ANCIENT DRAMA AND HOMERIC EPICS: A RETURN TO SOURCES

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Abstract: The article attempts to define the subject and motives of the Athenian tragedy as a living organism that evolved from the source of Homer's epics through the lenses of the three tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, according to the development of the Athenian democracy. This evolution is defined by the change of nature that the hero goes through within the Greek cultural consciousness and his relationship with the divine. Also, an important accent is put on the shifting of societal attention from the individual to the collective, specific for democracy. The methodological framework of the present study is grounded in close philological readings of selected Greek tragedies that creatively engage with Homeric epic material. The analysis focuses on the transformation and adaptation of epic motifs within the theatrical context, tracing how the tragedians reconfigure foundational narrative patterns inherited from Homer. Through three-core point of view – Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's *Myth and Tragedy* – the article tries to show the sources of ancient Greek drama in Homeric texts by supporting the theory that states that Homer's texts are the means and drama an end.

Keywords: Homer**,** *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey,* Aeschylus' *Oresteia,* Aristotle's *Poetics,* Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy.*

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Introduction

The present study draws selectively on three critical frameworks, each grounded in the primary texts to which they refer: Firstly, on Nietzsche's Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy[1]: Homer's "Apollonian" clarity versus tragedy's "Dionysian" dissolution of boundaries and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* as a synthesis: Athena's courtroom (*Eumenides*, 681-710) imposing Apollonian order on Dionysian chaos. Secondly on Aristotle's *Poetics* – especially in the verse between 1449b-1453a were: we identify "epic mimesis" (epic imitation) as narrative report versus "tragic mimesis" (tragic imitation) as embodied performance, and also "Anagnorisis" (recognition): Odysseus' scar.[2] Finally, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's structuralism in *Myth and Tragedy* were they are mentioned Tragedy as: "the negotiation of myth in the «agora» (fora, forum) and the «polis» (the city) reframing heroic individualism as civic responsibility"[3].

1 Nietzsche, F. (1886) *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism* (original German title*: Die Geburt der Tragödie, Oder: Griechentum und Pessimismus,* first edition in 1872 as: *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik),* translated by W.M.A. Haussmann, Ph.d., §4-5.

2 Homer, *Odyssey* 19, 392-466, versus Oedipus' self-blinding in Sophocles *Oedipus the Tyrant*, 1270.

3 For further discussion see: Vernant, J.P., Vidal – Naquet, P. (1990) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, NY: Zone Books, p. 32.

Through this three-core point of view we'll attempt the identification of the sources of ancient Greek drama in Homeric texts by supporting the theory where Homer's texts are the means and drama an end.

The methodological framework of the present study is grounded in close philological readings of selected Greek tragedies that creatively engage with Homeric epic material. The analysis focuses on the transformation and adaptation of epic motifs within the theatrical context, tracing how the tragedians reconfigure foundational narrative patterns inherited from Homer. Material will emerge by a close reading of: *Agamemnon*'s reworking of *Odyssey's* "Nostoi", Philoctetes' subversion of *Iliad*'s heroic code and *Hecuba*'s inversion of *Iliad* twenty-four's lamentation scenes.

From this vantage point, firstly, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* reworks the "nostos" motif of the *Odyssey*, offering a tragic reinterpretation of the return, wherein homecoming signifies not redemption but retribution – an "oikos" tainted by ancestral guilt and divine wrath.[4] Secondly, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* subverts the Iliadic heroic code. The eponymous character, isolated and physically broken, becomes an anti-hero who challenges the Homeric ideal of "arête" (excellence in war) and introduces psychological and ethical complexity foreign to epic values.[5] Thirdly, Euripides' Hecuba inverts the lamentation scenes of the *Iliad*. Hecuba is no longer merely the grieving mother; she becomes an active agent of vengeance and justice, thereby reshaping the poetics of suffering and tragic agency.[6] This comparative approach, juxtaposing tragedy with its epic antecedents, sheds light on the dynamic interplay between narrative memory and theatrical performance. It reveals how tragedy not only inherits but also transforms the epic legacy, crafting new modes of mythopoeic expression.

1. Homer's tragic revision as a source of ancient Greek drama

The Athenian tragedians' engagement with Homeric epic represents not merely literary adaptation, but a profound philosophical and aesthetic metamorphosis. This paper traces how Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides systematically reconfigured Homeric paradigms to interrogate fifth-century Athenian anxieties about justice, agency, and divine order. Where Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (8th

4 For further discussion see: Goldhill, S. (1986) *Reading Greek Tragedy,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 78-81.

5 For further discussion see: Segal, Ch. (1995) *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 95-110.

6 For further discussion see: Foley, H.P. (2001) *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 280-285.

century BCE) present a world of aristocratic heroism and clear moral hierarchies, Athenian tragedy (5th century BCE) transforms these elements into a medium for democratic and existential inquiry. Through the enormous changes that humanity experienced in this unique period of this Mediterranean corner of the earth, where the citizens of the Athenian democracy – in an equally unique social system like the city-states model – experienced the transition from the heroic, strong muscular man (Aias, Achilles) to the new improved human model, the intelligent, new man (Ulysses – Odysseus), we received the gift of Theatre and ancient Greek drama, that was a transformation of the Homeric oral literature speech in a rhetoric philosophical way of dramatic/theatrical presentation of some mythical or historic facts presented by great poets through this aforementioned very interesting period lensed.

1.1 The Crisis of Heroism

From Homer to Sophocles, and subsequently to Euripides, based on the extant ancient texts, heroic figures – such as Achilles in Homer – are gradually transformed into "new type" individuals. This transformation occurs through the awareness and acquisition of a jurisprudential understanding by the citizens of the fifth century BCE, a knowledge rooted in a growing perception of human development. This juridical knowledge emerged because of both cultural advancement and the biological evolution of the human species. It was apprehended through literature, which reaches its apogee in ancient Greek civilization following a fifty-year period of intense progress – first in mathematics and philosophy, and subsequently across all known sciences of the time – as well as in politics, culminating in the establishment of democratic governance. The theatre, as an art form, is a direct offspring of this democracy.

The fundamental shift that led from the epic discourse and literary structures of Homer's works – texts shaped by an oral narrative tradition – can be identified, among other things, through the following significant theoretical frameworks: Homer's Achilles (Homer, *Iliad,* 9, 410-416) chooses "kleos" (glory) over survival, embodying the epic warrior ideal. On the contrary, Sophocles' *Ajax* (815-865), finds his heroic identity rendered obsolete in a world valuing "sophrosyne" (moderation) over martial prowess. Respectively Euripides' Heracles (Hercules, 1340-1393) descends into madness, his labors meaningless before divine caprice.

Through this tripartite framework, we are led to the gradual deconstruction of the heroic model. The heroism of epic narrative discourse, for the rationalist Sophocles, undergoes a transformation from the "man of muscle" (Ajax) to

the "man of mind" (Odysseus), who – assisted by the goddess of Wisdom (a symbolically significant choice) – claims the "scepter" of the human species from his now-outdated warrior predecessor and assumes a leading role in human development as the newly evolved form of man.

Euripides, an even more radical "modernist" for his time, takes this deconstruction a step further by presenting Heracles, yet another "hero", as experiencing utter decline and ultimately accepting his defeat. Through the evolution of the Heracles myth, further deconstructs the divine order as it had been conceived and accepted by his tragic predecessors, Sophocles and Aeschylus.

Through this complete dismantling of both heroism and the absolute sovereignty of the gods of ancient Greek religion, we are gradually led to the progressive collapse of cosmic certainty.

1.2 The Collapse of Cosmic Certainty

The disruption and eventual dismantling of cosmic certainty – as formulated over time from the oral narrative mode of Homeric epic to Euripides' radical and subversive theatrical treatment – is reflected in the representation of the divine across distinct literary genres (epic and drama) and through the differing poetic visions of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. This evolution is evident in how each engages with the divine: Homer's Zeus upholds a clear moral order (Homer, *Iliad* 1.5: "The plan of Zeus was being fulfilled."), Aeschylus' Zeus (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 160–183) operates through the cryptic principle of "pathei-mathos" (learning through suffering) and Euripides' gods are either absent or actively malevolent (Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 1060–1120).

1.3 Theatricalizing the Epic

The theatricalization of the epic emerged organically, as the dramaturgical structure inherent in Homer's evocative, descriptive narrative was already ripe for dramatization. This predisposition toward theatrical representation gained fresh impetus in ancient Greece, driven by a pressing need to comprehend the epochal transformations that unfolded during the half-century following the birth of democracy in Athens. This period saw an immense leap in human cognition, which in turn created a demand for a new "tool" that could facilitate human adaptation to this unprecedented reality. That tool was none other than theatre and the art of drama itself – born of that very necessity.

The combination of Homer's dramatic narrative structure and the aforementioned societal need gave rise to theatre in the form preserved for us

through the enduring texts of the three principal tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides), as well as the comic-lyric poet Aristophanes. This theatrical tradition is further documented in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which captures aspects of theatrical practice, and throughout the historical records of that era. Beyond Aristotle's Poetics, the trajectory toward the theatricalization of Homeric epic can also be traced through the works of both earlier and later writers, historians, and philosophers, including, but not limited to, the following: Plato, particularly in his dialogues (*Republic*, *Ion*, *Laws*), where he critically engages with Homer and tragedy, revealing both their cultural authority and the evolving perceptions of mimesis and performance in the classical world. On the other hand, Herodotus, who frequently refers to Homeric themes and figures, treats them not only as part of a mythic past but also as reference points for understanding historical causality and human character. In a different way Thucydides who, despite his critical and empirical approach, retains structural and stylistic elements reminiscent of epic narration, while simultaneously displaying a dramatic sensibility in his set speeches and character portrayals. Longinus, in *On the Sublime*, who analyses the grandeur of Homeric expression in comparison to later literary forms, offering insight into the rhetorical and emotional power that would influence tragic dramaturgy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who discusses the evolution of Greek prose and poetry, drawing links between Homeric narrative techniques and later dramatic developments. In a parallel field, Philostratus and the Second Sophistic, where rhetorical reenactments and Homeric performances in declamation suggest a continued blending of epic and theatrical modes well into the Roman era. In modern times, Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, famously positions Homeric clarity (the Apollonian) in dialectical tension with the chaotic force of Greek tragedy (the Dionysian), thus proposing a philosophical framework for understanding the transformation from epic to drama. Finally, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, whose structuralist readings (*Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*) map the shift from mythic narrative to tragic performance as a reflection of evolving political and social structures in the polis.

These figures, spanning antiquity to modernity, contribute to a broader intellectual and cultural narrative that illuminates the gradual reconfiguration of the Homeric epic into the embodied, dialogic, and civic form of Attic theatre.[7]

7 Homeric similes "As lions stalking prey...", *Iliad*, 5, 554-558, create aesthetic distance. Tragic violence occurs offstage but is viscerally reported (e.g., the blinding of Oedipus in *Oedipus the Tyrant*, 1270-1279). The chorus transforms from Homer's passive observers, *Iliad* 3, 146-160, to active participants in Sophocles, *Antigone* 332-375.

2. Thematic Affinities: Heroism, Fate, and Recognition

The tragic engagement with Homeric themes reveals both continuity and radical innovation. In this section we will try to examine three core thematic transformations through Nietzschean, Aristotelian, and Vernantian lenses in order to deeply understand the relation between homer's epic world and theatre plays of ancient Greek dramaturgy.

2.1 The Deconstruction of Heroism

The Homeric conception of heroism, especially as embodied in the "aristeia" (excellence) of Achilles in *Iliad* (Homer, *Iliad* 20, 381–502), presents a paradigm of battlefield excellence that culminates in the aestheticization of death: Achilles re-enters the war with superhuman ferocity, slaughtering countless Trojans with divine assistance. His rage, sanctified by the gods and sanctioned by heroic code, reaches its apogee in a moment of sublime violence. This is what Jean-Pierre Vernant famously described as the "beautiful death", whereby the hero gains immortality through a glorious end that suspends the natural limits of human life within the cultural imaginary of the epic (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1991, p. 63).

In stark contrast, Sophocles' portrayal of Ajax's suicide, in his masterpiece *Ajax,* undermines this ideal. Certainly, the case of Ajax in Sophocles' tragedy carries additional dimensions. This play constitutes a rare exception within the extant corpus of ancient Greek drama, as it features the on-stage death of the tragic hero – specifically, by suicide. Through this dramatic choice, Sophocles attributes yet another significant function to the theatrical art: its capacity to reflect on human existence and social structures. Ajax's symbolic failure to retain his weapons and assert his leadership offers the contemporary spectator a unique experience of normative reflection through the medium of theatre. The awarding of Ajax's arms and command to Odysseus – assisted, not incidentally, by the goddess of wisdom – signifies a profound cultural transition. The symbolic meaning here is deliberate: Odysseus, aided by Athena (goddess of wisdom/ sophia), inherits both the hero's arms and the reins of command in the Greek army. This transition, as discussed earlier, becomes the dramaturgical vehicle for the emergence of a new human model: the "intelligent" man replaces the "heroic" warrior. The invulnerable hero is defeated not by force of arms, but by sophia – wisdom – and it is through divine intervention that the "wise" man inherits the sceptre of leadership from the now obsolete paradigm of the "heroic" man. This shift marks not merely a change in theatrical narrative but signals a deeper ideological transformation: the ascendancy of cunning, adaptability, and intelligence over brute strength and martial honour.

Returning to the previous reasoning, far from an ennobling or redemptive gesture, Ajax's death is marked by futility and personal disgrace. His failure to exact vengeance and the collapse of his heroic identity result not in epic transcendence, but in isolation, madness, and ultimately self-destruction. The aesthetic order of Homeric "kleos" (glory) is replaced here with tragic dissonance. As Charles Segal observes, in *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*, the tragic death in Sophocles does not affirm values but exposes their limits and contradictions (Segal, 1981, pp. 110–113).

This transformation may be further illuminated through a Nietzschean lens. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche identifies the tragic hero as "the Dionysian mask through which Apollo speaks his final truth" (Nietzsche, §7, p. 44). That is, the heroic figure becomes a site where the tension between illusion (Apollonian form) and chaos (Dionysian dissolution) is enacted. Achilles, though momentarily transcendent, is still trapped in an Apollonian framework of glory and order. Ajax, by contrast, succumbs to Dionysian fragmentation; his breakdown points toward the failure of the heroic ideal itself. In this sense, the tragedy does not simply mourn the loss of epic values – it interrogates and deconstructs them from within.

This trajectory from Homeric "kleos" to Sophoclean pathos signals a cultural and philosophical shift: from the affirmation of heroic identity to the recognition of its tragic fragility. Heroism is no longer unproblematically aligned with excellence and honour; it is refracted through doubt, irony, and ultimately death devoid of meaning.

2.2 "Moira" (fate) vs "Hamartia" (sin)

The movement from epic to tragedy is marked not only by a transformation in heroism but also in the conceptualization of responsibility and causality. In Homeric epic, the force of "moira" – fate – is portrayed as an immutable order that even the gods acknowledge. A clear instance of this is found in Hector's speech to Andromache in *Illiad*, where he accepts his predetermined death with tragic composure and a sense of noble inevitability. His words exemplify what M.S. Silk has described as "heroic fatalism" – the epic hero does not resist fate but embraces it as a source of meaning and honour (Homer, *Iliad* 6, 440–465).

In contrast, Greek tragedy introduces the notion of "hamartia" – a flaw or error – as the primary engine of downfall. This shift is not merely literary, but deeply ideological. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the protagonist's catastrophic "anagnorisis" (recognition) and self-blinding emerge not from divine will alone, but from his own ignorance and impulsive actions. His lines in *Oedipus the King* convey this realisation: "*Ah, all is clear at last. O, light, let me look on you one final time!*" (Sophocles,

2004, *Oedipus the King*, 1182–1185, p. 78). Here, Sophocles displaces absolute fate for the burden of personal agency – a shift reflective of democratic Athens' growing concern with moral and civic responsibility. As Martha Nussbaum argues: "the tragic subject becomes accountable not simply to the gods, but to a humanised polis, where the consequences of one's choices reverberate socially and politically" (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 25-30).

This evolution is further illustrated in the movement from Odysseus to Orestes. In *Odyssey*, Odysseus' use of strategic deception before Penelope is marked by cleverness and control – it is a morally sanctioned Mētis[8], a hallmark of Homeric intelligence. However, in Euripides' *Electra*, Orestes employs similarly deceptive tactics, but with significant ethical ambiguity. His feigned report of his own death, delivered to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, raises troubling questions: is deception still heroic, or has it become a symptom of inner fragmentation and ethical decay?

According to the view of an important researcher: "Euripidean tragedy dismantles the Homeric confidence in Metis by subjecting it to moral scrutiny" (Goldhill, 1986, p. 91). Orestes' lies are no longer a tool of survival or strategy; they point toward a crisis of moral clarity. What was once a sign of heroic resourcefulness becomes a manifestation of ethical disintegration in a world no longer ordered by absolute codes. In sum, the transition from moira to hamartia reflects a broader cultural shift: from a "cosmos" (world) of ordained outcomes to a "polis" (city) of contested responsibilities. The epic hero accepts his fate; the tragic hero must answer for his choices, ushering humanity into a new also very interesting era.

2.3 Anagnorisis (recognition) and Identity

We could make a comparison between Homeric and tragic "anagnorisis" (recognition). In "Homeric world" we have a different perspective on this specific issue: In *Odyssey*, for example, recognition (anagnorisis) is often achieved through tangible physical markers, which serve to re-establish identity within the narrative. The most iconic example is the scar on Odysseus' thigh, revealed during his encounter with Eurycleia (Homer, *Odyssey*, 19, 393–507). This token (semeion) confirms his identity not only to others but also to the audience, reinforcing the hero's continuity and bodily integrity across his trials and transformations. The

8 According to Acusilaus, Metis was born with Eros and Aether, from the union of Erebus and Night, who came from Chaos. She was considered the goddess of wisdom and prudence, qualities that she bequeathed to her daughter, the goddess Athena. Metis was the personification for the ancients not only of wisdom and prudence but also of the kind of cunning and vigilance, represented by Odysseus among humans and by the fox among animals.

recognition is thus external, verifiable, and reaffirming of an enduring selfhood (Schein, 1995, p. 266). On the other hand in ancient Greek drama we have the Tragic "Anagnorisis" (recognition). In sharp contrast, tragedy introduces "anagnorisis" (recognition) as a destabilizing moment of internal rupture. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the eponymous hero's self-recognition – when he exclaims "*O, light, may I look on you for the last time!*" – marks the collapse of his prior self-understanding. Here, "anagnorisis" is not merely the revelation of a hidden fact, but the unravelling of the subject who perceives it. Oedipus does not gain knowledge that affirms identity; he learns that he has always been what he never believed he could be. This recognition brings about "peripeteia" (reversal), but also a philosophical crisis regarding the coherence of identity itself (Knox, 1957, p. 176).

In a theoretical framework we could focus on some important theories like Aristotle' *Poetics*. In this philosophical essay, he differentiates between forms of recognition in epic and tragedy (*Poetics*, 1452a). Aristoteles defines "anagnorisis" as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune". In epic, such recognition is often grounded in external tokens (semeia), like scars, rings, or memories. These serve narrative resolution without destabilizing character. In tragedy, however, recognition is tightly intertwined with "pathos" and "peripeteia" (adventure) and leads to an inner transformation: tragic anagnorisis in Sophocles "… undoes the coherence of self… it is not simply knowledge, but the reconfiguration of the person who knows" (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 109). Thus, whereas Homeric identity is stable and recoverable, tragic identity is contingent and fractured by the very process of knowing.

2.4 The Divine Reimagined

The divine realm, as conceived in Homeric epic, is a tangible and immanent force – visibly intervening, personally engaged, and often anthropomorphically aligned with human affairs. In contrast, Attic tragedy reconfigures the divine presence, often invoking it through silence, absence, or inscrutable distance, thus reflecting a shift in theological imagination from Homeric "oral" immediacy to tragic "written" ambiguity.

As a result, we could conclude that in "Homeric Gods" existed a kind of "visible intervention" and "divine proximity" also.

On the contrary in *Odyssey*, the gods do not merely influence the world passively; they manifest in direct, perceptible ways. One of the clearest examples occurs in *Odyssey* when Athena appears in the form of Mentor to assist Odysseus in his climactic confrontation with the suitors. The goddess stands by him, offers tactical guidance and, crucially, enhances his physical prowess – a striking

depiction of "human – divine" cooperation in "heroic" warfare. Her presence, both in disguise and in her true form, asserts the Homeric conception of the gods as companions-in-arms of mortal heroes (Homer, 1967, *Odyssey*, lines 22.205-240; cf. 16.156–200). Homeric theology is marked by a clarity and confidence in divine order; gods are arbiters of justice but also guardians of personal oaths and familial integrity – particularly Athena in her consistent support of Odysseus and Telemachus, whom she protects with almost maternal dedication (Segal, 1994, p. 41). This divine immediacy reflects a pre-political "cosmos" (world) in which justice is enforced through a direct line between Olympus and the mortal world.

On the other hand, in Euripides "tragic universe" the Gods withdraw ushering in an era of "tragic divine absence". Euripides' *Hippolytus* for example dramatizes a world in which the gods are present not through direct engagement, but through absence, silence, or opaque cruelty. Artemis, who champions chastity and reveres her devotee Hippolytus, remains absent throughout his downfall. Only after his death does she appear, too late to save him, to pronounce divine regret without responsibility (Euripides. *Hippolytus*, lines 1321–1368). The tragedy is intensified not only by Aphrodite's malicious orchestration at the play's beginning, but also by Artemis' cold inability to intervene, even when aware of the truth.

The gods in tragedy often become emblems of impersonal power or ideological critique. The cruelty of Aphrodite and the impotence of Artemis highlight a disenchanted vision of divine justice, one in which mortals suffer despite – or because of – divine whims: Euripides "presents a world governed by divine forces whose justice is not necessarily human or even coherent" (Sourvinou-Inwood, 2003, p. 248), signaling a darker theological outlook than that of Homer. In the era of tragic poets and the golden age of Athenian democracy there is also a "democratization of the divine". From a scholarly perspective Greek tragedy "democratizes" the divine by removing the gods from their privileged intimacy with the heroic elite and rendering them abstract agents whose actions affect the "polis" (city) at large (Vernant, 1988, pp. 23–44). In epic, gods function as personal allies or "antagonists" (competitors) of individual heroes. In tragedy, however, the divine reflects communal tensions, political anxieties, and moral dilemmas. This shift parallels the evolution from a heroic ethos to a democratic civic consciousness, where gods no longer uphold the fate of individuals but rather preside over collective human error and fragile justice. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, for instance, the divine hierarchy does not serve justice but reaffirms cosmic imbalance. Artemis' withdrawal from action and Aphrodite's ruthless assertion of power render human agency tragically futile. This transformation is not simply theological but ideological – the gods no longer mirror aristocratic codes of honour but symbolize a broader interrogation of moral certainty and political order in the democratic "polis" (city) (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1990, p. 258).

3. Rewritings of Homer in "tragic's world"

Greek tragedy often operates through a process of palimpsestual reworking – rewriting Homeric myth within a civic, theatrical, and philosophical framework that destabilizes epic certainties. We could better understand this process following indicatively some parts of ancient Greek plays that illustrate how tragic poets critically reimagine Homeric narratives, not only for aesthetic purposes but as a form of cultural interrogation.

3.1 Oresteia and the "Nostoi" (Nostos' plural)

Odyssey recounts Agamemnon's return from Troy as a cautionary tale: his murder at the hands of Clytemnestra is reported with ominous solemnity but without moral ambiguity – Aegisthus is the villain, and Orestes the avenger. Homer's narrative retains the ethical clarity of heroic justice: the homecoming (nostos) is fatally obstructed by personal betrayal, not systemic fault (Homer, 1967, *Odyssey*, lines 3.254–312).

In contrast, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* rewrites the "nostos" motif as a metaphysical ordeal. The crimson tapestry scene in which Agamemnon is seduced into walking upon imperial red cloths, marks not merely a gesture of pride but a symbolic transgression. The visual excess becomes a metaphor for the guilt of the Atreid house and the pollution of war. This act could be faced as the visible eruption of the tragic: "…the fabric signifies both victory and defilement, collapsing the distinction between glory and crime" (Vernant, 1988c, p. 29). Philosophically, the scene also echoes Nietzsche's concept of the "Dionysian entanglement" – the fatal merging of life, suffering, and ecstatic horror that lies beneath Apollonian order (Nietzsche, 1999, §9). Agamemnon's entrance, both triumphant and cursed, reflects the tragic entrapment of agency within ancestral necessity.

The structural contrast culminates in the opposing forms of revenge: Odysseus' solitary and righteous massacre of the suitors stands against Orestes' moral impasse and his eventual trial in *Eumenides*: "…where the Odyssey restores personal and social order through dike, the *Oresteia* problematises justice itself, requiring the intervention of Athena and the establishment of civic institutions – a shift from private vengeance to collective deliberation" (Zeitlin, 1984, p. 70).

3.2 Philoctetes and the Iliad

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* stages an implicit dialogue with *Iliad* 9, in which Achilles must choose between glorious death and a long, obscure life. Achilles' heroic decision — to die young but remembered – crystallizes the epic ideal of "arete". His suffering is noble, his fate exemplary. Philoctetes, however, offers a revisionary response. His wound, described with visceral intensity is not a mark of "kleos" (glory), but a site of marginalization and abjection. Exiled and rotting, he embodies a hero whose suffering isolates rather than ennobles. Sophocles dismantles the epic paradigm by confronting the audience with the physical and ethical consequences of heroism removed from the social frame that legitimizes it.

Aristotle's concept of "pathos" as "noble suffering" in the *Poetics* is thus interrogated. Philoctetes' pain is not metaphorical or moralized, but intensely corporeal and politically charged. His wound cannot be redeemed through honour, only instrumentalized by others – notably Odysseus – turning him into an object of strategic necessity rather than a subject of epic glory. According to the opinion of some scholars reading of Greek tragedy as a space where "the vulnerability of the good" is exposed finds powerful expression in *Philoctetes* (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 395). Arguing that Sophocles challenges any facile identification of suffering with moral nobility: pain is not a test of virtue but a brutal fact of life, one that may destroy or deform the soul. Thus, *Philoctetes* rewrites the Homeric ethos from within, showing how the heroic ideal collapses when removed from the narrative frameworks that previously sustained it.

3.3 Euripides' Hecuba vs Iliad 24

Homer's *Iliad* ends on a note of profound "pathos" (as noble suffering): Priam's journey to ransom Hector's body is marked by dignity, grief, and a brief reconciliation between enemies. The moment affirms the possibility of shared humanity beyond the devastation of war. On the contrary, Euripides' *Hecuba*, offers a bleaker counter-narrative. In *Hecuba*, the once-regal Trojan queen blinds the Thracian king Polymestor in an act of visceral revenge for the murder of her son Polydorus (Euripides, 1995, lines 1048–1135). The nobility of Priam's mourning is replaced by the horror of a mother turned Erinys. The Hecuba does not end with mourning but with mutilation, rage, and the loss of all moral certainty. This Euripidean moment is described by Snell as the: "*discovery of ethical ambiguity*" (Snell, 1953, p. 25). Hecuba is both victim and executioner, righteous and monstrous. The play reveals the collapse of traditional ethical polarities and dramatizes a world in which the categories of honour, vengeance, and justice bleed into one another. Vernant adds that *Hecuba* inverts ritual structures: "…

where Homeric mourning involves lament and supplication, Euripides offers sacrificial vengeance with no catharsis" (Vernant, and Vidal-Naquet, 1990, p. 270). The tragic reworking here is not merely a psychological deepening but a structural dislocation of the very cultural rituals that once allowed grief to find meaning.

3.4 *Cyclops*: Satyr Play as Homeric Critique

Finally, Euripides' *Cyclops* – the only surviving satyr play – parodies *Odyssey* 9.105 -566, the episode of Odysseus and Polyphemus, but with a sharply political and ideological undercurrent. While the Homeric version presents Odysseus as a cunning and heroic survivor, Euripides transforms the encounter into a grotesque carnival of drunkenness, sexual innuendo, and Dionysian subversion. Through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, *Cyclops* functions as: a space where epic hierarchies are suspended and inverted (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 122–134). The noble Odysseus is ridiculed, and the monster becomes a drunken caricature of tyrannical power. The satyr chorus, with their phallic jokes and unruly exuberance, dismantles the epic gravity of Homer's narrative. More significantly, the play can be read as a political satire of Athenian imperialism: Euripides' Polyphemus, who boasts of lawlessness and detests the gods, "… mirrors the hubris of imperial Athens rather than the barbarism of a Cyclops" (Hall, 1989, p. 144). The transformation of Homeric narrative into satyr play thus enables a critique not only of myth but of contemporary political ideology.

Conclusion: The "tragic afterlife" of Homer

The Athenian tragedians' engagement with Homer represents a paradoxical movement: a return to epic origins that is also a radical act of re-signification. Tragedy does not merely adapt Homeric material; it rethinks the very terms of myth, ethics, and representation. This study has demonstrated how the tragic stage becomes both a philosophical homecoming and a cultural departure from Homeric poetics.

Tragedy – in this "democracy era of tragic's" – transforms the aristocratic "ethos" (moral) of "kleos" (glory) into the civic experience of "pathos" (as noble suffering and a way to knowledge). Where the Homeric hero is defined by individual glory and genealogical honour, tragic characters become representatives of collective suffering and ethical dilemma. The chorus, often drawn from marginal or vulnerable social groups – women, elders, slaves – replaces the epic bard and introduces a new form of collective voice: The chorus serves as the people's conscience, mediating between personal catastrophe and communal responsibility.

This way of philosophical reflection that democracy and ancient drama created, led in the Birth of Western Subjectivity. Greek tragedy becomes the laboratory for what Bruno Snell termed "*the discovery of the mind*." Whereas Homeric characters are driven by divine will and heroic codes, tragic figures interiorize conflict. Ajax's soliloquy – in Sophocles' *Ajax* – or Phaedra's tortured admission of desire in Euripides' *Hippolytus* reveal the emergence of inwardness, guilt, and ethical reflection. This inward turn inaugurates the modern concept of selfhood: fragmented, opaque, and tragically aware of its own limits making tragedy the "ultimate" means of Athenian self-criticism.

Tragedy no longer functions as a mythic celebration but as a civic critique. Ancient Greek drama – especially tragedy – became a "*laboratory of the polis*" (city), where Athens interrogates its own foundations through myth (Vernant, 1988b, p. 29). In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the cycle of Homeric vengeance is supplanted by a juridical system rooted in deliberation and rationality. In The *Trojan Women*, Euripides confronts Athenian imperial violence by reimagining the victims of Troy not as distant foes but as "…*mirrors of contemporary suffering*" (Hall, 2010, p. 220). The tragic "polis" (city) turns Homeric "Kleos" (glory) into political responsibility.

Summarizing the theoretical part of the issue we could emphasize regarding Nietzschean Dialectic that the tragic reworking of Homer exemplifies the Apollonian/Dionysian dialectic. Homer offers structured beauty and epic measure, but tragedy shatters that form, giving way to Dionysian chaos, rupture, and ecstatic terror. The tragic chorus dances on the edge of madness and insight (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 1999, §10). Correspondingly – in relation to the Aristotelian Transformation – Aristotle's katharsis depends upon Homeric emotional material – grief, fear, pity – but gives it theatrical embodiment. The tragic stage becomes a site where myth becomes experience, and audience members engage in shared moral reflection. Finally, according to the modern reception, the Homer-tragedy dialogue continues across of the centuries. Seneca's *Troades* reimagines Euripides through Roman stoicism. Anouilh's *Antigone* transposes Sophocles' heroine into a Nazi-occupied France. These adaptations affirm that **"…Homeric tragedy is not static legacy but a generative form of cultural memory"** (Goldhill, 2007, p. 221).

Epilogue

The present work could future provoke on a further inquiry into understudied aspects of the Homer – tragedy nexus in different ways. For example, by a Lacanian approach: recognition (anagnorisis) scenes in Homer and tragedy could be reread through a Lacanian way of psychoanalysis as sites of subject formation, the gaze, and symbolic loss.

Also, regarding the performance studies and theatre practicing the present study could be proven very useful as a basis for a new way of stage presence of drama or a new dramaturg model even an acting model as well. Comparative analysis of rhapsodic and dramaturgical modes of delivery could probably illuminate how the Homeric epic was re-experienced in the tragic theatre, not just as text but as event – embodied, affective, and political, leading in a new approach of stage presentation of Homeric literature.

In alignment with this interpretive framework, the National Theatre of Northern Greece – under the artistic direction of the present author for the last three and a half years – has chosen, for its major summer production, a conscious return to the sources: to Homer and epic poetry, which constituted the foundational matrix for the birth of tragedy and ancient drama.

Distinguished Greek director Michail Marmarinos, internationally acclaimed for his innovative theatrical vision, directs a production titled "Z', H', Th': The stranger. A visit to three rhapsodies of the *Odyssey"*, an ambitious theatrical endeavour that seeks to rediscover the epic substratum from which ancient drama originally emerged.

Ultimately, the tragic afterlife of Homer lies not in fidelity to a fixed canon but in the restless reinvention of myth for new historical horizons. The tragedians did not preserve Homer; they exposed and transformed him – making him endure process in a never-ending renegotiation of our relationship with the narrative epic and the Homeric universe up to our era.

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