

## dianoesis

Vol 15 (2024)

Leadership: charisma, power, and freedom



The ethics of war leadership as seen through  
ancient Greek poetry

*Ioanna Tripoula*

doi: [10.12681/dia.38177](https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38177)

## The ethics of war leadership as seen through ancient Greek poetry

Ioanna Tripoula,  
*PhD, University of Athens*  
joantrip@gmail.com

### Abstract

The present article focuses on the ethics of war leadership in the ancient Greek world, as it is presented through poetic works, specifically the Homeric epic, mainly *Iliad*, and tragedies, such as Aeschylus' *Pérsai*, Sophocles' *Aías*, *Antigóni* and *Philoktétes*, and *Andromákhē* and *Hekabē* by Euripides. These works offer interesting insights into the most important aspects of the morality of war leadership, such as who warrior is considered as a charismatic and virtuous leader, which behavior is his is considered moral and by what criteria, who is considered as moral model or moral guide, how the leaders decide regarding the fate of captives and especially of women and what is the role of the gods in selecting and evaluating the morality of war leaders? The conclusion that emerges is that there are certain moral standards, which men and especially the war leaders are expected to follow, while balancing between the pursuit of personal expediency and the common good. A virtuous character, however, is not considered a sufficient condition to ensure a glorious life or victory, because the fate of each and everyone's is ultimately defined by the gods. Man can only try and hope that he has been proved morally worthy before the challenges and problems he faces: his end, however, will prove whether he really succeeded.

**Keywords:** Aeschylus, drama, Euripides, Homer, *Iliad*, leadership, Sophocles, tragedy

*The ethics of war leadership as seen through ancient Greek poetry*

The heroic code, which defined the ethics of war including those of war leadership in Greek antiquity was formed by the Homeric epics and especially the *Iliad*, from which the tragedies of classical era were highly inspired<sup>1</sup>. The morality projected through the heroic poetry echoes a heroic era, the era of the Mycenaean kingdoms which was already by the time of Homer considered as a distant past<sup>2</sup>. The ideal of the virtuous leader according to the ideals of that time is personified by two generals of the two opposing sides, Achilles and Hector. Though of a different nationality those two from a moral point of view are two sides of the same coin, since they share certain values in common, as being good (i.e. kind, loving, caring) to their people and fearsome to their enemies<sup>3</sup>. For example, Achilles speaks tenderly when referring to his father and addresses his mate, Patroclus with genuine tenderness · likewise, whenever Hector speaks to his father-king, shows true respect, as well love to his wife and child<sup>4</sup>. Both generals, however, prove themselves to be extremely frightful to their opponent when they come into battle, not only by their martial skills, but by their very behavior. Hector's name spreads terror among the Trojans, whilst just the sight of Achillea's presence to the battlefield is more than enough to makes the Trojans retreat. *Iliad* is full of bloody battles and duels between fearsome warriors. All this ferocity is not simply explained as an obligation or as an emotional outburst (such as caused to Achilles by the death of Patroclus), but arises from the archaic morality according to which you show your

<sup>1</sup> J. De Romilly. *Ancient Greek grammarology (Archaía ellinikí grammatologyía)*. Athens: Kardamítsa, 1988, 39.

<sup>2</sup> S. Schein. "The Iliad: Structure and Interpretation". In *A New Companion to Homer*, 343–359. I. Morris & B. Powell (eds.). Leiden: Brill, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> M. Whitlock Blundell, *Helping friends and harming enemies: a study in Sophocles and Greek ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 26-59.

<sup>4</sup> De Romilly, 1988, 40-41.

toughest side to the opponent, until he regrets that he initially chose to be your opponent.

However, it appears from various points that there were certain moral principles which mainly must be demonstrated by the leaders. A well-known example where a certain dueling ritual is presented, is the scene between Glaucus and Diomedes, both descendants of old and noble families<sup>5</sup>. The duel begins with praising of the opponent and often ends with an exchange of gifts. When we rush to judge this kind of behavior based on today's morality, we fall into the trap of characterizing it as politeness or amenity, when it actually served other purposes; namely, on the one hand, praising the opponent in the "fight of words", that is, before entering the fight with the weapons, was intended to show the worth of both involved, while on the other hand the exchange of gifts would always remind both of the feat of a duel with a glorious and equal opponent<sup>6</sup>. Thus, both the verbal combat and the exchange of gifts raise the prestige of the warlords involved, to the same degree as engaging in battle.

In the duel between of the two main leaders, Achilles and Hector, the rules are broken: the two engage firstly in a verbal combat, but in a one that lacks the usual practice of glorification of the opponent- at least on Achilles' part, simply because he cannot overcome his anger and grief. When the prince of Troy reminds the rules concerning the defeated, that is to respect the dead body and return it to the relatives, Achilles is neither willing to listen nor to respect them. This scene is the apogee of sketching the difference between the two characters: Achilles is carried away by his temper and his emotions, while Hector is steadily proven as more prudent like a real leader should behave.

However, these two, Achilles and Hector, are both undisputed leaders, who won this recognition not so much because of their origin or social position, but because of their personal worth. This is mainly shown by their indirect but constantly apparent comparison with other heroes: Achilles is

---

<sup>5</sup> *Iliad*, Z', 119-236.

<sup>6</sup> H. van Wees, "Homeric Warfare". In *A New Companion to Homer*, 668-693. I. Morris & B. Powell, Leiden: Brill, 1997.

often shown as more worthy than the major leaders of the army and especially than Agamemnon, while in addition he enjoys greater appreciation from the army and, from the other side of the wall, Paris is the proof that being the prince of the city is not enough to get praised or respected. And of course, what connects the two great heroes is the unquestionable sense of personal honor and the moral obligation to defend their personal honor and the honor of their family and city<sup>7</sup>: Achilles willingly and steadily walks towards his death, not only to avenge the death of his friend, but because he knows in advance that in this way, he will gain everlasting glory (*κλέος ἄφθιτον*), while Hector, on the other hand, repeatedly states that he considers it a shame to be proved a coward before his army and his king. The code of this morality is summed up in the words of Ajax, the second - after Achilles - bravest of the Achaeans: “*the honest must live honestly/or die an honorable death. That pretty much says it all*” («ἀλλ’ ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέαι / τὸν εὐγενῆ χροή. πάντ’ ἀκήχοας λόγον.»).<sup>8</sup>

Both parties have a living moral leader, i.e. Priam from the camp of Troians, and some well-respected figures from the Greek camp, such as Phoenix and Nestor. Considering that we refer to a decennial war, these people -most of them kings in their own countries- represent the old warrior class, who now, that we have reached the very last days of the war, take little or no part in battle, but play a decisive role by advising not only for war planning and operational matters, but also in matters of attitudes and behaviors, that is, ethics, mainly by mediating among leaders and by advising the younger ones. However, to what extent their opinions and advices will be heard, basically depends on the personal ambitions of the warriors and above all on which way they think is best for defending their personal honor.

Finally, a new form of morality is personified by Odysseus, who is already a leading figure in the *Iliad*, not only because he is also a king, but mainly because of his cleverness, which he inherited from his grandfather, Autolycus. He is mostly well

<sup>7</sup> A. W. H. Adkins, “Homeric Ethics”. In *A New Companion to Homer*, 694–713. I. Morris & B. Powell. Leiden: Brill, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax*, 479- 480.

known for his ability to slip away from difficult situations with the power of his mind or/and speech. His first reaction, when asked to travel to Troy, to pretend to be mentally ill, although at first glance looks like a funny or even unheroic choice<sup>9</sup>, is a behavior indicative of his morality, of his cunningness, but also of his sound judgment, which is characteristic of a proactive leader. His persuasiveness and ingenuity were, after all, the catalytic factors that ensured the triumphant victory after ten years of irresolute war. Perhaps in this way Homer is ultimately leans towards this ethics of war by projecting the message that, to engage in any cause, a leader must firstly believe in the cause, possess all the necessary virtues and be able to succeed. This new kind of morality is clearly projected as the opposite of that of Achilles or Hector in the Sophoclean tragedy *Ajax*, where the great hero, leader of the Salaminians, appears firstly as a representative of the old heroic code · later, though, after the rage that overwhelmed him because of the misrecognition of his worth as a soldier, is presented as a negative role model, i.e. arrogant, immoderate and irreverent, in contrast to Odysseus, who justifies the title of the winner of Achilles' armor by demonstrating piety and prudence<sup>10</sup>. One way of understanding the outcome of their battle could be that strength and martial prowess can at any moment serve the troop or turn against it· but critical thinking and fierce judgment is a steadily reliable quality of a worthy leader.

The contrast between Odysseus and Ajax highlights two different moral conceptions regarding how one deals with victory. This question arises in the tragedy of Sophocles *Philoctetes*<sup>11</sup>. The main hero, king in some Thessalian cities, who joined along with the Greek fleet for Troy, never arrived, as his fellow warriors abandoned him in Lemnos, due to an

---

<sup>9</sup> J. Griffin. "Heroic and unheroic ideas in Homer". In *Homer: readings and images*, 21-32. C. Emlyn-Jones, L. Hardwick & J. Purkis (eds). London: Duckworth in association with the Open University, 1992, 21-32.

<sup>10</sup> Lesky, A. *History of ancient Greek literature (Istoría tis arkhaías ellinikís logotekhnías)*. Thessaloniki: D. Kiriakídi, 2015, 391; Easterling, P. E. «Sophocles (Sophoklís)». In *History of ancient Greek literature (Istoría tis arkhaías ellinikís logotekhnías)*, 394-419. P. E. Easterling & V. M. W. Knox (eds.) Athens: Papadíma, 1994, 394-419 and especially 400-401.

<sup>11</sup> Blundell, 1989, 184-225.

incurable snakebite poisoning. Ten years later, they are forced to return for him, because of an oracle, who says that Troy will never be conquered without his magic bow and arrows. The mission is assigned to Odysseus and Achilles' son, Neoptolemus<sup>12</sup>. Since Philoctetes, however, refuses to help his former partners, who have abandoned him for so many years, the king of Ithaca comes up with a plan, that includes deceit, deception and lies. The one who will deceive Philoctetes will not be Odysseus, precisely because of his reputation for deception, and Neoptolemus, who he is presented as a representative of morality because of his youth, of his little experience in war (as his name suggests), which causes men to become corrupt and his descent from Achilles, which makes him virtuous. Although the young man initially refuses, considering cheating morally reprehensible, he is eventually defeated by the same passion that had driven his father to Troy, the love of glory. His moral quality, however, does not allow him to complete the plan and in the end, he chooses the path of truth and decency<sup>13</sup>.

This contradiction between Odysseus and Neoptolemus, between deceit and honesty, proves that there are two types of ethics among war leaders. On the one hand, Neoptolemus represents uprightness, an ideal represented from the older generation, by his father, by Ajax, Hector etc. On the other hand, Odysseus, at least as seen from Philoctetes' point of view, is the personification of trickery and resorting to any means with the ultimate goal of victory<sup>14</sup>. Characteristically he declares: *Where such are needed, I am such; and where the righteous and the virtuous are to be judged, you will not find anyone better than me. everyone —/except you*" («Οὐ γὰρ τοιούτων δεῖ, τοιοῦτός εἰμι' ἐγώ·/ χῶπρου δικαίων καγαθῶν

<sup>12</sup> E. Belfiore, "Xenia in Sophocles' Philoctetes", *The Classical Journal*, 89, 2 (1993): 113–29.

<sup>13</sup> Lesky, 2015, 406-410; De Romilly, 1988, 113. Lesky, A. *The tragic poetry of the ancient Greeks*, vol. I, *From the origin of the genre to Sophocles (I trayikí plísi ton arkhaíon Ellínou, t. A', Apó ti yénesi tou ídous os ton Sophoklí)*. Athens: National Bank Educational Foundation (MIET), 1997, 397-412.

<sup>14</sup> H.M Roisman. "The appropriation of a son: Sophocles' Philoctetes", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* (1997): 127-171.

*ἀνδρῶν κρίσις, οὐκ ἂν λάβοις μου μᾶλλον οὐδέν' εὐσεβῆ./ Νικᾶν γε μέντοι πανταχοῦ χρῆζ' ἔφυν, πλὴν ἐς σέ»*)<sup>15</sup>. The king of Ithaca is of course a “*polytropa*” (i.e. resourceful) man, however in this case he just follows orders of the council of generals of the Greek army<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, we should not fall into the trap of jumping to trivial conclusions, because in this case we would judge based on the morality of our era and society. After all, in war, as is commonly known, (almost) everything is allowed and Odysseus is the most eminent representative of this point of view. He is the leader who does what has to be done in order to ensure every single time the success and the victory.

The use of deception on the behalf of a leader is considered justified and legitimate, if it aims to the common good. Odysseus himself as a king, a warrior, even a person, has nothing to benefit from his lie, but it will surely will bring to his army the long-awaited victory over the Trojans after ten years of war. It is, so to speak, a small malpractice done by one man in order to achieve a great good for the many, his fellow-warriors. This is another – a new or at least an unusual - aspect of “be good to your own and tremendous to your enemies” morality. The practice of deception was, after all, also used later, with the use of the Trojan Horse, which helped them to achieve the long-desired conquest of Troy, the end to the ten-year war, a triumphant victory for the Greeks and the *νόστος*, the return to homeland.

However, in other mythological examples, deceit is denounced if it is used for selfish purposes. Such a case is presented in Euripides’ *Hekabē*, in which the heroine is the former queen of Troy, wife of the great leader Priam<sup>17</sup>. During the war, Hecuba had entrusted her youngest son, Polydorus, to an old ally of their city, the Thracian king Polymestor, in order to avoid the child’s involvement in the war. The young prince had been sent to the foreign kingdom with gold, which Polymestor finally decided to keep for himself, killing its rightful owner. By this action the leader of the Thracians

---

<sup>15</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax*, 1049- 1053.

<sup>16</sup> Lesky, 1997, 411.

<sup>17</sup> Lesky, 1997, 103-115.



proved himself to be far below his role, because his act was clearly violating the oaths he had given to the child's parents and to the gods and mainly Zeus, the god - protector of hospitality<sup>18</sup>. Hecuba, is forced under the new circumstances to leave behind her the passive role she had until now as a woman and as a queen and to become a leader securing the obedience of the Chorus, in order to deceive two kings and destroy the one of them.

With her actions furthermore she becomes the instrument by which the gods punish the treachery and selfishness that lead to impiety, and restore the secular and moral order<sup>19</sup>. According to the ancient Greek thought the gods constantly supervise the world and judge the moral choices of individuals, sometimes punishing and sometimes rewarding<sup>20</sup>. Long life, bliss and certainly victory are ways of manifesting god's approval of the individual's morality. In Aeschylus' *Pérsai*, king Xerxes is bitterly defeated, because he defied the will of the gods, who wanted the Hellespont to be a boundary between the two continents and the two worlds, East and West, while, when passing through Athens, he burned down the sanctuaries of the Acropolis, clearly offending the gods<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, it seems that there are certain boundaries, which one even a great king, leader of tens of peoples and millions of people, is not permitted to access, and these are the boundaries that the gods set for the world, whether physical, social, or in any way related to the worldly order. As the wise king Darius very eloquently declares: *For Zeus heavy and straight stands /punisher of all great pride*" («Ζεύς τοι κολαστής τῶν ὑπερκόμπων ἄγαν /φρονημάτων ἔπεστιν, εὐθυνοσ βαρύς») <sup>22</sup>.

A similar belief is expressed by Sophocles in *Aíás*, where the hero, leader of the Salaminians who participated in the Trojan War, loses the opportunity to acquire the weapons of Achilles

<sup>18</sup> De Romilly, 1988, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Lesky, 2015, 511-513.

<sup>20</sup> C. J. Herington. *Aeschylus*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1986, 5-7.

<sup>21</sup> De Romilly, 1988, 85; Herington, 1986, pp. 67; H. D. F. Kitto. *Greek tragedy: a literary study*. London: Routledge, 1990, 31- 33; Lesky, 1997, 141-151.

<sup>22</sup> Aiskhúλου *Pérsai*, 827-828.

because of his insulting behavior towards the gods<sup>23</sup>. At least three times he proved disrespectful to the gods. At first, on his departure for Troy he told his father: “*father, with gods at my side, and a mere mortal / may equally win; but I, even without / their help, am confident / that I shall win the war alone*” («πάτερ, θεοῖς μὲν κἄν ὁ μηδὲν ὦν ὁμοῦ / κράτος κατακτήσασαι· ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ δίχα / κείνων πέποιθα τοῦτ’ ἐπισπάσειν κλέος./ τοσόνδ’ ἐκόμπει μῦθον») <sup>24</sup>. With the same arrogance he had answered Athena, when she once decided to stand before him in the battle: “*queen, go and stand before the other Achaeans; /as far as we are concerned, the front of the battle will never /be crushed*” («ἄνασσα, τοῖς ἄλλοισιν Ἀργείων πέλας/ ἴστω, καθ’ ἡμᾶς δ’ οὔποτ’ ἐκρήξει μάχη») <sup>25</sup>, while addressing his wife, Tecmessa, he had argued that he did not consider himself indebted to the gods<sup>26</sup>. The misrecognition of the power of the gods constitutes an unforgivable insult that cannot be left unpunished; on the battlefield the punishment translates into bitter defeat. The Homeric epics and classical dramas are full of such examples, which prove that people in general and especially those who are kings and leaders are free to make whatever choices they want, but their morality is judged not only by people, but, above all, by the gods. The power or authority people may have mean nothing in comparison to the divine· in fact, it depends directly on it and is judged by it.

Not only the outcome of a war, but the end of a man’s life lies in the hands of the gods according to his moral choices and moral quality. He, who dishonors his citizens and subjects, dies in shame and his dead body remains unburied, as the example of Ajax shows us. It was a decision made by king Menelaus, in order to punish the one who attacked his army and to show the rest how powerfully and decisively he responds to such choices. In the military there is a strict hierarchy, which is implied to echo the will of the gods.

---

<sup>23</sup> Blundell, 1989, 60-105.

<sup>24</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax*, 767-770.

<sup>25</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax*, 774-775.

<sup>26</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax*, 589-590: «ἄγαν γε λυπεῖς. οὐ κάτοισθ’ ἐγὼ θεοῖς / ὡς οὐδὲν ἀρχεῖν εἴμ’ ὀφειλέτης ἔτι;».

According to this hierarchy, the leader has the power of life and death on every subject, just as the gods have the power of life and death over every man. This is the reasoning by which Menelaus orders the prohibition of the burial of Ajax<sup>27</sup>. While, however, he thinks he is imposing the will of the gods, he overlooks that the dead belong to the jurisdiction of the gods, and thus no mortal has power over their bodies or their afterlife. The prohibition or even this delay of their burial is a clear insult towards the gods and their cosmic and moral order<sup>28</sup>.

The inviolable right of a proper burial is recognized already in the Homeric epics, where it is often stated that, as in all battles, there was a cessation of fighting especially for the purpose of burning the dead and rendering of due honors<sup>29</sup>. In that point we can also recall the story of the sons of Oedipus, who were involved in a civil war and who they annihilated each other; the new king, Kreon, forbids the burial of Polyneices on the grounds that he marched against his city, not realizing that he is committing blasphemy. Moreover, the story of the house of Lavdakids is being used also in Aeschylus's tragedy *Heptà epì Thébas*<sup>30</sup> and Euripides' *Phoínissa*<sup>31</sup>; although each poet is narrating the same story highlighting different aspects and meanings, they both express the belief that the fate of people, of the warriors, their relatives, even of the civilians, i.e. whether they will win or how they will die, is not really decided by their kings or leaders, rather than by the gods.

The fate of Hecabe and Antigone reminds us that the way of dealing with the weak and the defeated is indicative of the morality of the winners. A true leader cannot be petty or vindictive. Regarding the fate of the captives, most information comes from the classical era, but the very first can be found in the Homeric epic poetry. For example, Achilles' ritual tribute to Patroclus included among other offers the sacrifice of

---

<sup>27</sup> Sophocles, *Ajax*, 1047-1090.

<sup>28</sup> Lesky, 1997, 313

<sup>29</sup> *Iliad*, Η' 321-432, Ω' 678-805.

<sup>30</sup> Lesky, 2015, 352-35; Lesky, 1997, 154-168.

<sup>31</sup> Lesky, 2015, 534-536; Lesky, 1997, 290-314.

Trojans, who were caught as captives in an earlier battle<sup>32</sup>. Such an information indicates that being a captive was essentially like being already dead, with the significant difference that the captive one was not protected by the sanctity and the respect that was tributed to the dead. The brevity with which this - shocking for our modern standards, today's ethics and human rights perceptions - information is passed by, can mean nothing else than that it was a common practice when honoring an important person of the military.

Obviously, the fate of men differed from that of women during war. According to the current morality of the times, a woman was expected to remain at home and had no place in the camp. So, it makes sense that their presence is extremely rarely mentioned, as it happens, for example, in *Iphigéneia hē en Aulídi*, where the heroine arrives with her mother after being called by Agamemnon under the excuse that he wishes to perform her nuptials with Achilles before their departure for Troy – an excuse for securing her presence in order to offer her as a sacrifice to Artemis. And in this case the woman is the weak one and her fate is up to the judgment of the leader. Thus, her father King Agamemnon, decides - albeit reluctantly at first, due to his paternal love - the death of his daughter for the sake of the expedition. Atreides' decision is a typical example of utilitarianism, according to which the action that benefits the whole is morally correct.

Women in general did not have a place in the camp. The exception was the women of the wars who were under siege, as they had no choice. From the *Iliad* we know that any woman who ended up captured, was given as a *γέρας*, a spoil to a leader or to the soldiers altogether, depending on the importance of her lineage or her social status; it seems that female captives, like the women of Troy, ended up either as concubines, if young, meaning pretty enough and in an age proper for childbearing, or as servants if older. Thus, although in general their fate was predestined, examination of individual cases can provide evidence for the moral evaluation of the winner.

---

<sup>32</sup> *Iliad*, Ψ' 175-176.

For example, the classical tragic poets had shown a special interest for the destiny of the female captives of Troy<sup>33</sup>. Euripides in *Trōádes*, refers to the fate of the four Trojan women who, in the last rhapsody of the *Iliad*, mourn over Hector's corpse, i.e. queen Hecuba, her daughter, Cassandra, the even younger Polyxene, and Hector's wife, Andromache<sup>34</sup>. This particular tragedy is all about the relation between the war and women as war trophies<sup>35</sup>. With the capture of their city the fate of these women was more or less predetermined – the one that Hector had already predicted in the last meeting with his wife<sup>36</sup>. For them there is only the path of slavery left and what remains to be decided is to whom each one will be given as a *γέρας* (trophy)<sup>37</sup>. The case of Andromache, in which the same poet focuses on another of his tragedies, however, shows much about the morality of the leaders who determined her fate<sup>38</sup>. The former princess, wife of the great leader of Troy, was given as a concubine to the son of the man who killed her husband and who had previously killed her entire family. This choice on the part of the leaders of the Greek army clearly seems to have been vindictive and punitive. In addition, Menelaus works with his daughter Hermione, who is married to Neoptolemus, to kill the Trojan captive. Thus, the poet shows us that a great king, who gathered an army from all over Greece and led a ten-year campaign, turns out to be immoral, as he is involved in a woman's intrigue that starts from jealousy and envy. The behavior of the two of them towards the unfortunate woman is unfair and immoral – something that will be emphasized by Peleus, Achilles' elderly father<sup>39</sup>. This attitude of his, shows wisdom, kindness and

<sup>33</sup> De Romilly, 1988, 126.

<sup>34</sup> *Iliad*, Ω' 678-805.

<sup>35</sup> E. Craik, "Sexual Imagery and Innuendo in *Troades*". In *Euripides, women, and sexuality*, 1-15. A. Powell (ed.). London New York: Routledge, 1990, 1-15.

<sup>36</sup> *Iliad*, Z' 440-463.

<sup>37</sup> N. Felson & L. Slatkin. "Gender and Homeric epic". In *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, 91-114. R. Fowler (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 91-114.

<sup>38</sup> Lesky, 2015, 513-515 ·Lesky, 1997, 115-131.

<sup>39</sup> Euripidis. *Andromache*, 632-636.

humanity, but also arises from the fact that as a man and a king he himself realizes the need for his lineage and his city to have a successor to the throne. His morality, therefore, is undeniably influenced by the fact that he is a man and that he has experience of the practices of war.

Equally vindictive and small-minded was the decision of the Greek leaders regarding the fate of the queen of their rivals. In *Hekabē* we follow the tragic fate of Hecuba after the fall of Troy, when all her male children had been killed, and all the women of the family been given as concubines<sup>40</sup>. In the context of the tragedy, she will watch her young daughter being sacrificed on the mound of the man who killed her first-born son, while later she understands that her youngest and the only son she had left, as she had sent him away to save himself, Polydoros, was killed by their erstwhile ally, King Polymestor of the Thracians. Once again, the tragic poet shows that the great leaders are actually small-minded and mean. Polymestor betrayed his oaths to secure gold and new, stronger allies, while Odysseus repeatedly refuses to return the favors Hecabe had done him in the past. So, with nothing for her left to lose and nothing to hope for, she decides to take revenge on the killer of her last son by blinding him. Whether the gods morally approve her choices and actions is evidenced by her end; despite the fact that there are many mythological variants, they all converge on her being transformed into a female dog – i.e. into a state apparently prohibitive for any punishment thereof under the human law<sup>41</sup>.

In summary, from the Homeric epics and tragedies of the classical era it becomes clear that there was a belief that even in war certain moral rules apply which are binding for everyone and leaders must follow showing that they understand that the moral order of the world is defined by the gods. The heroic code enforces each warrior and especially the leaders to be good to their own people and fearful to their opponents. The one who recognized by all as a good and effective leader must also possess moral virtues and above all

---

<sup>40</sup> S. G. Daitz, "Concepts of Freedom and Slavery in Euripides' Hecuba", *Hermes*, 99, 2 (1971): 217–226.

<sup>41</sup> Kitto, 1990, 216–222; Lesky, 2015, 511–513.

be devout to the gods. The older and more experienced are expected to advise the younger not only in matters of war, but also in matters of morality. Shiftiness or eloquence or other virtues which contribute to the achievement of an end for the common good, are positively evaluated insofar that they do not invalidate moral constants. In war, contrary to general and widespread belief, not absolutely everything is permitted. A man and especially a warrior, a general, a king, a ruler, who knows how to keep his moral principles intact, even at the most critical moments, will be rewarded by the gods either with a long life, or with a glorious death, or with a triumphant victory. The one who showed disrespect, on the contrary, is about to suffer bitter defeat and a dishonorable death. The parallel losses include the most unfortunate: the prisoned warriors and the captured women. The fate of these people is completely left in the hands of the winner. The manner in which their fate is determined, however, says much about the morality of the victors, whether they really deserve to be considered leaders with the favor of the gods on their side, or whether through their arrogance and malice prove themselves to be inferior to their circumstances. In any case, everyone can only hope and try to prove himself worthy and morally correct- the rest lays entirely in the hands of the gods.

## References

### Works of reference

- Aeschylus. *Pérsai*, H. Weir Smyth (ed.), Cambridge, 1926.
- Euripidis. *Andromache. Scholia palia eis tēn Euripidou Andromachēn. Vetera scholia ad Euripidis Andromachen. Ed. cum sua adnotatione*, J. Lenting,(ed.), apud H.C.A. Thieme, 1829.
- Homer. *Homeri Opera in five volumes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford,1920.
- Sophocles. *The Plays and Fragments, with critical notes, commentary, and translation in English prose. Part III: The Antigone*. Sir R. C. Jebb. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1900.

Sophocles. Vol 2: *Ajax. Electra. Trachiniae. Philoctetes*, transl. F. Storr. The Loeb classical library, 21. Francis Storr. London; New York. W. Heinemann Ltd.; The Macmillan Company. 1913.

#### Secondary Bibliography

- Adkins, A. W. H., "Homeric Ethics". In *A New Companion To Homer*, 694–713. I. Morris & B. Powell. Leiden: Brill, 1997.
- Belfiore, E. "Xenia in Sophocles' Philoctetes", *The Classical Journal*, 89, 2 (1993): 113–29.
- Blundell, Whitlock, M. *Helping friends and harming enemies: a study in Sophocles and Greek ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Craik, E. "Sexual Imagery and Innuendo in Troades". In *Euripides, women, and sexuality*, 1-15. A. Powell (ed.). London New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Daitz, S. G. "Concepts of Freedom and Slavery in Euripides' Hecuba", *Hermes*, 99, 2 (1971): 217–226.
- De Romilly, J. *Ancient Greek grammarology (Arkhaía ellinikí grammatologyía)*. Athens: Kardamítsa, 1988.
- Easterling, P. E. «Sophocles (Sophoklís)». In *History of ancient Greek literature (Istoría tis arkhaías ellinikís logotekhnías)*, 394-419. P. E. Easterling & V. M. W. Knox (eds.) Athens: Papadíma, 1994.
- Felson, N. & Slatkin, L. "Gender and Homeric epic". In *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, 91-114. R. Fowler (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Griffin, J. "Heroic and unheroic ideas in Homer". In *Homer: readings and images*, 21-32. C. Emlyn-Jones, L. Hardwick & J. Purkis (eds). London: Duckworth in association with the Open University, 1992.
- Herington, C. J. *Aeschylus*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Kitto, H. D. F. *Greek tragedy: a literary study*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Lesky, A. *The tragic poetry of the ancient Greeks*, vol. I, *From the origin of the genre to Sophocles (I trayikí píisi ton arkhaíon Ellínon, t. A', Apó ti yénesi tou ídous os ton Sophoklí)*. Athens: National Bank Educational Foundation (MIET), 1997.
- Lesky, A. *History of ancient Greek literature (Istoría tis arkhaías ellinikís logotekhnías)*. Thessaloniki: D. Kiriakídi, 2015.
- Roisman, H.M. "The appropriation of a son: Sophocles' Philoctetes", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* (1997): 127-171.
- Schein, S., "The Iliad: Structure and Interpretation". In *A New Companion To Homer*, 343–359. I. Morris & B. Powell (eds.). Leiden: Brill, 1997.
- van Wees, H., "Homeric Warfare". In *A New Companion To Homer*, 668–693. I. Morris & B. Powell, Leiden: Brill, 1997.



ROUTLEDGE INNOVATIONS IN POLITICAL THEORY

Scientific Statesmanship,  
Governance and the History of  
Political Philosophy

Edited by  
Kyriakos N. Demetriou and Antis  
Loizides

