

TRAGIC MALE SUICIDE IN ATHENS

TRAGIC MALE SUICIDE IN FIFTH-CENTURY ATHENS

By DANIEL M. BEAUCHAMP, B.A., HONS.

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for the Degree Master of Arts

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Hons. (York University) SUPERVISOR: Professor K. Mattison NUMBER OF

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Lay Abstract

During the Peloponnesian War in the fifth century BC, the ancient Greek city of Athens produced a number of works of tragedy. These plays were part of Athens' cultural ascendancy during this period, and were intended to contribute to the moral education of Athenian citizens. As this citizen body was made up of adult men, it is striking that one seemingly destructive aspect of Greek tragedy, that of male suicide, is depicted positively throughout the surviving plays. This thesis will demonstrate that the ancient Athenians portrayed male suicide in a particular way in tragedy in order to glorify cultural ideals of civic duty and civic pride during this period.

Abstract

The cultural ascendancy of Athens during the fifth century BC involved the production of works of tragedy. Among the purposes of tragedies was the moral education of Athenian society. The democratic organization of Athens meant that the *polis* was predicated upon the political and social contributions of adult, citizen men. Given these features, it is all the more striking that male suicide, so apparently destructive of these goods, is mainly depicted positively throughout Attic tragedy. The presence of these moments in the tragedies suggests that the Athenians intended to model positive meaning through these representations. The aim of this study is to show how the framing of male suicide in tragedy mimicked Athenian ideals of civic duty and civic pride that were the products of an increasing cultural hegemony during the Peloponnesian War. The findings of this thesis will demonstrate that the Athenians engaged with the issues of government, self-sacrifice, and social contribution through the performances of male suicide at the City Dionysia.

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Declaration of Academic Achievement

The author declares that the contents of this thesis have been compiled by Daniel M. Beauchamp, with contributions of the supervisory committee consisting of Dr. Kathryn Mattison, Dr. Mariapia Pietropaolo, and Dr. Sean Corner during the research and writing process.

Introduction

A Civic Context for Tragic Male Suicide

I. Overview

The purpose of this study is to examine some specific instances of male suicides in Greek tragedy and their connection to Athenian cultural ideas, in order that we might gain a better understanding not only of the treatment of male suicide in tragedy but also the attitude with which these suicides were received. The social considerations of tragedy, and the ethical ones of suicide, warrant a deeper exploration of this treatment and reception. The audience of the tragedians, the people of Athens, delighted in finding within themselves and their society links to heroic myths which justified their claims to prominence among the Greeks.¹ The cultural ascendancy of Athens during the fifth century BC coincided with the production of tragic works which reinforced these tendencies. Tragedies were mainly planned events with religious elements inherent to their performance, and among the purposes of tragedy was the moral instruction of

¹ In making this observation, I agree with scholars who read features in the themes and structure of tragedy that correspond to the social context of fifth-century Athens. Notable examples of this tendency are found in Aeschylus' *Persians*, for example, a play which won first prize in the Dionysia of 472 BC and in which the Athenians' victory at Salamis, and their claims to prominence among the other Greeks, are clearly associated with the Homeric Greek expeditions of the *Iliad*. For more on the link between *Persians* and Athenian identity, see O. Taplin, 'Aeschylus' *Persai*-The Entry of Tragedy into the Celebration Culture of the 470s?', in D. Cairns, and V. Liapis, (eds.) *Dionysalexandros: Essays on Aeschylus and his Fellow Tragedians in honour of Alexander F. Garvie* (Swansea 2006), 1-10.

For further commentary on Athenian identity in Aeschylean drama, see E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-definition through Tragedy* (Oxford 1991); and T. Harrison, *The Emptiness of Asia: Aeschylus' Persians and the History of the Fifth Century* (London 2000).

Athenian society.² In addition, the democratic organization of Athens meant that the civic virtues of the *polis* were predicated upon the political and social contribution of adult, citizen men. Given these features, it is all the more striking that male suicide, so apparently destructive of these goods, is depicted for the most part in a positive light throughout Greek tragedy. This kind of suicide, which has not yet been a subject of discrete attention,³ might valuably be examined in connection with Athenian notions of military or civic virtue.

Approaches to studying the interaction between tragedy and the *polis* have been various. In past scholarship, it was common to treat classical tragedy, along with poetry and other ‘great literatures’ (a category now bearing only nostalgic value), with an Aristotelean emphasis on the ‘tragic pleasure’ that tragedy offered its viewers and little else besides.⁴ More recently, recognition of the need to interpret tragedy in the political

² Arist. *Poet.* 1448a 1-4, 1448b 9-16; *Pl. Resp.* 10. See also E. Hall, ‘The sociology of Athenian tragedy,’ in P. E. Easterling, *The Cambridge companion to Greek tragedy. Cambridge companions to literature* (Cambridge 1997), 101.

³ Tragic suicide in general, however, has been studied in some depth notwithstanding. For one well-known example, see E.P. Garrison, *Groaning Tears: Ethical and Dramatic Aspects of Suicide in Greek Tragedy* (Leiden 1995).

The scope of this thesis will not extend to the exploration of female suicide, and so make a complete study of the subject, in part because the particular problems associated with male suicide in the political sphere did not extend to Greek women, who were excluded from formal civic duties. For an extended foray into the subject of female suicides in tragedy, see N. Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. A. Forster (Cambridge, Mass. 1987).

⁴ So Griffin, 39: ‘The time is long gone when literary men were happy to treat literature, and tragic poetry in particular, as something which exists serenely outside time, high up in the empyrean of unchanging validity and absolute values.’

For the connections in Aristotle between the emotional aspects of tragedy, ethics, and politics, see the essays collected in A. Rorty, (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton 1992), especially the contributions of Halliwell, Nussbaum, Nehemas, and Lear; S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chapel Hill 1986); E. Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion* (Princeton 1992); M. Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Princeton 1988); and, in general, W. Fortenbaugh,

context of the fifth century has become mainstream.⁵ The effects of this shift in scholarship are felt thematically, as even critics of this approach are forced to contend with what the political constitution of the city might entail for tragedy.⁶ For example, one view is that the tragedies contains elements of transgression and questioning to an extent that makes identification of ‘civic ideology’ in them problematic.⁷ This work will take varying scholarly stances into account, whilst exploring the effects of contemporary discourse on tragedy. To acknowledge the political context of tragedy is not, I shall argue, to say that tragedy merely indoctrinated its audience in democratic ideology, but rather that Athenian tragedy represents the kind of images that would foster ideals of civic pride among the largely male, Athenian audience, in much the same way as the *Nibelungenlied* and *Le Morte d’Arthur* of mediaeval imagination.

In referring to the social and civic influence on tragedy, some flexibility must always be allowed. Tragedy was first introduced in the sixth century, under tyrants, and

Aristotle on Emotion: A Contribution to Philosophical Psychology, Rhetoric, Poetics, Politics and Ethics (London 1975).

⁵ Sources for this view include, among others, P. Cartledge, ‘“Deep plays”: theatre as process in Greek civic life,’ in P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1997); J. Gregory, *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians* (Ann Arbor 1991); N. Croally, *Euripidean Polemic* (Cambridge 1994); J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin (eds.), *Nothing to do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton 1990); A.H. Sommerstein, S. Halliwell, J. Henderson, and B. Zimmerman (eds.), *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari 1993); P. Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton 1990); P. Rose, *Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth* (Ithaca 1992); and S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (eds.), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge 1999).

⁶ See, for example, B. Goff, ‘History, tragedy, theory,’ in B. Goff (ed.), *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama* (Austin 1995); and M. Griffith, ‘Brilliant dynasts: power and politics in the *Oresteia*,’ *CA* 15 (1995) 63-129.

⁷ ‘The claim that one essential function of Attic tragedy is (in some sense) to explore social conflict, transgression, and ambiguities, including those of civic identity itself, should by now provoke little disagreement’ (Griffith, ‘Brilliant dynasts,’ 109).

before the establishment of democracy.⁸ Tragedies continued to be produced after the Macedonian domination of Athens, and long after its democratic institutions had disappeared.⁹ The City Dionysia of Athens, with its important religious and festival function, was also but one of several locales for tragedy as a whole; others included the Lenaia and performances at the Rural Dionysia.¹⁰ As a result, the tragedies that have survived are reflections of a time in which Athens was a democracy, but the social values with which they are concerned need not always be democratic. But while the subject-matter of tragic discourse was not always specifically democratic, the performances were always crafted with the interests of the audience and of the *polis* in mind. Tragedy may have wrestled with themes that were not exclusively democratic or contemporary in nature, but which could nevertheless reflect the social anxieties of the people in the state.¹¹ Tragedies that feature male suicide do so as a result of the tragedian writing with purpose for benefitting the community (his audience), the gods (in the religious setting of the Dionysia), and himself (as competitor for the first prize). When we encounter these highly stylized scenes, filled with profound speeches and introspection, we understand

⁸ ‘What seems certain is that it was in the sixth century that the festival [the City Dionysia] became important, probably through the policy of Pisistratus’: A.W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 2nd ed., rev. J. Gould and D.M. Lewis (Oxford 1988) 58. For an alternative view on this dating, see W.R. Connor, ‘City Dionysia and Athenian democracy,’ *C&M* 40 (1989) 7-32.

⁹ ‘The competitions went on, and proclamations of honour were made and crowns bestowed καινοῖς τραγῳδῶν ἐν τῷ ἀγῶνι at the Dionysia down to the first century B.C.’ (Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 82).

¹⁰ Pickard-Cambridge, 41.

¹¹ For examples of this in fifth-century performance, see C. Maier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, (Baltimore 1993); and J. Henderson, ‘Demos, Demagogue, Tyrant in Attic Old Comedy,’ in Morgan (ed.), *Popular Tyranny*, (Austin 2003), 155-179.

that the tragedian's purpose in making them was deeper than simple plot advancement, especially since suicides are depicted as actions disruptive to the community.¹²

¹² That is, although any action in the play might well be characterized as plot advancement, it does not follow that the *reason* that tragedy portrays male suicide positively is because it advances the plot of the story.

II. Suicide and Tragedy

The sociological study of attitudes towards suicide has a lengthy pedigree.¹³ Other penetrating studies have been conducted on the ethics of suicide in the ancient world and in Greek tragedy broadly – though not with a specific focus on male suicide.¹⁴ From these a general framework has emerged for how the Greeks viewed suicide in relation to social norms. Suicide can be understood as a kind of communal pollution, a term which Robert Parker defined as ‘a kind of institution, the metaphysical justification for a set of conventional responses to the disruption of life through violent death.’¹⁵ The few literary sources that preserve a record for the treatment of bodies of those who died by suicide lend some support to the theory that the typical Greek attitude towards suicide was one of disapproval and that it represented separation from the communal body, although some

¹³ For a discussion of perspectives on suicide throughout history, see M.P. Battin, *Ethical Issues in Suicide* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1982). The first study which produced a comprehensive collection of all suicides in Greek literature was R. Hirzel’s *Der Selbstmord* (Leipzig 1908), esp. 75 ff., 243 ff., 417 ff., which aimed to trace the changing attitudes towards suicide from antiquity to 19th-century Germany.

¹⁴ The scholarship on ancient ethics and suicide is vast and cannot here be listed in its entirety. Some of the more prominent works concerned with ethical topics related to the issue of suicide and Athens include F.R. Earp, *The Way of the Greeks* (London 1929; reprint, 1971); J.H. Finley, *Four Stages of Greek Thought* (Stanford 1966); A.W.H. Adkins, *From the Many to the One. A Study of Personality and Views of Human Nature in the Context of Ancient Greek Society, Values, and Beliefs* (Ithaca 1970); N.R.E. Fisher, *Social Values in Classical Athens* (London 1976); M.W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies* (Cambridge 1989); B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley 1993).

For specific discussions on Greek suicide in general, see K.J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford 1974); R. Parker, *Miasma. Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford 1983); A.J.L. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity* (London 1990); and Garrison, *Groaning Tears*.

¹⁵ Parker, *Miasma*, 120.

ambiguity persists in fifth-century texts.¹⁶ In regard to the motives for suicide, the general view is that it was usually undertaken as a personal response to external social pressures or through dire necessity to avoid a worse fate, rather than being a widely acceptable method of ending one's life.¹⁷ These approaches largely represent the prevalent consensuses of Greek suicide in its historical reality.

There remains, however, some difficulty with regard to interpreting the occurrence of male suicide in tragedy. Tragic characters, though they may reflect the ideas of the world that invented them, are still superhuman and not bound by the same standards as real individuals.¹⁸ Furthermore, Attic drama served as a medium through which cultural ideals might be reflected without necessarily calling into question normative practices.¹⁹ Tragic male figures who die by suicide always display conflicting desires that symbolize their position between the mythical past and the present. For example, in the *Antigone*, Haemon, a mythical Theban prince, expresses a desire to remain loyal to his father's wishes in traditional aristocratic form. But when Creon rejects

¹⁶ Some later sources include Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 3.1116a 12-15; and Aeschin. 3.244 ('if someone kills himself, we bury the hand that did the deed separately from the body'); Plato, *Laws* 873D (suicides in Magnesia 'are to be buried individually - without even a single fellow-occupant of their grave - and without glory, in deserted and anonymous locations, the graves unmarked and nameless'). Note, however, that Plato prescribes this end only in the case of those suicides pursued because of ennui or cowardice - ἀργία δὲ καὶ ἀνανδρίας δειλίᾳ (*Laws* 9.873c). Fifth-century evidence is sparse and provides little clarity for the relative value judgement of suicide, but historical sources often preserved an air of pity or honour for suicide victims. E.g., Thuc. 3.81; Hdt. 8.53, 7.107.

¹⁷ É. Durkheim, *Le Suicide: Étude de sociologie* (Paris 1897); Garrison, *Groaning Tears*, 13. Herodotus recounts (9.71) that Aristodemus at Platea was not given postmortem honours by his fellow Spartans because his actions were suicidal, rather than truly courageous.

¹⁸ Van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide*, 140.

¹⁹ P.J. Rhodes, 'Nothing to do with Democracy: Athenian Drama and the Polis,' *JHS* 123 (2003), 104-119.

his counsel, Haemon couches his objections in fifth-century language: ‘That is no city, which belongs to a single man’ (πόλις γὰρ οὐκ ἔσθ’ ἥτις ἀνδρός ἐσθ’ ἐνός).²⁰ The tragedians explore these internal struggles, prompting the audience to examine and identify with the characters and their motivations similarly. As a result, it will not be the aim of this work to resolve any theoretical tensions between the attitudinal status of male suicide in antiquity and in theatrical performance, but instead to show how its positive framing in tragedy actually mimicked Athenian ideals of duty to the state and civic honour that were the product of an increasing cultural hegemony. In this way, I hope to integrate a critical evaluation of the performance of male suicide with a historical approach to its significance.

Tragedy was not the only type of Greek literature to feature male suicide. Homeric epic, which served as the material from which tragedy extracted its mythic narratives, also featured the deaths of heroes such as Ajax and Heracles, figures who would later be lionized in dramatic performances for their bravery. Yet the emphasis on the significance of their mode of death varies in each genre.²¹ In this sense, epic and tragedy stand somewhat apart. Suicide violated the elite social norm found throughout archaic literature of helping friends and harming enemies, and ancient poets who linked their works to the Epic Cycle leave little evidence for supposing that suicide was always viewed positively.²² As a result, we are limited in the extent to which we can rely upon epic to govern the examination of the meaning of tragic suicide.

²⁰ Soph. *Ant.* 635, 732.

²¹ Ajax, in particular, receives little attention until the Classical Period.

²² When Pindar (*Nem.* 7.20-27) writes that Ajax’s suicide might have been avoided, the tone is one of regret rather than laudation for Ajax’s qualities. The implication here is

Epic perspectives of honour and self-preservation, though, are not so much opposed as consolidated with civic responsibility in a tragic context. Male characters who commit suicide often do so for the good of the group as well as personal glory, and in this way tragedy and epic share elements. A good example of this is Menoeceus in *The Phoenician Women*, who scorns to be seen as lesser than the soldiers who fight for Thebes, and declares ‘I shall make for the city a present of my life, no mean offering, that I might rid the kingdom of affliction’ (στείχω δέ, θανάτου δῶρον οὐκ αἰσχρὸν πόλει δώσω, νόσου δὲ τήνδ’ ἀπαλλάξω χθόνα).²³ The emphasis placed on preserving the character’s reputation, often with martial overtones, is of a piece with the epic concept of a fair death in battle. Classical Greeks distinguished between honorable and dishonorable suicide and recognized motivations for both that could be personal or social.²⁴ The association of Athenian norms with the qualities of the heroes of epic was constantly in practice during this time period; this practice served to strengthen the social identity and beliefs of the Athenians, while also shaping the interpretation of their history.²⁵ The stories recounting the history of Athens found greater resonance in the context of the Peloponnesian War, when the Athenians were defining themselves both in a Panhellenic

that even in an epinician poem comparing the glory of a fifth-century athlete to epic heroes, the suicide of Ajax provokes only solemn pity.

²³ Eur. *Phoen.* 1013 f (Note: this, and all subsequent translations in this thesis, are my own).

²⁴ Garrison, *Groaning Tears*, 23-31. Garrison argues, through an examination of prescriptive evidence from Plato and Aristotle, that different motives for suicide coloured the perception of the victim’s actions. Plutarch (*Cleom.* 31 and 37) says that suicide was forbidden at Sparta, but cf. Hdt. 7.232 – Pantites’ end certainly implies that the Greeks sometimes preferred suicide to dishonour. For receptions of suicide in Sparta and Chios, see B. Schmidt, *Neues Jahrbuch für dem klassischen Altertum* 11 (1903), 619 ff.; and Hirzel, *Der Selbstmord*, 55.

²⁵ N. Fisher, H. Van Wees, *‘Aristocracy’ in Antiquity: Redefining Greek and Roman Elites* (Swansea 2015), 15-21.

sense, as the saviours of Greece, and in opposition to their enemies. At this time, the values of the epic world were also becoming appropriated and reimagined by the world of tragedy. It will be the business of this work to demonstrate how this interaction and reworking occurs in the suicides of tragic male figures and suggest some possibilities as to why it matters.

III. Chapter Outline

In my thesis, I shall investigate three case studies of male suicide in tragedy. These will be discussed with a view to their significance in the mythic narrative and their orientation in fifth-century political culture.

The first chapter will be a study of the *Ajax* of Sophocles, a play which features probably the most influential and thoroughly discussed suicide from Greek literature. Ajax's suicide after attempting to destroy the Achaean chieftains, arguably the main focus of the dramatic action, had been portrayed as early as the Epic Cycle.²⁶ His suicide is complicated by the fact that a connection to the Ajax myth was of great importance to Athenian civic pride. The significance of Ajax's connection to the Athenians was that his legacy strengthened their traditional claim over Salamis and reinforced their position as the dominant Greek *polis*.²⁷ This tradition extended to their political influence gained after the Athenian victory in the battle of Salamis during the Persian invasion of 480 BC. Herodotus writes that Ajax was specifically invoked as aid for the Athenians before the battle:

ἔδοξε δέ σφι εὐξασθαι τοῖσι θεοῖσι καὶ ἐπικαλέσασθαι τοὺς Αἰακίδας συμμάχους.

ὥς δέ σφι ἔδοξε, καὶ ἐποίηυν ταῦτα: εὐξάμενοι γὰρ πᾶσι τοῖσι θεοῖσι, αὐτόθεν μὲν

²⁶ The story is found, in divergent forms, in the *Aethiopsis* and *Little Iliad*.

²⁷ Ajax's two sons, Eurysakes and Philaios, were said to have renounced their territorial claims over the island and settled in Attica. Solon, who wrote that 'he would rather not be an Athenian than bear the shame of letting go of Salamis' (Plut. *Sol.* 2.3), referred to a sixth-century dispute between the Athenians and Megarians over Salamis. The Spartans, acting as arbitrators, ruled in favour of Athens due to their local cult honours for the hero (*Sol.* 10).

ἐκ Σαλαμῖνος Αἴαντά τε καὶ Τελαμῶνα ἐπεκαλέοντο, ἐπὶ δὲ Αἰακὸν καὶ τοὺς
ἄλλους Αἰακίδας νέα ἀπέστελλον ἐς Αἴγινα. (Hdt. 8.64.2)

and it was resolved to pray to the gods and summon the sons of Aiaikos as allies.

When it was decided, they continued thus: praying to all the gods, they invoked
Ajax and Telamon to come from Salamis, and sent a ship to Aegina for Aiaikos
and his sons.

Subsequently, the Athenians drew a parallel between the historical memory of the Trojan War and their own experiences in dealing with their Eastern foe.²⁸ Homeric comparisons served as a way for Athens to define its place in the Greek world after emerging as an unlikely victor from the Persian Wars, assuming control of a new empire after founding and expanding the Delian League, and engaging in diplomatic alliances with other Greek city-states. The Athenians, who already employed Ajax's reputation in the naming of one of their founding tribes (the Aiantidae), might well look for a means to model this hero as an exemplar of Athenian greatness.

In this chapter, I shall examine how Ajax's suicide scene is connected by means of allusions in Ajax's speech to Athenian greatness at the battle of Salamis and to Aeschylus' *Persians* – a speech which foreshadows Athenian ascendancy and military superiority. This chapter will also show how the audience of Athenians, both as spectators and actual witnesses of Ajax's death, participate in affirming Ajax's hero cult as a result of his suicide. Ajax, for example, alludes to the Athenian tribe of the Aiantidae during his suicide. By means of these features, the play portrays Ajax's suicide as a moment of

²⁸ K. Raaflaub, 'Sophocles and Political Thought.' in A. Markantonatos (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Sophocles* (Leiden 2012), 86.

prophetic importance to the Athenians and justifies their inclusion of him in the legendary founding lineage of their city.²⁹

The issues of burial and hero cult also feature prominently in the *Ajax*. In the second part of the play, we encounter arguments between Ajax's half-brother, Teucer, and the Achaean kings concerning the permissibility of burying Ajax following his suicide. I shall argue that these dialogues reflect contemporary civic discourse and highlight the nuances of the audience's concerns about duty to one's community and personal glory. Ajax's burial in the play is not only a practical necessity but also a ritualistic act through which his status as an Athenian hero is confirmed. The burial rites themselves become a kind of spectacle, emphasizing a significance for Ajax's death not found in epic and serving as a means for Athens to celebrate one of its most important civic heroes in the religious context of tragedy. The play ultimately reinterprets Ajax's suicide favourably, providing Athens with an opportunity to address the political anxieties it experienced as it evolved from being Greece's hero during the Persian invasion to becoming an imperial power during the Peloponnesian War.

In the second chapter, we shall pass on to the *Antigone* and the suicide of Haemon which occurs near the end of the tragedy. Although traditionally treated in his role as a foil for his father and the king of Thebes, Creon, Haemon has received some more

²⁹ Herodotus writes that Cleisthenes included Ajax in the tribes 'because he was a neighbor and an ally' (Hdt. 5.66). Cf. R. Osborne, *Greece in the Making 1200-479 BC* (New York 1996), 300, who argues that 'by instituting new tribal names, [Cleisthenes] was able to make all the various actions which Athenians performed in tribes, whether military, festival, or political, redolent of an Athenian past,' and by this action 'lay the groundwork for Athenian autochthony.'

attention in recent years as a pivotal figure in his own right.³⁰ The play's action centres on the eponymous female protagonist, who has chosen to disobey Creon's orders and bury her brother Polynices in obedience to the authority of sacred custom. This chapter will show that Haemon's decision to end his life is a direct consequence of the similar theme of civic loyalty. This stance is made evident through the lengthy dialogue with his father (631-765), in which Haemon accuses Creon of acting against the wishes of the people and the gods. Defying Creon's authority, Haemon affirms his desire to die alongside Antigone rather than live a life tainted with dishonour. This conversation foreshadows his eventual suicide, even though the scenes occur in different acts of the tragedy.³¹ Haemon's suicide is not an act borne solely from impulse, but from a sense of longing for a Thebes that seems lost and from a desire for revenge against Creon. His commitment to divine and social authority, as much as to Antigone, makes the case that his role is one of male bravery in the face of tyranny, embodying the Athenian cultural ideal of civic duty and justice.³² As Creon's tyranny in Thebes is represented as being in tension with the

³⁰ D. Barker, 'Haemon's Paideia: Speaking, Listening, and the Politics of the Antigone,' *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* 23 (2006), 1-20; P. Miller, 'Destabilizing Haemon: Radically Reading Gender and Authority in Sophocles' *Antigone*,' *Helios* 41 (2014), 163-185.

³¹ Many scholars have noted that Haemon hints at his intention to die alongside Antigone, but none have specifically analyzed this as a suicide speech. For more on this term, see Chapter 1. This category differs from 'escape songs' (Garrison, *Groaning Tears*, 80) in that suicide speeches are more often delivered by a male character, while songs are reserved for female suicides. Cf. N. Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, 18.

³² Regarding the presence of tyranny in the play, see A.J. Podlecki, 'Creon and Herodotus,' *TAPA* 97 (1966), 359-371; but cf. P.E. Easterling, 'Constructing Character in Greek Tragedy,' in *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature*, ed. C. Pelling (Oxford 1990), 98: 'We can't rule out the possibility that what he [Haemon] offers as a report of public opinion is his own construction designed to influence Creon'; and C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles' *Antigone*,' *JHS* 109 (1989), 134-148, who argues for Creon as the representative of the *polis*. She concludes that the scene would have 'framed emphatically the confrontations

cohesion of the city, Haemon's suicide contributes to the play's association of ideas of tyranny with oligarchic tensions in Athens.

The third and final chapter will examine the *Phoenician Women* of Euripides and the suicide of Menoeceus in response to an oracle from the blind seer Tiresias. Self-killing in the Euripidean plays is often discussed as an example of self-sacrifice rather than suicide.³³ Loraux argues that self-sacrifice attaches to the idea of glory and higher purpose, and Menoeceus' death is therefore not a suicide because suicide cannot be an altruistic act of heroism.³⁴ This chapter will position itself within these discussions following the work of E. P. Garrison and J. Casabona,³⁵ to insist that Menoeceus employs a vocabulary of honour and shame which strongly suggests, contra Loraux, that his death

and conflicts within the ideology of democratic Athens and activated the cultural assumption that disobedience of the laws and disturbance of the polis order is to be condemned, and to be seen also as an act of impiety against the gods who guarantee the oath.' The later messenger speech (1242 f.), however, states that Haemon's death signifies the evil of ignoring legitimate counsel (*aboulia*). This would seem conceivable only if Haemon himself better embodied the civic voice than Creon.

³³ This perspective on Euripidean tragedy is discussed in, for example, P. Roussel, 'Le Theme du sacrifice volontaire clans la tragedie d'Euripide,' *RBPh* I (1922), 225-240; P. Vellacott, *Ironic Drama. A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (Cambridge 1975); E.A.M.E. O'Connor-Visser, *Aspects of Human Sacrifice in the Tragedies of Euripides* (Amsterdam 1987); J. Wilkins, 'The State and the Individual: Euripides' Plays of Voluntary Self-Sacrifice,' in *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality*, A. Powell (ed.), (Routledge 1990), 177-94; and van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide*, 126 ff.

Vellacott (198-199) questions whether or not Menoeceus accomplishes what he intended because '...the sublimity of the self-sacrifice, for the necessity of which there is no evidence whatever, is swallowed in the flood of despair and death which covers Thebes after the invading army has dispersed.' The issue with including Menoeceus in the category of 'self-sacrifice' only is that his death is clearly a suicide: he chooses to die, announces his intention do so, and plunges the sword into his neck with his own hand. Loraux (41-42) files this episode under a 'virgin sacrifice.' For Loraux, only a death which is both accepted and sought after counts as a suicide.

³⁴ Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, 31-40.

³⁵ J. Casabona, *Recherches sur le vocabulaire des sacrifices en grec des origines à la fin de l'Époque classique* (Aix-en-Provence 1966); Garrison, *Groaning Tears*, 131.

must be viewed as a suicide, and that the tragedy employs some interchangeability in the themes of sacrifice and suicide in general. As I shall argue, the shared differences and similarities with altruistic self-sacrifice and Menoeceus' death in the *Phoenician Women* are not sufficiently elucidated if we accept a hard division between the two concepts. This chapter will examine Menoeceus as an example of both and clarify these nuances.

Although the locality of the dramatic action lies in Thebes, and the setting of the myth in the distant past, I shall argue that the martial and civic imagery that Euripides employs in Menoeceus' speech recalls the military-political context of Athens in the late-fifth century and the civic virtues found in Pericles' funerary speech.³⁶ The tragedy sets up Menoeceus as the ideal Athenian son, one who is willing and eager to act for the greater good of the city. Finally, this chapter will show that Menoeceus' suicide can be viewed as both honourable and the result of pure motives. Just as a Greek hoplite's ἀρετή was maintained through staunch obedience to command and working in concert with his countrymen, so too does Menoeceus recall the selfless contribution exhibited in the rolls of epic and tragedy.³⁷

Focusing on the suicides of these male figures allows us to uncover new evidence for how the Athenians used the medium of performance to connect their values to a distant past, ultimately increasing the glory of their city. In Athens, loyalty to the *polis* and the fulfillment of civic duty were not simply expected behaviours, but honourable

³⁶ N.B. Thebes has also been discussed as an example of an anti-Athens, and this argument will be briefly addressed in the thesis.

³⁷ Thus, Achilles puts his ἀρετή on hold because of his rejection of Agamemnon's authority in *Il.* 1. For a discussion of this value in the *Iliad* and Greek ethics, see A.W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values*, (Oxford 1960), 46 ff., 165 ff., 304 ff.; and his 'Basic Greek Values in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Hercules Furens*,' *CQ* 16 (1966) 193-219, esp. 206.

attitudes in themselves. This influence will be shown to have affected also the dramatization of male suicide in tragedy.

Chapter 1

The *Ajax* and Athens

I. The Athenian Heritage of Ajax

This chapter will be a study of the *Ajax* of Sophocles. The suicide of Ajax stands apart both for the importance of its legend to the history of Athens and for Sophocles' organization of the play on its basis, as the madness of Ajax and the tension that this introduces between the hero and his community gives rise to a two-part division in the play's structure and in the attitudes of its characters. In this chapter, I shall examine how Ajax's suicide scene is framed positively for Athenian audiences due to textual allusions in Ajax's speeches which foreshadow Athens' ascendancy and military superiority. This chapter will also show how the audience of Athenians, both as spectators and actual witnesses of Ajax's death, participate in affirming the hero's cult as a result of his suicide. A connection to the Ajax myth was greatly important to Athenian civic pride and tradition.³⁸ The Athenians named one of their most important tribes, the Aiantidae, after Ajax and assigned significant privileges to members of this tribe, holding them up as examples of military excellence.³⁹ This chapter will show how Sophocles plays upon this intentionally anachronistic reference in order to use Ajax's legacy to legitimate fifth-century political structure and make Ajax's suicide a moment of prescient importance to the city of Athens.

³⁸ For more on the importance of Ajax and the Athenian civic tradition, see B. Kowalzig, 'The Aetiology of Empire? Hero-cult and Athenian Tragedy,' *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 49 (2006) 79-98. The Philaidai and Eurysacidae, lineages named for Ajax's sons, Philaeus and Eurysaces, were among the noblest families of Athens.

³⁹ Plut. *Mor.* 628b-629a.

Several tragedies end with the establishment of a hero cult or the indications of one in the future. Important examples of these include Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Euripides' *Medea* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Issues of burial and hero cult also feature prominently in *Ajax*. The arguments in the second half of the play between Ajax's half-brother, Teucer, and the Achaean kings concerning the appropriateness of Ajax's burial reflect fifth-century thinking and highlight the nuances of Athenian concerns about duty to one's community and personal glory. Ajax's burial in the play is not only a practical necessity but also a ritualistic act through which his status as an Athenian hero is confirmed. The burial rites themselves become a spectacle which vindicates Ajax and serves as a means for Athens to celebrate this hero in the religious context of tragedy.

The question of Ajax's burial would have been one of great interest to the Greek spectators, for whom civic pride was often enhanced through identification with epic hero cults.⁴⁰ Why Ajax's burial should receive special treatment among these is easily answered. In itself, a supposed blood relation to Ajax was so desirable that we find ancients boasting of it even beyond the Greek world, such as in the case of a fifth-century Etruscan tomb in Bologna recording the deceased's pedigree as 'of Telamonian Ajax.'⁴¹ In Athens, divine honours were paid to Ajax and his heroic cult existed even in the time of Pausanias.⁴² The Athenians regarded Ajax as being among the city's foundational heroes, not least for the political claim this connection gave them over the island of Salamis, Ajax's homeland. For an Athenian audience of the fifth century, Salamis was a place of political importance as a result of the acquisition of Salamis in a dispute with the

⁴⁰ P.E. Easterling, 'Tragedy and Ritual,' *Metis* 3 (1988) 87-109.

⁴¹ In Greek mythology, Ajax was the son of King Telamon and Periboea.

⁴² Paus. 1.5.1.

Megarians. The Spartan arbitrators in the case ruled in favour of Athens due to the presence of local cult honours for Ajax in the region of Attica.⁴³ When Cleisthenes formed the ten tribes of Athens after the overthrow of the tyrants, one was named for Ajax.⁴⁴ Special honours were accorded to this tribe, the Aiantidae, whose members Aeschylus recounts as having been posted on the right wing of the army at the battle of Marathon and who were chosen to offer a sacrifice on Cithaeron after the battle of Plataea.⁴⁵ These connections of the hero to the city are deepened when Ajax invokes the Aiantidae moments before his suicide.⁴⁶ The physical image of Ajax also enjoyed widespread popularity on vase paintings from the mid-sixth century onwards, identifying his myth with the tribal heroes of Athens.⁴⁷ In short, a contemporary Athenian audience would necessarily have favoured Teucer's position in the debate over Ajax's burial – looking to it, with hindsight, as the origin of their hero's cult. The last half of the *Ajax*, for the Athenian audience, was concerned with the question of Ajax's attainment of his appropriate rank as an Athenian hero.

⁴³ Plut. *Vit. Sol.* 10.

⁴⁴ The Aiantidae, or sons of Ajax, were reputed to have descended directly from this ancestor (Dem. 60).

⁴⁵ See note 39, above.

⁴⁶ *Ai.* 861. Sophocles employs the term γένος several times throughout the *Ajax* (e.g. 190, 202, 399, and 1178), in each case denoting the concept of a lineal clan or tribe. Cf. Arr. *Anab.* 2.10.7; Pind. *Isthm.* 1.1.30. The meaning here cannot be the designation of 'people' or 'nation' applied to the Athenians as a whole, a cultural and collateral relationship which was routinely denoted by the term ἔθνος. The common usage is attested unambiguously among works of the fifth century and earlier. See *Il.* 13.565; Pind. *Nem.* 3.74; Ar. *Ach.* 153; Lys. 2.5; Thuc. 1.3, et al.

The allusion is therefore one of a close kinship descent from Ajax and a metaphorical founding of the Aiantidae by its eponymous hero, a concept that would come to be applied to Athenian tribes more generally from the fifth century onwards. Cf. Dem. 60.27-31.

⁴⁷ See *LIMC* i.1/2 (1981) s.v. Aias I.

The *Ajax* is a drama set against the backdrop of a contest which never actually materializes onstage, never makes its presence known except by way of backstory. This idea of a contest of arms relies upon the Trojan Cycle poets, the *Aethiopis* and the *Little Iliad*, which laid out the circumstance in more detail.⁴⁸ The story of Ajax's death is therefore a composite of narrative traditions.⁴⁹ The background for the *Ajax* is a contest between Ajax and Odysseus for the arms of Achilles.⁵⁰ In the *Iliad*, Ajax is depicted as a hero whose greatness and battle prowess are second only to those of Achilles. The two assume parallel roles in the Achaean host. While Achilles is almost always to be found at the front of a battle, Ajax also takes on defensive functions and watches over the Greek camp and ships. Homer calls him the 'bulwark of the Achaeans' against the Trojan hosts,⁵¹ and it is Ajax who reclaims the body of Patroclus on the field of battle.⁵² Ajax's valour and strength are attested in poetic tradition, as are his own special weapons, such as a huge shield made of seven cowhides with a layer of bronze.⁵³ After the death of Achilles, a competition is held to determine which hero deserves his Hephaestean armour. As a result of his accomplishments, Ajax believes that the contest will be decided in his

⁴⁸ Σ. H commenting on *Od.* 11. 547.

⁴⁹ There existed an early version of the story, related by Pindar (*Nem.* 8.26; 7.25) and possibly Homer (*Od.* 11.556 f.), in which Ajax kills himself just after the contest and apparently as a result of his resentment for being cheated of the arms. Pindar praises Ajax and suggests that his memory had been tarnished by bad poets. Cf. *Ov. Met.* 13.382-392 for a Roman preservation of this earlier version. This tradition holds the ingratitude of the Greek chieftains accountable for the suicide and establishes a blameless reputation for Ajax. Perhaps this characterization was what Aeschylus had in mind when he composed his own trilogy of *Ajax*, in which the character's circumstances were given an aspect of divine friendship and destiny by way of contrast (Σ. on *Soph. Ai.* 815, 833).

⁵⁰ First mention of this episode is made in *Od.* 11.543-547.

⁵¹ *Il.* 3.227.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.274-318.

⁵³ *Il.*, 7.219-223

favour. Odysseus, however, wins the contest through his eloquence, earning the acclimation of the Greek chieftains acting as judges, and the defeated Ajax, at some later point, resolves to kill himself.

II. Summary of the Play

The following section traces the main plot of the *Ajax*, in very rough form. The play begins *in medias res* in front of a large tent as Odysseus appears in search of Ajax, who has disappeared. Elsewhere on the stage, Athena speaks to Odysseus and tells him what has happened: she has visited a madness upon Ajax, and he has been the one slaughtering the Achaean flocks of cattle, thinking that they are the Greek commanders who have wronged him by denying him the arms of Achilles. Earlier in the night, Ajax crept up to the tents of two Greek chieftains and was on the point of slaying them before Athena diverted his aim. Even now he is within, thinking that he is torturing his foes. Against the protests of Odysseus, Athena calls on Ajax to show himself and he emerges, dripping with gore, laughing and boasting that he will kill Odysseus next. As Ajax returns to his grisly task, Athena cautions Odysseus and the audience against showing the same arrogance towards the gods that Ajax has displayed. It is for this failing that she has foiled his designs.⁵⁴

In the conversation which follows between the Salaminian Chorus and Tecmessa, wife of Ajax, the audience discovers that Ajax has returned to sanity once more and is grieving his actions. His dialogue with the Chorus and Tecmessa reveals that he intends to be rid of a shameful life, and he prepares for his death by bidding farewell to his wife and giving his son into the charge of the Salaminians. Ajax asks his half-brother Teucer to see that he is buried with his armour and withdraws into his tent again. Soon after he emerges and gives a speech in which he declares his intent to purge his shame and ‘bury’

⁵⁴ *Ai.* 755-775, but note that Ajax’s defiance of Athena is shown to be the cause of Ajax’s madness, not the reason for his subsequent suicide.

his sword; henceforth he will honour the gods properly. A messenger speech takes place during which the audience is supplied vital information about Ajax: according to the seer Calchas, it was his defiance of Athena on the battlefield that brought the goddess' wrath upon him and could he but live to the next day Athena's anger would pass and he may be saved. As the Chorus and Tecmessa search for Ajax, the scene changes to depict Ajax with his sword on shores of Troy, who invokes the gods to save him from dishonour by allowing his burial. Bidding farewell to his homeland of Salamis, to a future Athens, and to his kin, Ajax falls upon the sword and dies.⁵⁵

The second half of the play is concerned with themes of community, heroism, and justice. The body of Ajax is discovered by the Chorus and Tecmessa, who lament the death of Ajax as Teucer returns as if in answer to the prayer of Ajax. Menelaus argues that Ajax is unworthy of proper remembrance, having raised his hand against rightful authority and his allies, caused lawlessness in the camp, and ultimately proved more dangerous than their Trojan foes. Rebutting the wishes of Menelaus, Teucer resolves to bury Ajax's body and goes in search of suitable ground. He returns as Agamemnon approaches and forbids burial once more for several reasons: Ajax was arrogant and presumptuous for thinking he can act against the will of the Greek chiefs. What has Ajax accomplished that the other leaders of the Achaeans have failed to do? Teucer should not defy the will of the judges simply because Ajax felt humiliated by their pronouncements. The ideal of the individual hero is gone, and wiser and more community-minded notions must take its place.

⁵⁵ *Ai.* 865.

As Teucer and Agamemnon argue, Odysseus finally arrives and argues on behalf of Ajax. None should ‘allow a sense of power to prevail upon you to hate so much that justice be trampled upon.’⁵⁶ In the stichomythia that follows, Odysseus convinces Agamemnon that the ἀρετή of Ajax demands that he be given burial, and that doing so will be just. The Chorus recognizes the great nobility inherent in Odysseus and express a longing to leave for Athens. The play ends with Teucer calling upon all friendly Greeks to aid him in honouring Ajax.

⁵⁶ *Ai.* 1334 f.

III. *Ajax*, Athens, and Salamis

It has been suggested in this chapter that the moment of Ajax's suicide recalls Athenian predominance. Many scholars have suggested that Ajax's suicide is aetiological for a democratic context, examining the formal contest of words, the *agon*, after Ajax's suicide as an example of civic discourse in a new political world with no place for Homeric heroes.⁵⁷ Others have studied the death of Ajax with special reference to the cult of the hero, with similar emphasis on the shifting nature of the place of epic heroes in the fifth century.⁵⁸

My own approach is this: that Ajax's suicide is a moment of change in the collective history of the Athenian *polis*, and that the key to appreciating this lies in evocative phrases included in the various speeches of the play. I propose that the allusive language in Ajax's speeches invites the spectators to draw parallels between the end of Ajax's life and the beginning of their city's ascendancy. In other words, Ajax is honoured as a hero in Athens because his former role as a 'bulwark of the Greeks' has now been assumed by the Athenians themselves. This part of the chapter will focus on the significance of some references to *Persians* and Salamis in *Ajax*, and how this interconnectivity suggests a new interpretation of Ajax's image in the Sophoclean play.

⁵⁷ K. Reinhardt, *Sophocles* (Oxford 1979), 30. Cf. B.M. Knox, 'The Ajax of Sophocles,' *HSCP* 65 (1961), 1-37, esp. 24 ff. More recent proponents of this view include R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980), 57-72; C.P. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilisation: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 109-151, especially 109 f., 132 f., 142 f.; and P. Michelakis, *Achilles on the Tragic Stage* (Cambridge 2002) 144-150.

⁵⁸ P. Burian, 'Supplication and Hero Cult in Sophocles' Ajax,' *GRBS* 13 (1972), 151-156; A. Henrichs, 'The Tomb of Aias and the Prospect of Hero Cult in Sophocles,' *CA* 12 (1993), 165-180; R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford 1994), esp. 392-394.

The *Persians* of Aeschylus is another play which suggests the greatness of Athens in this period. Aeschylus produced *Persians* in 472 BC; despite its Panhellenic appearance, *Persians* attributes victory in the Persian Wars to Athenian leadership, and defines Athens' role as the defender of Greece.⁵⁹ Herodotus states that the Athenians at Salamis were the 'saviors of Hellas,'⁶⁰ and there are numerous ancient sources documenting the pains that Athens went to in identifying the episode as a defining historical moment. As *Persians* is concentrated on Salamis, I read an explicitly Athenian-oriented perspective in its lines.

Gurd writes that at the beginning of the battle in *Persians* the local Salaminian gods echo the Greek war cries. He argues that this could 'reinforce the messenger's supposition that the Persian defeat was due as much to divine forces as to human ones.'⁶¹ According to Herodotus, Ajax and other Salaminian spirits were invoked on the day before battle as divine aid for the Greek side.⁶² Bowie argues that 'they [Telamon and Ajax] must have been thought to be physically present at the battle, because heroes had

⁵⁹ Nevertheless, some scholars read a theme of Panhellenism in *Persians*. For example, L.M. Kowerski, *Simonides on the Persian Wars: A Study of the Elegiac Verses of the "New Simonides"* (New York 2005); D. Boedeker, 'Heroic Historiography: Simonides and Herodotus on Plataea' in D. Boedeker and D. Sider (eds.), *The New Simonides: Contexts of Praise and Desire* (Oxford 2001) 120-134; E. Hall (ed./trans.), *Aeschylus: Persians* (Warminster 1996) 123.

Cf. O. Taplin, 'Aeschylus' *Persai*-The Entry of Tragedy into the Celebration Culture of the 470s?,' in D. Cairns, and V. Liapis, (eds.) *Dionysalexandros: Essays on Aeschylus and his Fellow Tragedians in honour of Alexander F. Garvie* (Swansea 2006): 'appeals to shared Hellenism were aspirations which were in reality in tension with deep-seated and time-honored rivalries' (4).

⁶⁰ Hdt. 7.139.5-6.

⁶¹ S.A. Gurd, *Dissonance: Auditory Aesthetics in Ancient Greece* (Oxford 2016) 65-66.

⁶² '...and it was resolved to pray to the gods and summon the sons of Aiakos as allies. When it was decided, they continued thus: praying to all the gods, they invoked Ajax and Telamon to come from Salamis, and sent a ship to Aegina for Aiakos and his sons.' (Hdt. 8.64.2)

only local influence.’⁶³ For the Athenians, the presence of Ajax at the battle assured Athens of victory, and his inclusion in *Persians* is evocative of this social memory.

A significant aspect of constructed social memory in the play is the focus on the lamentation of Athens’ enemies. An argument has been advanced by Richard Garner⁶⁴ on the lament of the Chorus in *Persians* (286-289), specifically on the word εὔνις and its connection to Priam’s lament in Book 22 of the *Iliad* (22.44-45). A comparison of the passages follows:

στυγναί γ’ Ἀθᾶναι δάοις·
μεμνήσθαι τοι πάρα
ὥς πολλάς Περσίδων μάταν
ἔκτισαν εὔνιδας ἠδ’ ἀνάδρους.

Hateful indeed is Athens to her foes;
now we must remember well
how many Persian women she has caused
to be bereft of sons and husbands, all in vain. (*Pers.* 286-9)

ὅς μ’ υἰῶν πολλῶν τε καὶ ἐσθλῶν εὔνιν ἔθηκε
κτείνων καὶ περνὰς νήσων ἐπι τηλεδαπάων.

⁶³ A.M. Bowie, *Herodotus: Histories Book VIII* (Cambridge 2007) 151.

⁶⁴ R. Garner, *From Homer to Tragedy: The Art of Illusion in Greek Poetry* (London 1990)

since he has made me bereft of many brave sons,
slaying them and selling them to isles far away. (*Il.* 22.44-5)

Garner notes that the lament in *Iliad* 22 is ‘the most frequently echoed in the *Iliad*,’ and that the Athenian public would be familiar with it.⁶⁵ It is possible that Aeschylus’ use of εὔνις might allude to the lament of the *Iliad* in order to provide an epic touchstone for this episode of Athenian history.⁶⁶ In this way, Aeschylus establishes a pseudo-historical link between Athens’ historical achievements in the Persian Wars and that of Greek heroes in the epic world of the *Iliad*.

We also encounter scenes of tragic lament in *Ajax*, which should remind us, as it did the Greek audience, of the shared political outlook of these plays. As Goldhill writes, reflecting on the relation between tragedy and the *polis*, one finds that ‘although the emotions are an integral factor in tragedy, it is only one part of an intricate event. There is a politics and history of the emotions also.’⁶⁷ L.A. Swift, examining three major plays that place an emphasis on the convention of laments – Aeschylus’ *Persians*, Sophocles’ *Electra*, and Euripides’ *Alcestis* – concludes that ‘each of these plays uses lament to represent ethical ideas to do with moderation and social convention, highlighting the

⁶⁵ Garner, *From Homer to Tragedy*, 23.

⁶⁶ The word occurs earlier in only one other place, *Od.* 9.524, and so suggests a direct link to epic diction.

⁶⁷ S. Goldhill, ‘Civic Ideology and the Problem of Difference: The Politics of Aeschylean Tragedy, Once again,’ *JHS* 120 (2000) 34-56, 56. He also adds: ‘Tragedies themselves dramatize the complex interplay between emotional and intellectual engagement for an audience to respond to. This dynamic should be part of the discussion of how tragedy functions in the polis.’

politicized role that lamentation had accrued by this period.⁶⁸ The imbuing of civic ideas and politicization of lament in tragedy suggests that this and similar scenes of lament, scenes which comprise the majority of the speeches in *Ajax*, can be interpreted with a view towards any politically important references they might contain.⁶⁹

In the *Ajax*, we find that Sophocles builds connections between his play and Aeschylus' *Persians* in a manner that reaches beyond linguistic influence. In the 19th century, G. Wolff wrote on the shared diction of the two plays,⁷⁰ listing marked correlations in their lines as follows:

Ai. 56 = *Pers.* 426

Ai. 412 = *Pers.* 367

Ai. 673 = *Pers.* 386

Ai. 740 = *Pers.* 489

Ai. 172, 954 = *Pers.* 633

⁶⁸ L.A. Swift, *The Hidden Chorus: Echoes of Genre in Tragic Lyric*. *Oxford Classical Monographs* (Oxford 2010).

⁶⁹ Several historians have theorized that the origin of tragedy itself may lie in the ritual lamentations found in hero cult. Examples include M.P. Nilsson, 'Der Ursprung der Tragödie,' in M.P. Nilsson (ed.), *Opuscula Selecta*, vol. 1. (Lund 1951) 61–145; and R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-state* (Oxford 1994).

Other scholars deny a direct link from hero cult to tragedy. These include R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford 2005) 142; F.M. Dunn, *Tragedy's End: Closure and Innovation in Euripidean Drama* (Oxford 1996) esp. 60-63; and S. Scullion, 'Tradition and Invention in Euripidean Aetiology,' in M.J. Cropp, K.H. Lee, and D. Sansone (eds.), *Euripides and Tragic Theatre in the Late Fifth Century*. *Illinois Classical Studies* special issue 24–25 (Champaign 1999) 217-233.

⁷⁰ R.C. Jebb (ed./trans.), *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, with critical notes, commentary, and translation in English prose, Part VII: The Ajax* (London 1967) lii.

Ai. 1404 = *Pers.* 584.

More recently, the phraseology of Ajax's speeches in *Ajax* have been examined in connection with *Persians*. Francis Dunn, for example, argued that both plays share a 'metonymic connection,' and that since Ajax is always mentioned as Salamis' ruler in the Aeschylean tragedy, whenever Ajax echoes *Persians* it reminds the Athenian audience of their triumph in the battle of Salamis.⁷¹ He also suggests that the use of πόρους ἄλιπρόθους, a phrase which elsewhere appears only in Euripides' *Hippolytus* (1205), 'implies a connection between the living hero in one play and the place that commemorates him in the other.'⁷² These textual clues in *Ajax* suggest that the play invites the audience to reflect on Athens' assumed role as the defender of the Greeks, as well as Ajax's intrinsic role in contributing to this honour through his involvement in the Athenian cause. This provides the contextualization needed for understanding how Ajax features as a tragic figure for Sophocles' audience. The next section of the chapter will address the speeches and suicide of Ajax directly and how these scenes are delivered in this context.

⁷¹ F.M. Dunn, 'Dynamic Allusion in Sophocles,' in A. Markantonatos (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Sophocles* (Leiden 2012).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 276.

IV. Ajax's Speeches and Suicide

Thus far we have reviewed some references between *Ajax* and *Persians* which suggest that the plays are in dialogue with regard to elements of diction and themes in both which evoke Ajax and the battle of Salamis. We shall now move on to discuss how *Ajax* intentionally builds amity amongst the Athenian audience members towards Ajax through associations which imply a shared origin, presenting Ajax as a thoroughly Athenian hero. We shall also discuss points of evidence in Ajax's suicide scene that I believe tie Ajax's suicide to the cultural-political Athenian identity which emerged after the battle of Salamis and propose a reason for why the suicide is portrayed positively.

While the characters of Sophocles' *Ajax* are all Homeric ones, and the play is set in the shared mythic past of the Greeks, it includes scenes implying a relationship between Ajax and Athens reaching beyond the temporal or mythically adjacent. The most important example of this lies in Tecmessa's first address to the Salaminian Chorus (201-204), where she indicates shared a shared heritage between Salamis and Athens:

ναὸς ἄρωγοι τῆς Αἴαντος,
γενεᾶς χθονίων ἀπ' Ἐρεχθιδῶν,
ἔχομεν στοναχὰς οἱ κηδόμενοι
τοῦ Τελαμῶνος τηλόθεν οἴκου.

Ajax's mariners, men of the tribe sprung from
Erechtheus, sons of the earth, mourning is our portion,
we who care for the far-off house of Telamon.

In this speech, Tecmessa directly links the Salaminians with Erechtheus – the autochthonous king of Athens – and, by proxy, with the Athenian audience. This characterization of the Salaminians’ ancestry, and thus Ajax’s own, would have caused the audience to identify themselves and their heritage with Ajax, and possibly with the internal reflections and allusions present in his speeches. One suggestion here may be that Tecmessa’s pronouncement extends to the play’s audience, inviting the Athenians to reflect on the inner turmoil that has become Ajax’s portion as if it were shared with themselves as well.

We shall now turn our attention to the speeches made by Ajax in the play, and their importance for understanding the reception of his suicide. The speeches of male characters in tragedy that occur just prior to suicide are a small selection of dialogues with the Athenian audience that lack formal classification, but which may be termed suicide speeches. These speeches have the obvious purpose of advancing the dramatic plot of the play and providing action sequences to draw the audience along with the story. In the context of male suicide, however, the speeches serve another, explanatory purpose. By their very nature they suggest to us a kind of rationalization for the method of death to follow, a locutionary justification for why the suicide is necessary or honourable. In this they differ from the mode for suicides enacted on the stage but in a context other than one that was strictly male and Athenian.⁷³ As a result, these speeches serve to invoke a theme particular to male suicide: namely, that these deaths are in service to the character’s community and heroic nature. As we shall see, the speeches of Ajax suggest that his

⁷³ N.M. Dee, ‘The Athenian Reception of Evadne’s Suicide in Euripides’s *Suppliants*,’ *Illinois Classical Studies* 40 (2015) 263-279, esp. 266, 270-273.

suicide, like his allusions to the changing of the seasons, has become a point of alternation: one that connects the passing of the Homeric hero-ideal to the ascendancy of an idealized Athens.⁷⁴

The mid-play suicide speech of Ajax (646-692) provides a meditation which has often been the subject of commentary regarding its seeming dissimulation – i.e. whether Ajax relates to his companions the fact that he is about to kill himself. A selection follows:

ἀλλ' εἶμι πρὸς τε λουτρὰ καὶ παρακτίους
λειμῶνας, ὡς ἂν λύμαθ' ἀγνίστας ἐμὰ
μῆνιν βαρεῖαν ἐξαλύξωμαι θεᾶς:
μολὼν τε χῶρον ἔνθ' ἂν ἀστιβῆ κίχῳ,
κρύψω τόδ' ἔγχος τοῦμόν, ἔχθιστον βελῶν,
γαίας ὀρύξας ἔνθα μή τις ὄψεται:
ἀλλ' αὐτὸ νῦξ Ἄιδης τε σφζόντων κάτω.
ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐξ οὗ χειρὶ τοῦτ' ἐδεξάμην
παρ' Ἔκτορος δῶρημα δυσμενεστάτου,

⁷⁴On the significance of Ajax's death to the *polis* model, see note 38 (above).

Cf. R. Kennedy, *Athena's Justice: Athena, Athens, and the Concept of Justice in Greek Tragedy*, (New York 2009) 190, who comments on Ajax's suicide, stating 'it is the downfall of a generation's ideal. Through his relationship to both the allies and to the Salaminian heroes of Athens' past, Ajax represents an era in Athenian history when bravery and freedom came before safety and moderation. In the new world of the empire, such bravery is self-destructive.'

Kennedy does make an important point: Ajax's role had indeed become that of a favourable model, and Sophocles takes great pains to present Ajax in this light. His conclusion, however, would limit the role of Ajax to that of the Homeric mould only, and not take into account his portrayal on stage as a more contemporary Athenian hero.

οὐπω τι κεδνὸν ἔσχον Ἀργείων πάρα.
ἀλλ' ἔστ' ἀληθῆς ἡ βροτῶν παροιμία,
ἐχθρῶν ἄδωρα δῶρα κούκ ὀνήσιμα.

‘But I shall go to the bathing-place and the meadows by the shore, so that in the washing of my moral filth I may flee the heavy wrath of the goddess. Then I shall find some untrodden place and bury this sword, most hateful of weapons, digging in the earth where no one shall see; let night and Hades keep it underground! For since my hand received this gift from Hector, my worst foe, until now I have no good from the Argives. That proverb of men is true: the gifts of enemies are no gifts, and bring no good.’ (654-665)

This passage has attracted great commentary on its purported meaning, largely on the basis of being an intricate plot device.⁷⁵ Without wading too deeply into this discussion, I should like to add a point about the passage that has been overlooked, namely that there exists a strong religious aspect to it, with a view to tragic lament’s preoccupation with social conventions and Ajax’s ritualistic approach to his suicide. When Ajax speaks of a desire to ‘cleans the moral filth’ from himself and flee Athena’s wrath, he refers to the

⁷⁵ For the idea that Ajax has decided to kill himself, see W.B. Stanford, *Sophocles, Ajax*, (London 1963); whether he deliberately misleads, see M.W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*, (Cambridge 1989).

Garvie writes that Ajax’s use of the alternation principle means we must ‘believe that it is not all deceit or bitter sarcasm...It is hard to believe that all of this is expended on a lie’ (A.F. Garvie, *Sophocles: Ajax* (Oxford 1998) 186). There is also the theory that Ajax ‘deceives without actually lying’ (P.J. Finglass, *Sophocles: Ajax. Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries*, 48 (Cambridge 2011)).

same ritual purifications which would come to be attached to his cult as a protecting hero of Athens.⁷⁶ His invocation of darkness and the underworld creates an atmosphere funeral ritual, and the ‘untrodden ground’ (χωρον ἀστιβῆ) he seeks also suggests ground ‘not to be trodden,’ the consecrated soil upon which his future cult may be observed.

Later in this same speech, Ajax uses a phrase that is vital to understanding how Sophocles intends to frame his death:

καὶ γὰρ τὰ δεινὰ καὶ τὰ καρτερώτατα
τιμαῖς ὑπεῖκει: τοῦτο μὲν νιφοστιβεῖς
χειμῶνες ἐκχωροῦσιν εὐκάρπῳ θέρει:
ἐξίσταται δὲ νυκτὸς αἰανῆς κύκλος
τῇ λευκοπώλῳ φέγγος ἡμέρα φλέγειν:

Dread things and those strongest
yield to office; first, snow-strewn winter
gives way to fruitful summer;
and the weary rotation of the night
withdraws for day with its white horses to kindle the light. (669-73)

The phrase λευκόπωλος ἡμέρα is quite rare, although it appears in *Odyssey* 23.246. It also happens to be included in Aeschylus’ *Persians*, at the very moment when the fortunes of the Persians have begun to overturn and the dawn of Greek ‘light’ to triumph:

ἐπεὶ γε μέντοι λευκόπωλος ἡμέρα

⁷⁶ These practices are mentioned in *Ai.* 1402-1406.

πᾶσαν κατέσχε γαῖαν εὐφεγγῆς ἰδεῖν,
πρῶτον μὲν ἤχη κέλαδος Ἑλλήνων πάρα
μολπηδὸν ἠυφήμησεν, ὄρθιον δ' ἅμα
ἀντηλάλαξε νησιώτιδος πέτρας
ἤχώ

When, however, radiant Day with her white horses
shone her brilliant light over all the land,
a loud cheer first rang out like a song of triumph from the Greeks,
and simultaneously returned an answering cry
from the island crags. (386-91)

While λευκόπωλος ἡμέρα in *Persians* marks the beginning of battle, its appearance in *Ajax* marks the exit of Ajax from his role as the defender of the Greeks, with a similarity of dramatic succession that is hard to ignore. This allusion to the outbreak of battle in *Persians* foreshadows the Athenian military achievement in a Homeric context, and it is highly unlikely that Sophocles could have inserted the tragic anachronism unintentionally.⁷⁷ I conclude that this part of the suicide speech is intended to identify Ajax's final moments in the epic past with the Athenians' future victory at Salamis, and the greatness of Athens to follow. Ajax's earlier speeches can be considered in light of this theory as invitations for the audience to examine and identify with his motivations.

⁷⁷ On these passages, Garner states that both plays 'remind us that Salamis is the home of Ajax' and that the 'phrase, rhythm, and thought have all been borrowed by Sophocles from [*Persians*] which describes the most famous event at his hero's home' (*From Homer to Tragedy*, 50).

The internal (but externalized) meditations of Ajax act as a prompt for the Athenian audience to reflect on their own role as the ‘bulwark of Greece.’

After recounting the circumstances of his madness, Ajax questions what future lies ahead for him (457-466):

καὶ νῦν τί χρῆ δρᾶν; ὅστις ἐμφανῶς θεοῖς
ἐχθαίρομαι, μισεῖ δέ μ’ Ἑλλήνων στρατός,
ἔχθει δὲ Τροία πᾶσα καὶ πεδία τάδε.
πότερα πρὸς οἴκους, ναυλόχους λιπὼν ἔδρας
μόνους τ’ Ἀτρείδας, πέλαγος Αἰγαῖον περῶ;
καὶ ποῖον ὄμμα πατρὶ δηλώσω φανεῖς
Τελαμῶνι; πῶς με τλήσεται ποτ’ εἰσιδεῖν
γυμνὸν φανέντα τῶν ἀριστείων ἄτερ,
ὧν αὐτὸς ἔσχε στέφανον εὐκλείας μέγαν;
οὐκ ἔστι τοῦργον τλητόν.

‘And now what shall I do, one who is manifestly hateful to the gods,
begrudged by the Greek army, and detested by all Troy and these plains?
Shall I go from my station of the ships and leave the Atreidae alone, to sail
homewards across the Aegean? And what face shall I betray to my father
Telamon, when I arrive? How will he bear to look upon me, when I appear
before him naked and without that prowess for which he himself won a
fine garland of fame? Nay, ‘tis not to be borne!’

Here, Ajax reminds us of his chief purpose in sailing with the Atreidae: to win renown and uphold honour in the eyes of others. Such a benefit is sought not as an internal recognition within oneself, but something granted as a result of the acceptance of what others deem honourable. Thus, Ajax's desire to regain honour becomes a quest to redeem his future self and memory among the Athenian community, rather than his current status. This idea is developed more fully as the speech progresses (466-480):

ἀλλὰ δῆτ' ἰὼν
πρὸς ἔρυμα Τρώων, ξυμπεσὼν μόνος μόνοις
καὶ δρῶν τι χρηστόν, εἶτα λοίσθιον θάναω;
ἀλλ' ὧδέ γ' Ἀτρείδας ἄν εὐφράναιμί που.
οὐκ ἔστι ταῦτα. πεῖρά τις ζητητέα
τοιὰδ' ἀφ' ἧς γέροντι δηλώσω πατρὶ
μή τοι φύσιν γ' ἄσπλαγχνος ἐκ κείνου γεγώς.
αἰσχρὸν γὰρ ἄνδρα τοῦ μακροῦ χρήζειν βίου,
κακοῖσιν ὅστις μηδὲν ἐξαλλάσσεται.
τί γὰρ παρ' ἧμαρ ἡμέρα τέρπειν ἔχει
προσθεῖσα κἀναθεῖσα τοῦ γε κατθανεῖν;
οὐκ ἄν πριαίμην οὐδενὸς λόγου βροτὸν
ὅστις κεναῖσιν ἐλπίσιν θερμαίνεται:
ἀλλ' ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι
τὸν εὐγενῆ χρή. πάντ' ἀκήκοας λόγον.

‘But then shall I go against the stronghold of the Trojans, attacking alone in single combat and doing some useful service, and finally perish? No, in so doing I might perchance gladden the Atreidae. That must not be. Some trial must be sought whereby I may prove to my aged sire that in nature, at least, his son is not cowardly. It is dishonourable for a man to crave the full term of life, when he finds no variance in his troubles. What joy is there in day following day, now advancing us towards, now drawing us back from the verge of death? I would not buy at any price the man who is warmed by empty hopes. Nay, one of noble birth should nobly live, or swiftly and nobly die. You have heard all.’

Ajax is concerned that his honour has been tarnished because, by his own actions, he has not lived up to his duty of being ‘a man of noble birth’ (τὸν εὐγενῆ) and the legitimate protector of the Achaeans. The notion that he might regain his honour by performing the great deed of fighting alone against the hosts of Troy is reminiscent of Hector’s desire to face Achilles in single combat rather than hide behind those same walls.⁷⁸ The defining factor in both cases is the authority that both heroes stood to gain in the eyes of his comrades and civic community. The audience is invited to sympathize with the force of necessity that underlies Ajax’s proposed end, precisely because what troubles him is his failure to embody his role as the community’s hero. It is noteworthy that Ajax decides *against* the idea of seeking death in single combat against the Trojans, even though such

⁷⁸ *Il.* 22.99-110.

an attempt might well be considered suicidal.⁷⁹ Instead, he will seek a moment of trial (πεῖρά τις ζητητέα) that will somehow redeem his role as the protector of the Greeks.

In Ajax's final speech, Sophocles brings together all of these themes – honour; future memory; protecting the community; legitimization of purpose – in a final address that connects the hero with mythic and Athenian greatness:

σὺ δ', ὃ τὸν αἰπὺν οὐρανὸν διφρηλατῶν
Ἥλιε, πατρώαν τὴν ἐμὴν ὅταν χθόνα
ἴδης, ἐπισχῶν χρυσόνωτον ἠνίαν
ἄγγελον ἄτας τὰς ἐμὰς μόρον τ' ἐμὸν
γέροντι πατρὶ τῇ τε δυστήνῳ τροφῷ.

‘And you, whose chariot-wheels climb the heights of the sky, Helios, when you see the land of my fathers, draw in your rein spread with gold and tell my disasters and my fate to my aged father and to the hapless woman who reared me.’ (845-849)

Ajax commands Helios to reign in his chariot, to stop time at the moment when ‘Day’s white horses’ will preside over his suicide. His death will take place in a moment of eternal repute, in much the same way that the Athenians imagined their own legacy to have begun. In such a moment, his final invocations also assume lasting significance:

ὃ φέγγος, ὃ γῆς ἱερὸν οἰκείας πέδον

⁷⁹ Cf. N. Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. A. Forster (Cambridge, Mass. 1987), 41 f.

Σαλαμῖνος, ὃ πατρῶον ἐστίας βάθρον

κλειναί τ' Ἀθῆναι καὶ τὸ σύντροφον γένος

‘O sunlight! O sacred soil of my own Salamis, firm seat of my father’s hearth! O famous Athens, and your tribe kindred to mine!’ (859 ff.)

In his *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles refers to a fragment of Pindar in which Ἑλλάδος ἔρεισμα, κλειναὶ Ἀθῆναι, ‘bulwark of Greece; famous Athens,’ is applied to the city.⁸⁰

With the phrase κλειναί τ' Ἀθῆναι, Ajax foreshadows the Chorus’ final words at the end of the play.⁸¹ He himself foretells Athens’ future glory, at a time in the epic past when Athens was as yet untested. When Ajax calls the city κλειναὶ Ἀθῆναι, therefore, he also extolls Athens as the new ‘bulwark of Greece.’ Ajax relinquishes this mantle through his mode of dying, since because of his suicide (rather than a death in battle, for example) Ajax has *chosen* to give over his protective role to the Athenians. His suicide has become the catalyst for the giving way of the Homeric world of mythic heroes to that of historical time, in which Athens and the Athenian tribes have assumed his role as defenders of the Greek cities against Sparta during the Peloponnesian War.⁸² It is at this moment, right before the suicide, that Salamis and Ajax are shown in their closest relation to the city of Athens and the Aiantidae, cementing the heightened drama of the episode with the validation of these attributes, hero and island, as truly Athenian. Ajax’s role is redeemed,

⁸⁰ *Pi.* fr.76

⁸¹ *Ai.* 1418 ff. ‘Many things shall mortals learn by seeing; yet, before he sees, none may read the future or his fate’ (ἢ πολλὰ βροτοῖς ἔστιν ἰδοῦσιν γνῶναι: πρὶν ἰδεῖν δ’ οὐδεὶς μάντις τῶν μελλόντων, ὅ τι πράξει).

⁸² Sophocles, himself a general during the Peloponnesian War, might well have had the political atmosphere of his time uppermost in mind as he composed these lines.

not in Ajax himself, but through the deeds of a renowned Athens to come. The play's second half is now positioned for the establishment of Ajax's public cult at Athens.

V. Ajax's Burial and Cult

The reasons for Ajax's suicide dominated the stage prior to his actual death, but the heated dispute over his burial in the second half of the play jeopardizes his legacy. To deny Ajax his burial would not only dishonour the hero but also violate the sacred laws which bound living Athenians to the dead.⁸³

The arguments against burial fall into two categories: personal failures on the part of Ajax, and that his stubbornness and suicide have threatened the fabric of the Greek community. Agamemnon's unfavorable comparison of Ajax's stubborn loyalty to an ox does not recall the tenacity of Ajax on the battlefield, but instead the lazy donkey driven back slowly by young boys.⁸⁴ The same characteristics of boldness and glory-seeking which made Ajax a great hero to the Achaeans seem to have become his reasons for plotting against the army.⁸⁵ Agamemnon's final claim to authority over Ajax's burial is given in an extended speech (1239-50) in which he argues that Ajax has opposed the legitimate laws of the community:

πικροὺς ἔοιγμεν τῶν Ἀχιλλείων ὄπλων
ἀγῶνας Ἀργείοισι κηρῦζαι τότε,
εἰ πανταχοῦ φανούμεθ' ἐκ Τεύκρου κακοί,
κούκ ἀρκέσει ποθ' ὑμῖν οὐδ' ἠσσημένοις
εἵκειν ἅ τοῖς πολλοῖσιν ἤρεσκεν κριταῖς,
ἀλλ' αἰὲν ἡμᾶς ἢ κακοῖς βαλεῖτέ που

⁸³ A theme explored in great detail throughout *Antigone*, for example.

⁸⁴ 'An ox, for all its great girth, is kept straight on the road with a small whip,' (1253 f.)

⁸⁵ *Ai.* 1229-1238.

ἢ σὺν δόλῳ κεντήσεθ' οἱ λελειμμένοι.
ἐκ τῶνδε μέντοι τῶν τρόπων οὐκ ἄν ποτε
κατάστασις γένοιτ' ἂν οὐδενὸς νόμου,
εἰ τοὺς δίκη νικῶντας ἐξωθήσομεν
καὶ τοὺς ὀπισθεν εἰς τὸ πρόσθεν ἄξομεν.
ἄλλ' εἰρκτέον τάδ' ἐστίν

I believe we shall rue the day when we called upon the Greeks to contest the arms of Achilles, if, whatever the issue may be, we are denounced as evil by Teucer, and if, even when you are defeated, you will never accept that which has been decided by the majority of judges, but must ever assail us with abuse or stab at us in the dark; you, the losers. Now, where such ways prevail, there could never be the institution of law, if we are to thrust the rightful winners aside, and bring the rearmost to the front. No, this must be checked.

Since the dispute over burial has to do with an Athenian hero and the foundation of his cult, the morality and reputation of the 'renowned city' itself is at stake. The Atreidae's reactions to Ajax's legacy, though veiled in civic language, threaten to unravel this foundation.

I suggest that the final scenes of argument are more concerned with the judgement of the Athenian audience than that of the characters in the play. Agamemnon's assertions that he cannot understand Teucer and that Teucer has committed hubris by speaking freely clearly seem intended as a prompt for those listening to reflect on these arguments

against Ajax's legacy and reject them.⁸⁶ Although the arguments of Agamemnon are superficially compelling in the context of a democratic city, in reality his hypocrisy would be apparent to the audience. In the stichomythia that concludes the debate, Odysseus appears and argues in favour of his former enemy.⁸⁷ In his scene, we may discern shades of the same ideals which inspired the funerary speech of Pericles, extolling the greatness of those Athenians who would give their lives for Athens, whether from selfless duty or a sense of personal honour.⁸⁸ Through brave action, an Athenian might win honour for himself and a deserved place in public memory. In this way, Odysseus' arguments are more indicative of the attitude towards the suicide that *Ajax* attempts to instill.

As I have argued earlier, the suicide of Ajax symbolically suggests the responsibility of the Athenian *polis*: to take up Ajax's mantle. It may also indicate that Athens no longer has room for heroic ideals which do not include, or stand antagonistically against, the majority of its citizens.⁸⁹ As we have seen, however, this did not seriously preclude Sophocles from adapting the hero's attributes to fit the new political landscape. The Athenians themselves clearly appropriated such ideals. Martial valour attached itself to the imagery of the eponymous heroes of the Athenian tribes,

⁸⁶ Garvie, *Sophocles: Ajax*, 239, n. 1262 f: 'The pretence that Teucer does not speak intelligible Greek brings the speech to its offensive end.'

⁸⁷ *Ai.* 1336.

⁸⁸ A.B. Bosworth, 'The Historical Context of Thucydides' Funeral Oration,' *JHS* 120 (2000) 1-16.

⁸⁹ Blundell (*Helping Friends and Harming Enemies*, 101-104) stresses how the play ends with the positive cooperation of the whole community. But cf. C.P. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilisation: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 109-151, esp. 138, who argues that there is continuing tension in the end.

inspiring real courage in Athenian warriors during the Peloponnesian War.⁹⁰ Odysseus, mediating as the voice of reason for the community, recognizes that the hero's ἀρετή trivializes his supposed offenses and that Ajax's legacy should be recognized by all the Greeks.⁹¹ In like manner, the Athenians wished for their city's political influence to be linked to Ajax and recognized by the Greeks of their own time.⁹²

A question that persists in scholarship regarding the play's conclusion is how Ajax's cult ritual is transformed from being kin-based in the play to a practice of the *polis* in the fifth century. On this issue, Rehm notes that 'After his death, the hero who divided the Greek camp is honoured in a public (*polis*) cult, a process that effectively converts kin-based funeral ritual (signalled in the play by Odysseus' exclusion) into a communal rite celebrating *polis* solidarity,'⁹³ and concludes 'perhaps the Athenian audience found some mitigation of Odysseus' exclusion in the hero cult in which it could participate.'⁹⁴ I alternatively suggest that there is no true transformation from one practice to the next. Teucer's exclusion of Odysseus from Ajax's burial rites is not a true kin-based exclusion, because Sophocles has already insinuated that the Athenians share kinship with Ajax: 'O famous Athens, and your race kindred to mine!'⁹⁵ Indeed, Teucer states that he will make the ritual preparations δὲ τᾶλλα, 'for others' and calls upon all who call themselves φίλος

⁹⁰ Sir Kenneth Dover, in his *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley 1974), 168 f., compares Demosthenes' pronouncement of Ajax 'as an example of the heroism which inspired martial courage in the *phyle* named after him': '[Ajax] judged life to be unlivable when he was denied the prize for valor' (Dem. 60.31).

⁹¹ *Ai.* 1363.

⁹² J.A.S. Evans, 'Herodotus and The Battle of Marathon,' *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 42 (1993) 279-307, esp. 279-280.

⁹³ R. Rehm, *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton 2002), 137.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁹⁵ *Ai.* 861; 201 f.

ἄνθρωποι (i.e. the Athenian spectators) to participate in the funeral rites.⁹⁶ Through the participation of the audience as spectators to the tragedy, its members also become participants in Ajax's cult rites.

Near the close of the play, the Salaminian Chorus laments the homeland they have left behind them, and the loss of the man on whom their return depended, their 'great wall against nightly terrors and darts,'⁹⁷ concluding by expressing their yearning to sail towards 'the rampart of Sounion' and 'sacred Athens.'⁹⁸ The hero and the city of Athens are combined into a twin image through the 'bulwark' (προβολὰ) of Ajax and the 'rampart' (πρόβλημα) of Sounion, the promontory of Attica. Like the famed walls of Athens, Ajax comes to symbolize the heroic, enduring foundations of the city. In the end, we find that Ajax's suicide allowed Sophocles to handle with poetic dexterity the necessity of Ajax relinquishing the role of protector to Athens voluntarily, while praising, at the same time, Ajax's connection to one of Athens' most definitive historical moments.

⁹⁶ *Ai.* 1398, 1413.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1211 ff.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1217-1272.

Chapter 2

Antigone and Haemon

I. Thebes and Oligarchy

Male suicide in the *Antigone* has been afforded little attention owing to scholarly focus on the tension between Antigone and Creon rather than secondary characters, such as Haemon. The *Antigone* begins in the wake of a fratricidal and inter-familial war within the house of Cadmus: the ruling dynasty of Thebes. Oedipus, the former king of Thebes, has gone into exile. His sons Eteocles and Polynices wage a civil war over the Theban throne, resulting in the death of both brothers. The new ruler of Thebes and their father's brother-in-law, Creon, has ordered that because of Polynices' actions against the city's community, his body should lie outside the city walls unburied – a meal for carrion birds and scavenging animals. The play's main story centres around the attempts of Antigone, the sister of Polynices and Eteocles and betrothed of Creon's son, Haemon, to observe the proper burial rites for Polynices in defiance of Creon's unilateral edict. As the *Antigone* unfolds with tension mounting between Creon and Antigone, we find Haemon thrust into the limelight – his loyalty to his father tested and weighed against his affection for Antigone and his responsibility towards the citizens of Thebes. In the end, Haemon, who refuses to stand by while Creon drives his city and family into ruin, resolves to kill himself if Antigone dies. His suicide becomes a part of the calamitous ending for Creon.

The play is set in the mythical past of the city of Thebes, an oligarchic city in the mid-fifth century and Athens' greatest rival apart from Sparta. Despite this distant setting, and the fact that the *Antigone* also belongs in the Theban cycle of tragedies, it is quite

likely that recent historical events played some role in the play's eventual tone. Sophocles is said to have achieved the popularity necessary to obtain a generalship on account of his production of the play,⁹⁹ which may be understood in the context of the political events of the time. In 447 BC, some few years prior to the first production of the *Antigone*, the oligarchs of Thebes conspired against a democratic faction in the city, leading to a revolt in Boeotia.¹⁰⁰ In response, the Athenians campaigned in the region but were unable to regain control despite their best efforts; all of Boeotia, including Locris and Phocis, fell into the hands of the oligarchs. After such a disaster, Athens was forced into signing the so-called Thirty Years' Peace in 446, giving up all its possessions in the Peloponnese and ending the first Peloponnesian War.¹⁰¹ This setback dealt a major blow to the Athenians' diplomatic influence and power. I suggest that following these events, the character of Creon in *Antigone* was associated with Athens' oligarchic opponents.¹⁰²

Both the *Antigone* and the *Phoenician Women* (in Chapter 3 to follow) are set in Thebes. The political opposition of Thebes to Athens has led some scholars to argue that Thebes is represented in Attic tragedy as a kind of anti-Athens.¹⁰³ The abundance of

⁹⁹ R.C. Jebb (ed./trans.), *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, with critical notes, commentary, and translation in English prose, Part III: The Antigone*, (Cambridge 1900) xix. I understand these fragments to imply that Sophocles was only reputed to have been made a general because a great poet, and that the political qualities of the *Antigone* might have been more influential for securing common popularity than the office outright.

¹⁰⁰ Paus. 1.27.5.

¹⁰¹ N. Bagnall, *The Peloponnesian War: Athens, Sparta and the Struggle for Greece*, (New York 2006) 123.

¹⁰² Cf. A.J. Podlecki ('Creon and Herodotus,' *TAPA* 97 (1966) 365-371) who writes that the *Antigone* is in dialogue with the Persian Debate of Herodotus, and traces a common literary source for both portrayals of 'the tyrant' to Hippias.

¹⁰³ See F. Zeitlin, 'Thebes: theater of self and society in Athenian drama,' in J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin (eds), *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton 1990) 130-167. The dichotomy presented by Zeitlin, in my opinion, may be too too stark to depict satisfactorily the attitude of Athens towards representations of

Theban plays do grant us a picture of an important fifth-century *polis*, but, as Zeitlin notes, this is often really an inverted picture of Athens.¹⁰⁴ Thebes represented an opportunity for the Athenians to distance themselves in tragedy both temporally (in mythic time) and spatially (in another city) from their political and social issues and project these onto a safe subject. Athenian representations of Thebes, then, are not so much the portrayal of an anti-Athens as that of a mirror of Athenian values, providing a convenient way to discuss deeper issues affecting the city systemically. For example, both cities are paralleled in foundation myths featuring autochthony. The term is one used to describe having always occupied the ‘same land’ (*autos chthon*) but which also refers to mythical ancestors being literally born out of the earth. In this way the sown men of Thebes (*Spartoi*) are paralleled in Athenian myth by their founding king Erechtheus.¹⁰⁵ The tradition of Athenian autochthony provided the Athenians with a mythic basis for an idealized, all-male community.¹⁰⁶ The self-sustaining nature of Athens’ autochthonous *polis*, however, can be contrasted with the self-destructive aspect of Creon’s harshness in the *Antigone*, and the damage inflicted by his actions on the house of Cadmus. In like

Thebes. For example, Zeitlin (167) dismisses Theseus’ praise of Thebes in *Oedipus at Colonus* (919-930).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 142-150.

¹⁰⁵ *Il.* 2.546.

See also S. Nimis, ‘Theban Autochthony and Athenian Ideology in the Phoenissae of Euripides,’ *Mediterranean Studies* 25 (2017) 148-151. For more on the evolution of the autochthony ideal in Athenian public discourse, see V.J. Rosivach, ‘Autochthony and the Athenians,’ *Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987) 294–306. For Athenian myths of autochthony in art and literature, see H. Shapiro, ‘Autochthony and the Visual Arts in Fifth-Century Athens,’ in D. Boedeker and K.A. Raaflaub, eds., *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens* (Cambridge, Mass. 1998) 127–51. For Theban myth, see F. Vian, *Les Origines de Thèbes: Cadmos et les Spartes*, (Paris 1963).

¹⁰⁶ For further discussions on autochthony and sex in tragedy, see N. Loraux, *Children of Athena: Ideas about Athenian Citizenship and the Division between the Sexes*, trans. C. Levine (Princeton 1993).

manner, issues of tyranny and civic duty in plays like the *Antigone* served as a moment of reflection for the Athenian audience regarding their own social anxieties.

Much of the scholarship on this complex tragedy has been devoted to examining the issues of family, civic community, law, and conscience it contains.¹⁰⁷ Although *Antigone*'s main action is mostly concentrated on the dynamic between Creon and Antigone, and the latter's choice of loyalty to family rather than legal authority, the character of Haemon has received more attention in recent years.¹⁰⁸ His purpose in the play, however, has often been understood to be that of a supporting character, despite the fact that his debate scene with Creon and his role in punishing his father with his suicide are some of the most active scenes in the play. I have chosen to concentrate specifically on these scenes in order to analyze Sophocles' characterization of Haemon and his suicide and their political significance.

This chapter will argue that Haemon's decision to end his life is an act of loyalty to the city of Thebes and Antigone in defiance of Creon's misuse of legal authority.

¹⁰⁷ For some of the most pertinent works in this vein, see S.M. Adams, 'The "Antigone" of Sophocles,' *Phoenix* 9 (1955) 47-62; A.J. Podlecki, 'Creon and Herodotus,' *TAPA* 97 (1966) 359-371; P.E. Easterling, 'Constructing Character in Greek Tragedy,' in *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature*, ed. C. Pelling (Oxford 1990); C. Jacobs, 'Dusting Antigone,' *MLN* 111 (1996) 889-917; P. Holt, 'Polis and Tragedy in the "Antigone,"' *Mnemosyne* 52 (1999) 658-690; J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York 2000); B. Honig, 'Antigone's Laments, Creon's Grief: Mourning, Membership, and the Politics of Exception,' *Political Theory* 37 (2009) 5-43; J. Strauss, *Private Lives, Public Deaths: Antigone and the Invention of Individuality* (New York 2013).

¹⁰⁸ For examples of Haemon's role as an anti-authoritarian figure, see D. Barker, 'Haemon's Paideia: Speaking, Listening, and the Politics of the Antigone,' *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* 23 (2006), 1-20; and P. Miller, 'Destabilizing Haemon: Radically Reading Gender and Authority in Sophocles' *Antigone*,' *Helios* 41 (2014), 163-185.

Haemon's scenes show that although his decision to commit suicide is an act borne of anger over Antigone's death, it is long premeditated in the course of the play and his motivation for suicide is political in origin. Haemon embodies bravery in the face of oligarchic oppression, which has manifested in the guise of an archaic tyranny at Thebes. As Creon's rule is represented as being in tension with the cohesion of Thebes itself, Haemon's defence of civic justice helps associate the ideas of tyranny in the play with the oligarchic elements with which Athens found itself in tension.

II. Haemon and Creon

In one of the opening scenes of the play, Creon enters and seeks the support of the chorus; it is gradually revealed, however, that this is no ordinary chorus, but a specially selected council that Creon has called together to back his edict and support him in the future (σύγκλητον τήνδε γερόντων).¹⁰⁹ The chorus consists of elders, who, just prior to Creon's arrival, have recounted the events of the Seven against Thebes.¹¹⁰ Creon notes the special loyalty of these elders to the authority of the royal household, and in this way his mustering of the chorus resembles an exclusive, oligarchic council. The chorus leader pledges his support out of deference, granting Creon a kind of oligarchic mandate for his decisions: 'It is in your power to proclaim what you will concerning the living and the dead.'¹¹¹ The unilateral edict imposed by Creon in the *Antigone* would certainly constitute an injustice to the Athenian mind. It is in the later argument with Haemon, however, that Creon seems most fully to manifest a negatively charged persona of the oligarch-as-*tyrannos*.¹¹²

Throughout the *Antigone*, Creon's position in the *polis* is always referred to as one of a leader or ruler, rather than a tyrant. In the messenger speech relating Haemon's suicide, however, Creon's rule is characterized as that of a *tyrannos* specifically: 'Live as a tyrant, if you wish.'¹¹³ Some scholars have argued that tyrants are merely symbolic

¹⁰⁹ Soph. *Ant.* 160 ff.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99-151.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 211-214.

¹¹² Podlecki (note 107, above) argues that the play captures Creon in the process of becoming a tyrant throughout (359).

¹¹³ *Ant.* 1169. The messenger refers to the outcomes of Creon's administration of Thebes.

placeholders for oligarchy.¹¹⁴ Others have nevertheless maintained that the tragedy does not provide an opportunity for the criticism of the oligarchy, but the tyranny of Thebes. Richard Seaford, for example, argues that actual tyranny was a pressing issue for Attic drama in general, writing: ‘Traditional myth did not provide much scope for dramatizing “the conflict between democracy and aristocracy/oligarchy”...But these traditional themes *were* assimilable (up to a point) to a recent historical experience, the experience of tyranny.’¹¹⁵ Athens’ acquaintance with tyranny, though, was of some antiquity by the fifth century, and given the messenger’s reference it seems natural to read a criticism of oligarchy, a more recent historical issue, in the *Antigone*. As Raaflaub has argued,¹¹⁶ the Athenians were inclined to describe many forms of autocratic intent as ‘tyrannical,’ and this tendency was reflected in their tragedies, the events of which were set in a time pre-dating oligarchy. Historical writers and orators of the fifth century employed the *tyrannos* trope in this way as a kind of shorthand for the exercise of both oligarchic and dynastic power.¹¹⁷ Thus, tyranny could be invoked in tragedy as a way to discuss non-popular forms of government, whether oligarchic or otherwise. Edith Hall writes that while the tragedians tended to reinterpret myths within contemporary contexts, royal figures in tragedy were ‘operating at a high degree of abstraction from social reality, encoding the

¹¹⁴ J. Griffin, ‘The Social Function of Attic Tragedy,’ *The Classical Quarterly*, 48 (1998), 51-52.

¹¹⁵ R. Seaford, ‘The Social Function of Attic Tragedy: A Response to Jasper Griffin,’ *CQ* 50 (2000) 30-44, 36. Seaford’s argument suggests that concern over tyranny persisted in Athens throughout the fifth century.

¹¹⁶ K. Raaflaub, ‘Stick and Glue: The Function of Tyranny in Fifth-Century Athenian Democracy,’ in *Popular Tyranny: Sovereignty and Its Discontents in Ancient Greece*, K. Morgan, ed. (New York 2003), 23.

¹¹⁷ E.g., Xen. Hell. 2.3.16, 4.2.1; Thuc. 6.89.4; Lys. 12.35. For more on this view, see J. Lombardini, ‘Responding to Emergency in Democratic Athens: The Case of Anti-Tyranny Legislation,’ *Polity*, 47 (2015) 461-83.

newly discovered political freedoms and aspirations of ordinary men in the symbolic language of pre-democratic political hierarchies.¹¹⁸ The tensions between Creon and Haemon might well recall the political conflict between Athens and oligarchic Thebes during the Peloponnesian War, and situate Haemon's suicide in the midst of this.¹¹⁹ As a result, the terms 'tyrant' or 'tyranny' in this chapter refer specifically to exercises of Creon's authority, but with the understanding that the authority being criticized in the play is really that of oligarchy.

Haemon's first appearance in the *Antigone* is in a lengthy dialogue with Creon (631-765), during which Haemon accuses Creon of tyrannical behaviour and claims to represent the majority of the Theban people when he voices misgivings about Creon's misuse of power. Throughout the lengthy scene, Sophocles suggests Creon's concerns over his own future:

κρείσσον γάρ, εἴπερ δεῖ, πρὸς ἀνδρὸς ἐκπεσεῖν,
κούκ ἂν γυναικῶν ἦσσονες καλοίμεθ' ἄν.

¹¹⁸ E. Hall, 'The sociology of Athenian tragedy,' in P.E. Easterling, *The Cambridge companion to Greek tragedy. Cambridge companions to literature* (Cambridge 1997) 98.

¹¹⁹ Before leaving this topic to one side, we should take note of the interesting claim advanced by Seaford (2000), supporting the idea that tyranny itself was given special attention in tragedy in opposition to democracy, that 'at the City Dionysia...there was read out annually, probably throughout most of the fifth century, a decree proclaiming a reward for killing any of the tyrants' (35).

The earliest anti-tyranny decree that prescribes the *killing* of tyrants, however, is the Decree of Demophantos (Andoc. 1.96-98), dated to 410 BC, and Seaford's source for an earlier origin is found in a comedy (Ar. Av. 1074 f.), rather than a tragedy. As a reward is declared for the killing of *dead* tyrants (τυράννων τῶν τεθνηκότων) at this point in his play, Aristophanes appears to parody the anachronism of tyrants qua tyrants, rather than the law suggested by Seaford. The impact of such humour could be felt only if the threat of actual monarchy was rather stale in reality.

Better, if it must happen, that some man should deprive me,
as I'll not be called weaker than women.

But in an unexpected twist, Creon's actions ensure that his household will be overturned by Haemon, not Antigone. He has urged his son to 'let the girl find a marriage in Hades.'¹²⁰ This line foreshadows Haemon's death for the listener, when the Messenger proclaims that Haemon has 'found his marriage in the halls of Hades.'¹²¹ The entire conversation scene, in fact, constitutes the central means to understanding why the rest of the play unfolds in the manner it does.

First, Haemon enters and reassures Creon that he will obey good counsel from his father (635-638):

πάτερ, σός εἰμι, καὶ σύ μοι γνώμας ἔχων
χρηστάς ἀπορθοῖς, αἷς ἔγωγ' ἐφέψομαι.
ἐμοὶ γὰρ οὐδεις ἀξιώσεται γάμος
μείζων φέρεσθαι σοῦ καλῶς ἡγουμένου.

Father, I am yours. You guide me aright
with worthy counsel, to which I shall attend.
Nor will a marriage bed count for more with me
than your fair opinion.

¹²⁰ τὴν παῖδ' ἐν Αἴδου τήνδε νυμφεύειν τινί, 654.

¹²¹ *Ant.* 1240 f. For an in-depth discussion on the psychology of Antigone's marriage, see S. Murnaghan, 'Antigone 904-920 and the Institution of Marriage,' *AJPh* 107 (1986) 192-207.

In these lines, Haemon addressed the Chorus' concern that he approaches Creon with bitterness and grief¹²² and his father's that he bears malice instead.¹²³ In these sentiments we find nothing which suggests that Haemon's primary concern is for himself, Antigone, or his marriage. He is guided by 'worthy counsel' (γνώμας χρηστὰς) and hopes to find it in Creon. Creon's decree against Polynices' burial is made on the basis of laws that originate from good counsel,¹²⁴ and he initially claims that he holds to the best counsel of the people in making this law and in his reign generally (τῶν ἀρίστων ἄπτεται βουλευμάτων).¹²⁵ He believes that he is acting with the implied consent of the city of Thebes, and that his actions are in the best interests of the community. Instead, as Knox remarks at this point: 'Creon no longer speaks and acts for the *polis* as a whole; he speaks for no one but himself.'¹²⁶ Haemon's responses to Creon's advice take on the aspect of proverbial truths, in which we may read the political sympathies of a fifth-century Athenian audience.¹²⁷

¹²² *Ant.* 629 f.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 633.

¹²⁴ Demosthenes (25.16) states that the law of the *polis* is 'a general agreement of the entire community.' Creon's deference for previously established law comes too late, however (1113 f.).

¹²⁵ *Ant.* 178-181.

¹²⁶ B.M. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley 1964) 108.

¹²⁷ As Philip Holt (note 107, above) rightly points out: 'The thoughts and feelings of a people long dead are ultimately unrecoverable, and there is no reason to believe that all 16,000 spectators in the Theatre of Dionysos would react the same way. Still, we can estimate tendencies and argue that the text is especially apt to encourage certain responses in rather a lot of the audience' (672). As the first production of the *Antigone* was widely applauded, there is little reason to doubt that most Athenians would have sympathized with Haemon's reasoning.

Antigone has already observed that Thebes is against Creon’s order,¹²⁸ and now it is Haemon’s turn (689-695):

σοῦ δ’ οὖν πέφυκα πάντα προσκοπεῖν ὅσα
λέγει τις ἢ πράσσει τις ἢ ψέγειν ἔχει.
τὸ γὰρ σὸν ὄμμα δεινὸν, ἀνδρὶ δημότῃ
λόγοις τοιούτοις, οἷς σὺ μὴ τέρψει κλύων:
ἐμοὶ δ’ ἀκούειν ἔσθ’ ὑπὸ σκότου τάδε,
τὴν παῖδα ταύτην οἷ’, ὀδύρεται πόλις,
πασῶν γυναικῶν ὡς ἀναξιοτάτῃ
κάκιστ’ ἀπ’ ἔργων εὐκλεεστάτων φθίνει.

Being your son, I must consider all men’s doings
concerning you, their speech, and their censure most of all.
Your presence frightens any citizen from saying
things you would not care to hear.
But in dark corners I have heard them say
that the whole city grieves for this girl
unjustly doomed, if ever a woman was,
to die in shame for a glorious deed.

Creon ‘cloaks himself in the oligarchic watchwords of “good order” and “obedience to law,”’ even as Sophocles sets Haemon in his place as spokesman for the *polis*.¹²⁹ Later in

¹²⁸ *Ant.* 504 f., 509.

¹²⁹ C.H. Whitman, *Sophocles* (Cambridge, Mass. 1951) 90.

the speech (733) Haemon will flatly state that the whole city of Thebes is on Antigone's side.¹³⁰ Creon's answer to this directly contradicts his claims to civic justice – 'Is the city to direct my commands? Should someone else rule? (734, 736) – and reveals the double meaning in his constitutional soliloquy (666 f., 676):

ἀλλ' ὄν πόλις στήσειε τοῦδε χρῆ κλύειν
καὶ σμικρὰ καὶ δίκαια καὶ τάναντία...

...σώζει τὰ πολλὰ σώμαθ' ἢ πειθαρχία.

The man the city has elected must be hearkened to
in his least command, whether it be right or wrong...

...obedience to command saves their lives.

Creon praises the fulfillment of civic obligation, and obedience to the representatives of the *polis*, but these are hollow phrases. What he means is unquestioning and absolute deference to authority, whether its commands are just or unjust (δίκαια καὶ τάναντία).¹³¹

¹³⁰ Holt agrees that we should accept Haemon's claim at face value (682). Against the doubts of Sourvinou-Inwood in *Assumptions*, 144, we should apply the arguments of A.M. van Erp Taalman Kip, 'Truth in Tragedy: When Are We Entitled to Doubt a Character's Words?', *AJPh* 117 (1996) 517-536, esp. 521-524, who notes that if we do not accept that an off-stage reality exists, then we must question the content of every speech, including that of messengers, the gods, etc: 'If Sophocles wanted his audience to understand that Creon's decision had met with general disapproval, and that he could have rescinded it with the approbation of all, one of his characters had to be the vehicle for this information. Haemon was the obvious candidate. Since his death will be Creon's punishment, a confrontation between father and son was an essential part of the drama, and by choosing him to expound the people's view, Sophocles was able to add a political dimension to this confrontation' (523).

¹³¹ A.J. Podlecki, 'Creon and Herodotus,' 363; S. M. Adams, 'The "Antigone" of Sophocles,' 54-56.

Haemon's response to this insistence upon absolute authority is poignantly Athenian:

'You would rule a desert alone beautifully.'¹³² Initially, Haemon was ready to listen to his father, but as the dialogue devolves into stichomythia and he realizes the depth of Creon's mistaken position, he turns away from his former stance, proclaiming that the city is not Creon's sole possession and that, should Creon continue on this path, he intends to die along with Antigone.¹³³ His resolve to kill himself is related calmly, and without the qualification of lament or grief in his decision. Haemon's lines in the dialogue, taken in turn, correspond to a suicide speech: he states that Creon has offended the gods and the established laws, the principles of just rule, and unanimous public opinion. On this basis, he intends no longer to live in a city where such things are impossible and the will of the common man (ἀνδρὶ δημότῃ) goes unheeded.¹³⁴ As Podlecki remarks: 'Creon is thus revealed as a *tyrannos*, not only in the neutral, descriptive sense, but also in the pejorative.'¹³⁵ Even here we might push the idea a little further. In his *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles is careful to associate Thebes, though ruled by a king, with ideals of communal honour that exist in the city.¹³⁶ Through this portrayal of its ruler, Sophocles ensures that the impression left on his audience will be one of antipathy towards Creon's

¹³² καλῶς γ' ἐρήμης ἂν σὺ γῆς ἄρχοις μόνος, 739.

¹³³ 'No city is the preserve of one man' or lit. 'there is no city that is of one man' (πόλις γὰρ οὐκ ἔσθ' ἥτις ἀνδρός ἐσθ' ἐνός), 737 – here we understand the argument that the city is *common* property, and the insinuation that Creon cannot even govern it alone, but that his tyranny has its private supporters; 'Then she shall die, and her death will bring another' (ἢ δ' οὖν θανεῖται καὶ θανοῦσ' ὀλεῖ τινα), 751.

¹³⁴ See also A.H.M. Jones, 'The Athenian Democracy and Its Critics,' *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 11 (1953) 1-26, esp. 4, and the sources discussed that compare these freedoms to oligarchic alternatives. Note that Haemon's attitude is one of resignation towards Antigone's fate; his defiance of Creon is entirely political.

¹³⁵ A.J. Podlecki, 'Creon and Herodotus,' 364.

¹³⁶ Soph. *OC*. 919-930.

un-civic edicts. Under Creon, the Theban elders, and the palace guards, Thebes has become a tyrannical *state apparatus*: an oligarchy.

The wrath of Haemon that Creon feared, perhaps echoing the anxieties of a tenuous office,¹³⁷ is now on full display. Haemon storms away, vowing that Antigone will not die at his side, nor will he stand by and bear witness to Creon's malfeasance. Though he feels bound to uphold his principles, Haemon is a young man and cannot help but mingle a desire for vengeance with his emotional distress at Creon's stubbornness. His parting shot, somewhat cryptically, is that Creon will never again 'gaze upon my face, seeing it with your own eyes.'¹³⁸ Possibly this is meant as a veiled threat towards Creon, but if so his message goes unnoticed. They are his final lines in the play. The Chorus (or perhaps its leader) extends the scene (766 f.):

άνήρ, άναξ, βέβηκεν έξ όργης ταχύς:
νοῦς δ' έστὶ τηλικούτος άλγήσας βαρύς.

The man, my lord, has gone; swift in his temper;
the mind of one so young, being pained, is grievous.

The Chorus observes that Haemon carries the burden of βαρύς, a word placed emphatically at the end of their speech which signifies the grief and stern resolve that his decision bears.¹³⁹ This connects the two emotional responses in the minds of the

¹³⁷ Creon's insistence on the motive of bribery (κέρδος) in others rather projects his own desire for power – even if illegitimate (in lines 221 f., 292-303, 310 ff., 324 ff., 1037 ff., etc). As Tiresias will later retort (1056) 'all tyrants grab at base gain.'

¹³⁸ σύ τ' οὐδαμὰ τοῦμὸν προσόψει κρᾶτ' ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς ὄρων, 763 f.

¹³⁹ E.P. Garrison, *Groaning Tears*, 113-114.

audience, and the scene of Tiresias' prophecy, foretelling the death of Creon's son,¹⁴⁰ and the messenger's future report of Haemon's wrath¹⁴¹ reveal that Haemon's suicide will be one featuring vengeance as well as defiance of Creon's injustices in Thebes.

¹⁴⁰ *Ant.* 1064 ff.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1231-1235.

III. The Suicide of Haemon

With Antigone led into the underground tomb to die, and Haemon gone, the blind prophet Tiresias warns Creon that his edict has displeased the gods, and they punish the city by not accepting sacrifices. When Creon accuses Tiresias of lying, we are reminded of Haemon's vow that his father would never again look upon his living face (1064 ff.):

ἀλλ' εὖ γέ τοι κάτισθι μὴ πολλοὺς ἔτι
τρόχους ἀμιλλητῆρας ἡλίου τελεῖν,
ἐν οἷσι τῶν σῶν αὐτὸς ἐκ σπλάγχνων ἕνα
νέκυν νεκρῶν ἀμοιβὸν ἀντιδοῦς ἔσει,

Know well, the sun will not have rolled its course
many more days, before you come to give
a body for these corpses, the son of your loins.

The prophecy gives Creon pause and he decides, too late, to go back on his own words and prevent Antigone's death. As he tries to undo his mistakes, Haemon's suicide and Creon's enduring punishment become the climax to the drama. Haemon's suicide, however, as with all Sophoclean violence, occurs only in the audience's imagination. The messenger scene (1152-1243) describes what has happened offstage in powerful detail, the language dramatizing the action for the audience. When Creon and his followers find Antigone dead in her cell, they discover Haemon also, 'lamenting his bride's destruction, his father's deeds, and his ill-fated marriage.'¹⁴² Haemon hears his father's arrival, and

¹⁴² *Ant.* 1224 f.

turns from his dead bride look up at him. His grief has turned to rage, and we are told that the anger in his eyes blazes savagely.¹⁴³ Haemon's countenance reflects loathing (πτύσας προσώπῳ), as he does not speak a word but instead lunges at Creon with his sword and misses.¹⁴⁴ It is at this point that Haemon decides to carry out his intent to commit suicide, and join Antigone in her death, and he falls upon his sword.

The fact that the messenger relates the suicide scene to us, and, the audience, like us, must imagine Haemon's reaction, does not mean that no action occurs. We know that at the Theatre of Dionysus the Chorus would move and dance in the orchestra, and I believe it likely that messenger speeches, while perhaps not quite mimetic, would involve some level of emphatic delivery at key moments, or the selection of a particular tone to convey extra-auditory information.¹⁴⁵ These actions, as naturally to the Greeks as to us, inform the listener's experience and, in their original performance context, align the emphases with the intention of the tragedian. In short, the audience knows that Haemon's wrath is directed at Creon specifically, rather than merely outwards as a result of grief. As we have already shown, Sophocles has positioned Haemon in opposition to Creon's authority, and the audience is poised to evaluate his actions in this light. When the

¹⁴³ *Ant.* 1231.

¹⁴⁴ I follow the argument put forth by S. Johnson, 'A Note of Sophocles' "Antigone" 1232,' *The Classical Journal* 41 (1946) 371-374, in observing that πτύσας προσώπῳ is to be taken figuratively. As Johnson notes, there exists only one fragment of tragedy in which the literal meaning is implied (Aesch. *Fragm.* 354), and that sense is more suited to comedy anyway, where the literal meaning of πτύειν, to spit, is commonly found. E.g. *Ar. Vesp.* 792; *Men. Pk.* 202.

¹⁴⁵ For some further observations on these messenger speeches, see J.H. Caverno, 'The Messenger in Greek Tragedy,' *The Classical Journal* 12 (1917) 263-270. The performance of the messenger speech might also fall under the heading of 'performatives,' in that they describe an action that has occurred but also, by means of the speech, cause it to have happened in the play. For the definitive work on performative utterances, see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford 1962).

messenger (1231 f.) speaks of Haemon’s wrath, we must imagine that his tone evokes the defiance with which Haemon left Creon. Haemon’s eyes are ‘already angry’ (παπτήνας) when he fixes them on his father, and Creon’s words to him are curious (1228 ff.):

ὦ τλήμον, οἶον ἔργον εἴργασαι: τίνα
νοῦν ἔσχες; ἐν τῷ συμφορᾷς διεφθάρης;
ἔξελθε, τέκνον, ικέσιός σε λίσσομαι.

‘O reckless, what have you done? What plan have you caught up?
What sort of suffering is killing you?
Come out, my child, I beseech you, come!’

Adams muses that these lines carried ‘deadly significance’ in their accusatory sense, but we need not suppose that Haemon commits suicide out of desperation.¹⁴⁶ As the messenger has said earlier (1177), ‘the deed is on his father’s head.’ Creon’s rejection of the good counsel of the city, his ἀβουλία, is a great crime (1242 f.), and it is Haemon who ‘makes this clear to mankind,’ and to the audience, through his suicide. In the final act, the fortunes of the would-be tyrant are reversed, and it is Creon who is taken out of sight of men (1320) and Haemon’s body which is on display for Athens to mourn. It may be instructive to compare this treatment of Haemon’s body to Ajax’s.¹⁴⁷ On the one hand, while the meaning of Ajax’s suicide and burial is centralized throughout the *Ajax*, Haemon’s death gains no resolution for the play’s internal audience: Creon is devastated, certainly, but the meaning of Haemon’s suicide is left largely unremarked by the

¹⁴⁶ S.M. Adams, ‘The “Antigone” of Sophocles,’ 61.

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter 1, 25-30, of this thesis.

characters, unlike Odysseus' elaboration of Ajax's merits in death. On the other hand, the necessity for Ajax's cult is not clear to the Achaean leaders, as it is for the Athenian audience, while Haemon's death is acknowledged by the messenger and the chorus as a lesson in justice.¹⁴⁸ The difference between the two, I suggest, lies primarily in the escalation leading up to both suicides. While Ajax's cult is given meaning in the *Ajax* through a suicide that is honourable by association with Athenian glory, Haemon's death is inherently honourable because it occurs as the result of his standing up against oligarchy. His 'cult,' so to speak, lay in the continued practise of Athenian *polis* values.

Although Sophocles has Haemon hint at his suicide in advance, what the audience experiences of the suicide through the messenger speech scene is not the portrayal of a calm, considered stand of principle, but a messy issue overall. The messenger's story emphasizes an impulsiveness in Haemon's suicide, seemingly because of the shame or inwardly-directed anger at the prospect of killing his own father, and we, like the audience, have little cause to doubt the lines.¹⁴⁹ At the final moment, we appear to witness Haemon's earlier motivations for suicide and his actual actions aligning imperfectly. I believe that instead of casting Haemon's state of mind into doubt, Sophocles includes these details parenthetically in order to clarify that Haemon's death is not simply a self-sacrifice for *polis* values, but a true suicide involving the desire to reclaim honour and remove shame through upholding these same values.¹⁵⁰ The scene's

¹⁴⁸ *Ant.* 1242 f., 1270.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1233 ff.

¹⁵⁰ E.P. Garrison, 'Attitudes Towards Suicide in Ancient Greece,' *TAPhA* (1974-2014) 121 (1991) 1-34: 'These social phenomena of shame and honor (and its opposite, dishonor) motivate many of the suicides recorded by the historians and nearly all suicides in Greek tragedy' (13).

effect is to blur the distinction between the shame that Haemon feels for having failed to live up to his vow, that he would never ‘yield to base impulse,’¹⁵¹ co-mingled with the shame he feels at his failed attempt to kill Creon. By having Haemon follow through on his word to Creon, that he would not live in a Thebes where the worship of honour is absent,¹⁵² Sophocles attaches an idea of honour to Haemon’s principles.

As this chapter has hopefully shown, Haemon’s suicide in the *Antigone* is one that merits new evaluation in the tragedy. Beyond the elements of grief or divine retribution, the political orientation he exhibits in the play would likely prompt interest in the audience, allowing the Athenians to sympathize with his reasons for suicide and position themselves against Creon similarly. Haemon’s significance in the *Antigone* is his embodiment of the Athenian notion that good counsel, and justice, originates from the people and the gods rather than the will of a tyrant or oligarch. Thus his suicide garners sympathy for his earlier, principled stand against Creon as much as for himself through his death. In the wake of Athens’ political fortunes in the 440s, the parallels between Haemon’s attitude and the social values of the Athenians are difficult to deny. A suicide that ultimately reprovved ἀβουλία, a citizen who boldly confronted an oligarch: both were honourable outcomes of loyalty to the *polis*.

¹⁵¹ *Ant.* 747 (ἤσσω γε τῶν αἰσχρῶν ἐμέ).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 745 (οὐ γὰρ σέβεις τιμάς).

Chapter 3

Menoceus and Suicide

I. Euripides and Sacrifice

By far, the largest number of extant tragedies handed down to us from ancient times are found in the works of Euripides, eighteen in total. Of these, fully eight contain self-killing of some form.¹⁵³ In the *Phoenician Women*, the suicide of Menoeceus, son of Creon, is singular among these for the emphasis placed upon his deliberation and motivation to avoid shame prior to his death. Additionally, while much of the text of the *Phoenician Women* is rather poor, and interpolations abound,¹⁵⁴ Menoeceus' scenes are thought to be definitely Euripidean. Although most of the dramatic action in the play is taken up by other major characters, this chapter will focus on Menoeceus to argue that Euripides' portrayal of his choice to die is one of heroic male suicide in service to the greater good of the *polis*, and a model of the ideal Athenian son. Furthermore, the martial imagery that Euripides employs in Menoeceus' suicide speech recalls the military-political context of Athens in the late fifth century¹⁵⁵ and the civic virtues found in Pericles' funerary speech.

¹⁵³ These plays are: *Suppliant Women*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Phoenician Women*, *Alcestis*, *Hecabe*, *Heracles*, *Children of Heracles*, and *Hippolytus*.

¹⁵⁴ Many of these are detailed in D.J. Mastrorarde, *The Art of Euripides: Dramatic Technique and Social Context*, (Cambridge 2010).

¹⁵⁵ The play is generally thought to have been produced later than the *Orestes*, which is dated to 408 BC. On the basis of a scholiast's comment (Σ . on Ar. *Ran.* 53), its metrical style, and overall content, *The Phoenician Women* was likely produced after 411 and prior to Euripides' departure for Macedon.

The plot of the *Phoenician Women* shares features with Sophocles' earlier *Antigone*, in that both are centred around the myth of the Seven against Thebes.¹⁵⁶ The beginning of the play opens with the story of Oedipus, recounted by the Theban queen, Jocasta. Her sons, Polynices and Eteocles, have agreed to take turns ruling Thebes for one year apiece. Eteocles, however, refused to give up his position when the year had expired, leading Polynices to depart for Argos, where he has married the daughter of Adrastus – precipitating the future conflict with Thebes and his brother. As the play progresses and Eteocles and his uncle, Creon, prepare for battle with the Argives, Jocasta attempts to reason with the two parties, but Eteocles refuses to give up his power, and Polynices is set upon destroying the city he cannot have. In a twist from the Sophoclean tradition, it is Eteocles who forbids anyone from burying Polynices on Theban soil, and who bids Creon to ask the seer Tiresias for advice.

At this point, Tiresias reveals that to save the city Creon must sacrifice his son, Menoeceus. When the city was founded by their progenitor, Cadmus, he sowed the teeth of a sacred dragon he had killed into the ground, bringing forth the first autochthonous Thebans. The serpent, however, was sacred Ares, and now the god can only be appeased by means of a human sacrifice from a pure-blooded descendant of these men.¹⁵⁷ Creon is appalled and tells Menoeceus to flee to the oracle at Dodona, where he will be safe. Menoeceus agrees to placate his father, but when Creon has left he then turns to chorus

¹⁵⁶ According to the myth, Adrastus, the king of Argos, chose seven captains to command an Argive army in order to restore Oedipus' son Polynices to the Theban throne. They tried and failed to take the city, and all but Adrastus died in the attempt. In 467 BC, the myth was made the subject of a play by Aeschylus under the same name.

¹⁵⁷ Creon's other son, Haemon, is exempted because of his engagement to Antigone, and Creon himself is not suitable because of his own progeny. Only Menoeceus, because of his unmarried status, can make a proper offering.

and announces his true intentions: he will go to the dragon's den and kill himself to appease the god Ares and save his city. Thebes is victorious at the end of the play, but at the cost of the Theban royal house as Polynices and Eteocles kill each other and Jocasta commits suicide.

Two of the primary issues to attend the examination of this Euripidean tragedy are the challenge of determining intent for the characters, and drawing conclusions about their ultimate agency. This manifests especially in discussions about suicide and how Euripides intended his audience to think of it. There exists some disagreement in scholarship over whether Euripidean self-killing can better be understood as suicide or self-sacrifice, and whether to make such a clear distinction is even possible.¹⁵⁸ Scholars of the self-sacrifice persuasion accept that Menoeceus' death, along with most others written by Euripides, falls under the self-sacrifice category because of its sympathetic portrayal. In particular, Loraux levels an argument against analyzing these deaths as suicides because Euripides treats such deaths as 'virgin sacrifices,' to which public

¹⁵⁸ For an overview on the view of Euripidean self-sacrifice in general, see H.S. Versnel, 'Self-Sacrifice, Compensation and the Anonymous Gods,' in *Le Sacrifice dans l'antiquité. Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique XXVII* (Geneva 1981) 135-94, and the bibliography there cited; and A.J.L. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide. Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity* (Routledge 1990) 126 ff.

Scholars who accept Menoeceus' death as a self-sacrifice representatively include G.M.A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London 1941), *Phoenissae* 353-373; *Heradeidae* 166-176; *Iphigenia at Aulis* 421-438; H. Strohm, *Euripides. Interpretationen zur dramatischen Form* (Munich 1957) 50-53; T.B.L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London 1967) 103 f., 27; and N. Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* trans. A. Forster (Cambridge, Mass. 1987) 31 ff.

Scholars who emphasize the ambiguity of self-sacrifice in Euripidean drama and an association between self-sacrifice and suicide include P. Vellacott, *Ironic Drama. A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (Cambridge 1975) esp. chapter 7 'Sacrifice for Victory'; D. Sansone, 'The Sacrifice-Motif in Euripides' IT,' *TAPhA* 105 (1975) 283-295; and E.P. Garrison, *Groaning Tears: Ethical and Dramatic Aspects of Suicide in Greek Tragedy* (Leiden 1995).

honour may be attached.¹⁵⁹ Self-sacrifices, in this sense, create a version of the hoplite *belle mort* and they must not be seen as suicides because sacrificial victims only accept death, instead of seeking it.¹⁶⁰ The corollary to this argument, therefore, is that public honours do not attach themselves to the idea of suicide.

In general, some attention must be given over to the question of sacrifice and the divine element in Euripides' works. Although Euripides places his characters and their struggles to orient themselves in relation to the gods firmly in the dramatic context, his implicit delineation of sacrifice in *The Phoenician Women*, a framework in which his audience would have received his characters' actions, must have corresponded to religious social norms.

For the ancient Greeks, according to Robert Parker, sacrifice 'opened the channel of communication between man and god,' and enabled the exchange of favours.¹⁶¹ The 'channel' to be opened depended upon the sacrificial victim, and these had to be pure.¹⁶² Plutarch writes that animals that were to be sacrificed had to demonstrate consent to their deaths.¹⁶³ Within this definition, it seems simple enough to apply the principle of agency to Menoeceus and conclude that because he chooses to kill himself – even announcing his intention to do so – rather than merely assenting to death, he must be committing suicide. This is not a sufficient argument, however, because of the inverse proposition Loraux makes regarding honour and suicide. But as we have seen, the motivations behind the

¹⁵⁹ Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, 41 f.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 31-40.

¹⁶¹ R. Parker, *On Greek Religion* (Ithaca 2011) 132 f.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Plut. *Quaes. Conv.* 8.8.3.

suicides of Ajax and Haemon also accrued honourable memory to their mythic legacies. To this point, Elise Garrison follows Durkheim's sociological definition of suicide, 'all cases of death resulting directly and indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, to which he knows will produce this result,'¹⁶⁴ and concludes that suicides can also contain the element of glorious memory. Garrison suggests that Euripides used the fine line between self-sacrifice and suicide to uncover complexities in fifth-century institutional attitudes, rather than choosing one over the other.¹⁶⁵ She also points to several examples from ancient sources which show that suicide was often chosen as an honourable means to avoid shame, or to regain honour lost through disgrace.¹⁶⁶ Both Durkheim and Garrison open the path to reading 'institutional suicide' in tragedy.¹⁶⁷

The difference in tragedy between a positive self-sacrifice and a suicide that includes honour (and is therefore positive), as I see it, lies in the desire of the character for certain outcomes. Fifth-century literature provides evidence enough for assuming that the audience of tragedy would have been able to conceptualize the desirability of avoiding shame or removing dishonour, both of which are negative outcomes of societal perception.¹⁶⁸ A sacrifice, apart from the religious element, must be accomplished

¹⁶⁴ É. Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (London 1951) xlii.

¹⁶⁵ Garrison, *Groaning Tears*, 130.

¹⁶⁶ She mentions the examples of Eurytus and Aristodemus (Hdt. 7.228 ff.) and Pantites (Hdt. 7.232) in particular. In Thucydides (3.81), she points to the Messenian prisoners during the Corcyraean civil war who killed themselves rather than be disgraced, and notes that Thucydides employs the term ἀναλίσκω in the middle voice to describe their suicide, lending a 'tragic air' to the episode (*Groaning Tears*, 24). Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 570; Soph. *OT* 1174, Fr. 892 (Radt); Eur. *El.* 681.

¹⁶⁷ Garrison, *Groaning Tears*, 139. She cites Socrates in *Crito* as an example of socially-demanded self-killing that is unquestionably suicide.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 25. Garrison writes that Thucydides and Herodotus 'leave us with the sense not that suicide created "moral revulsion," but that it provided people with an honorable release from an undesirable life' (i.e. from a shameful existence).

altruistically and without desire for personal gain or avoidance. Suicide, conversely, attaches to the idea of shame and the desire to regain honour. Working within this definition, my view is that Euripides' portrayal of Menoeceus is one that eludes a simple reception of self-sacrifice. Since Menoeceus goes out of his way to kill himself, and his speech suggests that he is motivated by the desire to avoid shame, the aspect of personal honour which attends his death scene and the accompanying choral ode strongly favours a reading of positive male suicide. As I shall demonstrate through an analysis of the lines in the suicide speech, Menoeceus' death is not fully appreciated by categorizing it as a self-sacrifice exclusively. Euripides plays with themes of suicide and sacrifice in the scene while introducing imagery recalling the military-political context of Athens in the fifth century and the civic virtues found in Pericles' funerary speech, finally granting us a positive depiction of Menoeceus' choice.

II. Menoeceus and the City

There are two choral odes that frame the exchanges between Creon, Tiresias, and Menoeceus, both evocative of the clash of forces which threatens to overrun Thebes. Preceding the dialogue, the Chorus of Phoenician women sing of Ares and Dionysus (784-800), Oedipus and the sphinx's riddle (801-817), and the Sown men (818-832), hinting to the audience at the scene of the oracle to come. Their third stasimon following (1019-1066) is a tale of the woes of Thebes, from which the selfless death of Menoeceus will rescue the city.¹⁶⁹ The point of these odes is to supply a dramatic relevance for the Menoeceus scene. Foley, skeptical about Menoeceus' importance in the play, argues that Menoeceus' death assumes the place of a *deus ex machina* for Euripides.¹⁷⁰ The tragedian certainly does much to leave his audience with this impression, as the city's salvation is attributed to Menoeceus. With its alternating stanzas of disaster and relief, descending to the troubles of Thebes (801-817) before rising again to a tone of hope for the future that Menoeceus brings (1019-1066), the chorus literally frames the suicide and helps it stand in relief from the rest of the dramatic action.

¹⁶⁹ On these odes, see M.B. Arthur, 'The Curse of Civilization: The Choral Odes of the *Phoenissae*,' *HSCP* 81 (1977) 163-85, who notes that 'Thebes herself is a place of violence, and in subsequent [to the parodos] odes the chorus explore the process whereby in Thebes the recurrent clash of forces ends, not in reconciliation, but in mutual slaughter.'

¹⁷⁰ H. Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca 1985) 132-136. Cf. A.J. Podlecki, 'Some Themes in Euripides' *Phoenissae*,' *TAPhA* 93 (1962) 355-373, wherein Podlecki emphasizes the Chorus' fixation on Oedipus: 'The chorus should have been lamenting Menoeceus...instead it goes through the business of Oedipus and the sphinx and thereby misses entirely the function of the chorus in this play' (363). I cannot agree that their digression is disjointed; the chorus does not lament Menoeceus because it praises him instead, a perfectly fitting reaction (1054-1066).

From the outset of Menoeceus' introduction, the audience experiences his character in a place of personal violence. The blind seer Tiresias has just informed Creon (911-914) that he must kill Menoeceus for the sake of Thebes. Pressed by Creon, he adds to his oracle (942-946):

σὺ δ' ἐνθάδ' ἡμῖν λοιπὸς εἶ σπαρτῶν γένους
ἀκέραιος, ἔκ τε μητρὸς ἀρσένων τ' ἄπο,
οἱ σοί τε παῖδες. Αἴμονος μὲν οὖν γάμοι
σφαγὰς ἀπείργουσ'. οὐ γάρ ἐστιν ἦθεος:
κεῖ μὴ γὰρ εὐνής ἦψατ', ἀλλ' ἔχει λέχος.
οὔτος δὲ πῶλος τῆδ' ἀνειμένος πόλει
θανὼν πατρίαν γαῖαν ἐκσώσειεν ἄν.

You are the sole heir to our tribe of Sown-men
unmixed on both your mother's and father's side
you and your sons. Haemon's marriage bars him
from the deed. For he is no longer unmarried;
even if he has not consummated, yet he is betrothed.
But this young colt, consecrated to the city,
might by dying rescue his fatherland.

Tiresias' pronouncements seem clear enough. The term used for conducting the killing (σφαγὰς), 'cutting of the throat,' is typically employed in the vocabulary of animal

sacrifice,¹⁷¹ as does the substitute of ‘colt’ (πῶλος) for Creon’s son. Menoeceus’ death, however, is later described as both *self*-killing and ὑπερθανὼν, ‘dying on behalf of the city,’ demonstrating an ambiguous dynamic.¹⁷²

The similarity between Menoeceus and the virgin female sacrifices in Euripides’ other works, such as Iphigenia’s, is an important framing for his character. Initially, it appears that the reason Menoeceus is chosen is solely because of his unmarried status, a fact which muddies somewhat the designation of a ‘virginal sacrifice.’¹⁷³ What sets Menoeceus apart from virgin sacrifice more concretely is his intention and his sex. While his death, like Iphigenia’s, seems destined by the will of the gods, he still has the chance to escape and save himself. But unlike Iphigenia, doing so would expose Menoeceus to the shame of martial cowardice (δειλία), a penalty only he, as a man, could incur. Not committing suicide would be as much an active choice as appeasing Ares, so the question of Menoeceus’ voluntary assent, the mark of a self-sacrifice, is less important than the intention behind his choice.

In this context, we are introduced to Menoeceus for the first time. Initially, he assents to Creon’s plan of self-preservation (985-989):

εὖ λέγεις, πάτερ.

χώρει νυν: ὡς σὴν πρὸς κασιγνήτην μολῶν,

ἧς πρῶτα μαστὸν εἴλκυσ’, Ἰοκάστην λέγω,

¹⁷¹ Cf. Soph. *Ai.* 235. Also J. Casabona, *Recherches sur le vocabulaire des sacrifices en grec des origines à la fin de l’Époque classique* (Aix-en-Provence 1966) 32.

¹⁷² Eur. *Phoen.* 1090 ff. Cf. Soph. *Ai.* 235. The phrase ξίφος λαμῶν διήκε is definitive of male suicide, as per Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, 12 ff.

¹⁷³ That is, Menoeceus’ status as a virgin seems less important than his being unmarried.

μητρὸς στερηθεὶς ὀρφανὸς τ' ἀποζυγεὶς –
προσηγορήσων εἴμι καὶ σώσων βίον.

Well spoken, father.

Go now, for I shall come to your sister Jocasta,
at whose breast I was nursed when bereft of my mother,
a lonely orphan, to give her greeting
and, in so doing, save my life.

Menoceus lets Creon believe that his father's plan is clever, but in reality Menoeceus speaks deceptive words (κλέψας λόγοισιν).¹⁷⁴ He employs the language of self-preservation (σώσων βίον) as he placates his father,¹⁷⁵ but in reality it will be the city he saves (σώσω πόλιν).¹⁷⁶ His speech continues in an address to the chorus (991-994):

ὡς οὔν ἂν εἰδῆτ', εἴμι καὶ σώσω πόλιν
ψυχὴν τε δώσω τῆσδ' ὑπερθανεῖν χθονός.
αἰσχροὺν γάρ: οἱ μὲν θεσφάτων ἐλεύθεροι
κοῦκ εἰς ἀνάγκην δαιμόνων ἀφιγμένοι
στάντες παρ' ἀσπίδ' οὐκ ὀκνήσουσιν θανεῖν,
πύργων πάροιθε μαχόμενοι πάτρας ὑπερ:
ἐγὼ δέ, πατέρα καὶ κασίγνητον προδοῦς
πόλιν τ' ἐμαυτοῦ, δειλὸς ὡς ἔξω χθονός

¹⁷⁴ *Phoen.* 992.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 989.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 997.

ἄπειμ': ὅπου δ' ἂν ζῶ, κακὸς φανήσομαι.

Know this: I shall go and save the *polis*,

give up my life, and die for this land.

For it is shameful, that those bound by no oracles

and have not been placed under divine necessity

stand there, shield-to-shield, fearless of death,

and fight for their country before her towers,

whilst I leave the land like a coward, a traitor

to my father and brother and city:

thus wherever I live, I shall seem base.

The word ὑπερθανεῖν, ‘give up life (in service),’ indicates to the audience the conditions of sacrifice: Menoeceus willingly assents to a path chosen by divine will, employs the language of sacrifice, and acts to save others. Yet the salient point is that although we find in this action the necessary elements of sacrifice, what the lines really capture is an act of suicide *emerging from* a sacrificial context. His speech fits the mould of the speeches discussed in previous chapters whose agents are unambiguously suicidal.¹⁷⁷ Already intent on dying in service to a greater end, Menoeceus announces a deeper reason, associated with Greek suicide: he will kill himself to avoid shame and the stain of cowardice. His choice is made on the basis of retaining honour, rather than from purely altruistic motivation.

¹⁷⁷ It can, for example, be favourably compared with Ajax’s meditations on personal conduct (Soph. *Ai.* 455-477).

With the specific emphasis placed by Menoeceus on the honour of the agonal hoplite battle, one cannot help but think that the members of Euripides' audience would have cause to reflect on their recent losses in the Sicilian Expedition of 413 BC and the overthrow of their democratic political institutions in 411.¹⁷⁸ The second half of his speech is filled with martial imagery, including the death-defiant phalanx (στάντες παρ' ἄσπίδ' οὐκ ὀκνήσουσιν θανεῖν), the towers of Thebes (πύργων), and the defence of one's country (μαχόμενοι πάτρας).¹⁷⁹ Menoeceus' martial overtones combined with love of service to the fatherland bears a striking resemblance to the solemn exhortations of Pericles' funeral oration.¹⁸⁰ On the connection to Pericles, Bosworth remarks: 'Voluntary death in battle is proof that the individual has seen the worth of the community and constitutes the highest form of *arete*. The possibility of losing such a society justifies the sacrifice of one's life, and the current batch of dead are seen as consciously embracing death for the community.'¹⁸¹ Although Menoeceus chooses his death rather than finds it in battle, the extension of his sacrifice on behalf of his city into historical memory carries further implications in the militaristic context of his speech. In a possibly historical case of human sacrifice, Themistocles was said by Phainias to have slain three Persian youths before the battle of Salamis.¹⁸² While these were unwilling victims, Menoeceus'

¹⁷⁸ The short-lived Council of the Four Hundred; Athens would go on to overthrow this oligarchy and reinstitute democracy in the same year. For the expedition, estimates given by Thucydides put the number of hoplite losses at 5100 men, not including light infantry (Thuc. 6.43).

¹⁷⁹ Cf. *Od.* 11.403; 24.113.

¹⁸⁰ Thuc. 2.41-44.

¹⁸¹ A.B. Bosworth, 'The Historical Context of Thucydides' Funeral Oration,' *JHS* 120 (2000) 1-16, (6).

¹⁸² Plut. *Vit. Them.* 13.2-5. For a discussion, see A. Heinrichs, 'Human Sacrifice in Greek Religion,' in *Le Sacrifice dans l'antiquité. Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique* XXVII (Geneva 1981) 135-194, (208-224). He concludes that the report 'belongs to the

voluntary death takes place within a play produced in the shadow of another naval expedition, in Sicily. I suggest that the tradition of these events, speech and legend, coupled with the pressures of the on-going wars in Greece, would strongly associate Menoeceus' sentiments with the ideal of death in battle and a soldier's ἀρετή, while his voluntary suicide for the community and to retain his honour evokes the Athenian military efforts at Sicily, at a historical moment when the Athenians' hope for their own city's honour had been lessened after a disastrous military campaign.

realm of fiction' because the Athenians had taken no Persian prisoners before the battle. It may be more exact to conclude that it belonged to the realm of historic myth, and one with which the Athenians were likely acquainted.

III. Menoeceus and Meaning

Many scholars of *The Phoenician Women* have argued that Menoeceus is not a significant contributor to the overall story, or that his suicide is unsuccessful.¹⁸³ Garrison's response to this view has been to point out that, in the end, Menoeceus is successful; Thebes is spared destruction, and Ares is appeased.¹⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Garrison also argues that Euripides creates a paradox of positive meaning inserted around Menoeceus' suicide because of the destruction his death represents to the Theban dynasty.¹⁸⁵ A stress on these repercussions of Menoeceus' choice, however, need not affect the audience's reaction to his desire to retain honour. I suggest that Euripides addresses personal meaning in the death of Menoeceus through the reactions of the play's characters to his suicide. Creon laments the news of Menoeceus' death, declaring that his death is a 'grievous woe' to him personally, instead of praising his example.¹⁸⁶ Jocasta and the chorus, however, cast

¹⁸³ See, e.g., P. Vellacott, *Ironic Drama. A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (Cambridge 1975), 198 f: 'the question whether his sacrifice brought any good to his country is...obscure, and...disregarded...' and 'the sublimity of the self-sacrifice, for the necessity of which there is no evidence whatever, is swallowed in the flood of despair and death which covers Thebes after the invading army has dispersed;' and D.J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme, and Structure* (Toronto 1967): 'As far as one can judge from the text, Menoeceus' self-sacrifice has no discernible effect on the fortunes of the city' (241).

¹⁸⁴ Garrison, *Groaning Tears*, 142: 'The irony is evident, because the royal house is the State, and the self-destruction of the one can only detract from the victory of the other, and here, the motif of sacrifice that saves the city is submerged in the continuing pollution of Thebes' royal family. However, to claim the self-sacrifice fails because a battle ensues misunderstands both the nature of the sacrifice and what saving the city means. Thebes, in fact, survives. Its citizens are not massacred, its women and children are not enslaved, and its cults continue.'

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 143 f.

¹⁸⁶ *Phoen.* 1313 f.

Menoeceus' suicide in a positive light after the first messenger tells them of the Theban victory in battle (1200-1207):

καλὸν τὸ νικᾶν: εἰ δ' ἀμείνον' οἱ θεοὶ
γνώμην ἔχουσιν – εὐτυχῆς εἶην ἐγώ.

καλῶς τὰ τῶν θεῶν καὶ τὰ τῆς τύχης ἔχει:
παῖδές τε γάρ μοι ζῶσι κάκπέφευγε γῆ.
Κρέων δ' ἔοικε τῶν ἐμῶν νυμφευμάτων
τῶν τ' Οἰδίπου δύστηνος ἀπολαῦσαι κακῶν,
παιδὸς στερηθεὶς, τῇ πόλει μὲν εὐτυχῶς,
ιδίᾳ δὲ λυπρῶς.

Chorus: How fair is victory! If the gods have even
a better judgment, let this be my own fortune.

Jocasta: The gods and fortune hold well with us:
my sons live, and the land has escaped.
As for Creon, who married me to Oedipus,
he enjoys disaster. Robbed is he of his son;
fortunate for the city, but a grief to him.

Menoeceus' suicide is not a cause for lament, but explicitly connected with Thebes' victory in war. In this way, his death assumes the aspect of an honourable death in battle in its essence, if not in its form. In hindsight, Creon's grief evokes a similar sentiment to

what Orestes expresses in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*: the suffering of Greek men during war.¹⁸⁷ These reactions signal to the external audience of Athenians that Menoeceus' example is a positive one, personal repercussions aside.

Before leaving the stage, Menoeceus concludes his speech and final lines in the play in a moral contemplation (1013-1018):

στείχω δέ, θανάτου δῶρον οὐκ αἰσχρὸν πόλει
δώσω, νόσου δὲ τήνδ' ἀπαλλάξω χθόνα.
εἰ γὰρ λαβὼν ἕκαστος ὅ τι δύναίτο τις
χρηστὸν διέλθοι τοῦτο κὰς κοινὸν φέροι
πατρίδι, κακῶν ἂν αἱ πόλεις ἐλασσόνων
πειρώμεναι τὸ λοιπὸν εὐτυχοῖεν ἄν.

Now I go to make a present of my death for the city,
no small gift, to rid this land of its affliction.
For if each man were to take and give all the good in his power,
giving it over for the common welfare of his country,
our cities would experience fewer troubles
and have good fortune in the time remaining.

Menoceus has given himself over to his cause. 'In social terms he is completely a part of the state and has lost any sense of individuality.'¹⁸⁸ He decides that he will make a present

¹⁸⁷ Aesch. *Cho.* 919, 921. In *The Phoenician Women*, the reactions of both the chorus and Jocasta subsume the pain and struggles of the female characters to the ideal of a Theban victory, increasing the prominence of this gendered reception.

¹⁸⁸ Garrison, *Groaning Tears*, 139.

of his death (θανάτου δῶρον), rather than his life, and the accentuation of his death as honourable adds complexity to the intent in his scene. Although the lines pertain to common welfare (χρηστὸν κοινόν), we know that this outcome can only be the result, and not the cause, of the suicide; Menoeceus intends to die in order to escape the shame (αἰσχρός) that would result from living while his city suffers.¹⁸⁹ The military and Periclean connotations of his speech, meanwhile, situate Menoeceus in the context of the voluntary death in battle he wishes to attain. Yet his death is ὑπερθνήσκω, undertaken for the good of the community. As he departs from the stage, and from the sight of the Athenian audience, the chorus of Phoenician women sing to Athena, not lamenting, but praying only that they might be mothers to sons like Menoeceus (1054-1066):

ἀγάμεθ' ἀγάμεθ',
ὃς ἐπὶ θάνατον οἴχεται
γαῖς ὑπὲρ πατρώας,
Κρέοντι μὲν λιπῶν γόους,
τὰ δ' ἐπτάπυργα κληῖθρα γαῖς
καλλίνικα θήσων.
γενοίμεθ' ὧδε ματέρες
γενοίμεθ' εὔτεκνοι, φίλα
Παλλάς...

We marvel, we marvel at him
who has gone to death in his country's cause,

¹⁸⁹ *Pheon.* 999.

leaving tears for Creon, but bringing a crown
of victory to our seven-fenced towers.
May we be mothers in this way, may we have
such fair children, dear Pallas...

But as they themselves admit, Athena is the cause of the troubles tormenting the Theban land and the house of Cadmus, and Menoeceus commits suicide to lift the curse that she helped inflict.¹⁹⁰ Thus their invocation adopts a figurative purpose, as they appear to pray to Athena to grant them *Athenian* sons who might also die willingly to save her city (Athens) from πολύμοχθος Ἄρης.¹⁹¹ In the context of the City Dionysia, the chorus, really consisting of Athenian men, interprets the outcome of Menoeceus' death positively. We are therefore also left with the impression that his reasons, to avoid shame and die honourably, are similarly positive if conducted on behalf of one's *polis*.

Although Euripides builds a certain atmosphere of necessity in Menoeceus' suicide, we can ultimately conclude that he offers an interpretation of Menoeceus that would be sympathetic to the civic values of his audience. The juxtaposition of the Athenian ideals of military and civic service with the internal characters' reactions to Thebes' salvation encourages us to identify a meaning for the suicide that encompasses both civic and self-interested outcomes, both public praise and personal honour. Menoeceus' avoidance of shame also creates scope for him to acquire honour through service to his *polis*, and this, I suggest, indicates that his suicide in the play provided a

¹⁹⁰ *Phoen.* 1055-1066.

¹⁹¹ On another level, Euripides may be suggesting that Athens has become the source of her woes, but this reading is highly speculative.

means for the Athenian audience to come to terms with the sacrifices male citizens made on behalf of their own city.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this thesis has been to investigate some positive depictions of male suicide in Greek tragedy. As both a religious festival and a public institution of the *polis*, the City Dionysia provided the citizens of Athens with opportunities for spectacle and reflection, religious observation and civic participation. As the audience of a tragedy could participate in the spectacle as both active observers and judges of its content, tragedy has become a means for researchers to understand how fifth-century Athenians conceived of their mythic past and treated subjects of interest and engagement to themselves. This thesis' examination of the *Ajax*, *Antigone*, and *Phoenician Women*, plays which centrally depict the suicides of major male figures, has revealed that the manner in which Athens chose to treat the topic of male suicide was largely to portray it positively. Uncovering the ways in which this occurs in tragedy has been the object of this thesis. Its approach has been to combine a critical evaluation of the performance of male suicide with a socio-historical perspective. The results have allowed us to draw a few conclusions about how male suicide was treated in these plays.

First, the suicides are depicted positively through glorification of the city of Athens through connections to an idealized Athenian past or to contemporary practices within the *polis* community. In the *Ajax* of Sophocles, we saw how Ajax's suicide and speeches evoke both the historical event of the battle of Salamis, as the defining moment for the formation of fifth-century Athenian political identity, and the Aeschylean drama of *Persians*, a play that connected Athenian victory with the Ajax myth. Similarly, the *Ajax* explains how the cult of Ajax became so important for Athenian civic pride. In the two Theban plays, *Antigone* and *Phoenician Women*, we examined how the mythic Theban

past was used to illustrate Athenian political concerns. In the *Antigone*, we saw how the speech and attitude of Haemon were reminiscent of Athenian attitudinal postures directed against Euboean oligarchy in the wake of the crisis of the 440s BC. Likewise, we found that the sentiments of Menoeceus in the *Phoenician Women* recalls the memory of Pericles in his suicide speech and the honourable sacrifices made by Athenian hoplites during the Peloponnesian War.

Second, the male characters who commit suicide are positively associated with displays of civic virtue. Ajax, as a hero of epic, embodies this feature to a lesser degree in his own suicide, but the invitation extended to the Athenian audience to identify their lineage with Ajax's, and to participate in his hero cult as a public function, grants a virtuous legacy to his memory. For the *Antigone*, we have seen how Haemon is positioned as the spokesman for the *polis* in opposition to the tyranny of Creon, and how his refusal of participation in unjust authority carries a strong anti-oligarchic sentiment. In the *Phoenician Women*, Menoeceus' suicide is shown to be motivated from a desire to avoid shame through a selfless contribution to the safety of his city. We also considered how the martial imagery of his speech and the choral odes accompanying his scenes in the play connected his suicide with ideals of courageous service and a desire that Athenian sons might emulate such courage in service to their own *polis*.

Finally, these suicides are never carried out purely for personal or selfish reasons, but with an element of external regard for other members of the civic community, or for the character's own civic obligations. In the *Ajax*, we explored how Sophocles invokes the fame of a future Athens and the establishment of Ajax's Athenian lineage as partial features of his suicide. We noted Ajax's concern for his inability to carry out his heroic

role, and saw how his suicide was framed as a means to bestow this role upon the Athenian civic community. The character of Haemon in the *Antigone* is motivated in his defiance of Creon by the opposition of the people of Thebes to Creon's unjust decrees, and his concern for the respect due to the gods and sound counsel. His suicide is also undertaken out of a desire to punish Creon, which can be called a negative-external regard. Menoeceus likewise puts the needs of the *polis* ahead of his own desires in the *Phoenician Women*, demonstrating a voluntary contribution to the eventual victory of Thebes over the Argives and his respect for the wishes of the gods. His suicide speech maintains that the highest civic obligation of the citizen must be to his own community.

Accordingly, these three tragedies provide a compelling argument that despite the destructive effects to the political community that suicide might imply to their mostly male, mostly Athenian audiences, the Athenians looked for ways to model civic virtue and the glory of their *polis* in their tragic representations of male suicide. The aim of such a practice may have been to reinterpret this self-destructive act as something which, enacted under the right circumstances and for the right reasons, could produce positive meaning for the community, at a time when the *polis* was plagued by the multi-generational conflict of the Peloponnesian War. What seems certain is that mythical male suicides are often recast in tragedy to reflect the glory of Athens at a time when the city's cultural hegemony was both ascendant and being actively challenged from without. It is hoped that this study will have provided a useful basis for thinking about this intriguing practice in the future.

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