objective of this thesis has been to carry out an investigation, as comprehensive as possible, of Sophocles' representation of good breeding as well as situating it in the history of Greek thought. It has been demonstrated that the theme of breeding was an abiding topic of interest for Sophocles, featuring heavily in his earliest extant play and also his penultimate extant play. Although this thesis focused on five of his plays, it would be wrong to conclude that the topic is absent from the other two, *Trachiniae* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. And there are several fragments, referenced where relevant throughout the dissertation, which also speak to this theme.

As discussion of secondary literature showed, scholars have not failed to notice the importance of the theme but no one had attempted to carry out a systematic study placing Sophocles' portrayal of good breeding within the wider frame of Greek culture. The only exception was the PhD dissertation of Elftmann (1973), but this last is not as exhaustive or penetrative in his analysis, failing to give an account of good breeding in Homer, Theognis and Pindar, who happen to be essential poets for contextualising Sophocles' thought. Also, this thesis has been much more imaginative in its treatment of the individual plays, focusing not merely on passages featuring birth-related terminology but analysing the dramatisation of the subject through plot construction as well as exploring family-related topics relevant to the concept of good birth, such as parental status, adoption, sibling dynamics, conflict between the *polis* and the family etc. Because of this more expansive approach, significant contribution has been made to under-studied topics such as aristocracy in ancient Greece and the role of the family. Furthermore, this thesis has laid the foundation for a similar study on Euripides whose oeuvre, although being more replete with direct references to birth, has been even less mined than Sophocles'. It is quite astounding how little scholarship there is on Euripides' engagement with the theme.<sup>1</sup> I hope that my collation and discussion of the most relevant passages can be used as a basis for a monograph on the subject. In the introduction I put forward as an explanation for the general lacuna in relation to birth and aristocracy in the ancient Greek world the bias towards studying the democratic elements of tragedy and Greek civilisation. It seems that this academic trend is losing momentum and so there is hope that a dispassionate approach to the study of Greek texts, tragedy in particular, can be adopted where subjects are given attention based on their emphasis in the texts rather than their alignment with contemporary prejudices.

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart (2019) and a small section in Decharme (1893) are the notable exceptions to the general trend.

Sophoclean scholarship has been plagued with an unresolvable division between a hero-worship interpretation of Sophocles' protagonists and a pietist one. It has always been my intention to address this polemical debate, but rather than tackling the subject head-on and rehashing well-trodden arguments that have still failed to prove decisive, I have shown that coming at the subject from another angle is critical. The noble nature of Sophocles' characters is fundamental and their heroic positions and actions are an emanation of this essential nature. By directing attention to this substrate level, it has been argued that Sophocles is unequivocal in his esteem for a noble nature, a hereditary gift whose latent potential needs to be realised. And so it is highly likely that behaviour (depicted homogeneously enough to be identified as the 'heroic temper') attributive of this noble nature must be designed to be admired by the audience, even if the behaviour flouts convention. We, as the reader, can make our own judgements, and someone who has a sympathy for the Daoist principle of *wu wei* (effortless action, going with the flow), might struggle to admire Ajax or Philoctetes. However, that does not mean that Sophocles has not put extraordinary effort into rendering his protagonists worthy of praise and admiration. It is important to acknowledge as objectively as is reasonably possible the intention of the dramatist, even if we reserve a right to maintain our own notions of what we consider appropriate conduct. When we study the play of an author, we are entering into their mental world and not our own, and so sympathetic understanding with even antipathetic ideas must be attempted. The obstinate and uncompromising attachment to principle even to the point of risking death might not be an advisable approach in the real world, although certain figures have achieved great renown for such an approach, such as Christ and Socrates, but reading the plays as a condemnation of such behaviour in the fashion of Bowra seems widely off the mark, especially since it is impossible to square the insistent appreciation for a noble nature with this apparent condemnation of behaviour emanating therefrom.<sup>1</sup>

Let us summarise what attitude we have discerned in the plays towards pedigree birth. The archaic faith in good breeding, as testified by Homer, Theognis and Pindar, is still present in Sophocles. However, the tragedian no longer maintains the faith nor expectation that birth goes hand in hand with socio-economic-political privilege. Sophocles' plays imply that aristocrats maintaining an aristocratic ideology, such as Cimon, as opposed to the figures of aristocratic birth but democratic political leanings, such as Pericles, had been stripped of much of their socio-political standing. But that his protagonists, in spite of their social ruin, inspire admiration and display an inner greatness of character is a refutation of the idea that hereditary excellence is dependent on external factors. His plays therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Bowra (1944).

challenge the politics of his time since as much as they might comply with egalitarian ideology by dramatising the annihilation of aristocratic privilege, they nevertheless argue that, in spite of failure to recognise in a socio-political sense these aristocratic individuals, their hereditary excellence still persists. In this way, they are very hard to dispose of, and even after death they leave trace of their heroic nature, as the burial of Ajax, identifiable with hero-cult, suggests. Sophocles was a dramatist, and not a political theorist, even though he did hold certain political offices in his lifetime, and so we do not find any concrete answers in his plays as to how these aristocratic individuals might be reintegrated into democratic society, and yet that seems to be an issue many of his plays grapple with.

Moving away from a political focus, let us summarise what insights Sophocles has brought to the topic of hereditary excellence in terms of philosophical study. Unlike Francis Galton in the nineteenth century, it does not appear that the statements pertaining to hereditary excellence in Sophocles, whether we identify them as the author's opinion or not, are based on rigorously statistical analysis.<sup>1</sup> Nor can we expect any advanced opinions relating to the biological mechanics of hereditary excellence that modern genetic study offers. Nonetheless, there a few key principles that seem present throughout his plays.

1) One's nature is inherited from one's parents – in Sophocles' eyes, a person is not born *ex nihilo* but from a set of parents from whom the child inherits their nature. This was witnessed in the *Philoctetes* where there is word play connecting the parent with what he produces. And in all the plays studied, the main characters understand that their individual nature is shaped by that of their parents.

2) This is not fail-safe, and there will be exceptions proving the rule, as it were – Sophocles does not fail to depict descendants who deviate from their ancestral excellence: Ismene and Chrysothemis could be considered children who fail to live up to their heroic ancestry. But just because there are anomalies does not seem to diminish the faith in the general tendency of fine parents giving birth to fine children. It might not be an axiomatic rule but the suggestion is that the child of fine parents has a much higher chance of being born fine than the child of base parents.

3) Transmission is predominantly via the patriline – we saw in the lexical study that the meaning of *genos* in Homer is much closer to patriline than the broader family or ancestry. And therefore *eugeneia* would mean excellence of the patriline.

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<sup>1</sup> Galton (1892) with typical Victorian rigour approaches the subject of hereditary excellence which had previously only ever been a hotbed of conflicting opinions. In the book he draws up a list of eminent men, and then through genealogical study calculates and analyses how many of them have eminent kin. He argues that excellence is most certainly a family affair based on the high (well beyond the point of accidental) frequency of eminent men with eminent family members.

Although there are no such neat instances of *genos* having this specific meaning in Sophocles, it is still clear that the tragedian regards the patriline as the conduit through which hereditary excellence passes. Firstly, there is a large emphasis on patronymics. Secondly, the father-son relationship is explored in more depth than any other family relationship. Thirdly, in the *Electra* we actually see a dramatisation of the idea that children belong to the father, and not the mother, even so far as to suggest that the mother's role in the reproductive process is negligible.

3) The influence of ancestry reduces as degrees of relation increase, i.e. the influence of the father is greater than that of the grandfather – most of the time discussion of ancestry centres on the father, the nearest ancestral member. It is true that sometimes ancestry is traced back more generations, as in the case of Ajax. However, it is noticeable that Telamon features much more strongly as a determinant of Ajax' nature than his grandfather, Aiacus, or his great-grandfather, Zeus.

4) A noble nature requires instruction and mentorship – the most noticeable presentation of this principle is found in the *Philoctetes*, where Neoptolemus requires the example and association of Philoctetes to realise his noble nature. But the principle is also made clear by Ajax who stresses that his young son, Eurysaces, needs to be 'broken in'.

5) The excellence of noble nature is fundamentally moral, although intellectual and physical distinction often comes combined with it – Sophocles' protagonists are not depicted primarily as intellectual elites or physical specimens. The quality that is put in the foreground is their moral character, their adherence to principle, their willingness to suffer rather than compromise their sense of right. That is not say that his main characters are dullards or physical weaklings. All of them show a high degree of intellectual curiosity and the ability to speak eloquently. And mention is also made of their physical superiority, such as the 'largeness' of Ajax' body or Orestes' fictional depiction as a successful athlete. But, what fundamentally separates them from the masses is the strength of their moral fibre and their uncompromising conscience.

6) Noble nature has a natural basis and is not an artificial creation – nobility is depicted as something existing by *phusis*, rather than by *nomos*. The nobility of the main characters is not dependent on the pomp of externals, but persists even in social ruin. Furthermore, the *Philoctetes* give an anthropological basis for nobility.

7) The quality and achievements of one's ancestors count rather than their political prestige – the plays do not depict an ossified, institutionalised hierarchy where the main characters pomp around with a prestigious title handed down from their forebears. It is the feats and achievements of their ancestors which demand their attention: Ajax recalls the valorous deeds of Telamon in the first Trojan campaign,

Neoptolemus is mindful of his father's military prowess and principled character. The social status of their ancestors as well-born individuals is less important than the fact that they combined this good birth with great deeds. Atreus and Menelaos are presented as pseudo-noble because, although their ancestors might typically be identified as aristocrats, they are authors of immoral and shameless behaviour.

8) Nobility is superior to ethnicity – this point is made most clear in the *Ajax*, where Agamemnon's and Menelaos' disparagement of Teucer's foreign status, as the offspring of a spearbride, is refuted. Teucer makes the point in such an emphatic way that the audience is clearly supposed to agree with him, that his mother, though a foreigner, is still a princess 'by nature'.

9) Nobility although being transmitted via the patriline can be embodied in females pertaining to that patriline – it is somewhat paradoxical that as much as the patriline might be emphasised, two out of the five protagonists who are exemplars of hereditary excellence happen to be females. And this presentation is all the more striking given the patriarchal structure of the society in which the plays were performed. The only way to square this paradox is to conclude that females are able to inherit excellence but have a weak ability to transmit it.

10) Because of the uncertainty that surrounds nobility, it behoves the supposed beneficiaries of it to prove by heroic acts that they are true inheritors of it – all the main characters studied feel a burdensome obligation to live up to their family history. In the *Ajax* we saw insinuations that it is only by dying valiantly that Ajax can dispel any rumours of illegitimacy. And it is not just a question of proving one's biological legitimacy but also confirming one's moral legitimacy, since, as we have mentioned above, it is impossible for descendants, though the legitimate offspring of fine parents, not to be endowed with the family excellence.

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