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Patterns of Revenge in Greek Tragedy: Liberation and Deliverance

Abstract: The paper discusses some peculiar narrative pattern accompanying the plots of revenge in Greek drama. Particular attention here is given to the motifs of deliverance and tyrannicide. Among the plays taken into consideration are: Euripides' *Cyclops*, *Electra*, *Heracles*, the fragmentary *Kresphontes*, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Electra*.

Key words: Greek tragedy, satyr play, revenge, vengeance, tyrannicide, deliverance, liberation

A persistent feature of revenge in Greek drama is that it is seldom “pure,” insofar at least as we conceive of it. By contrast, modern revenge-narratives usually tend to peel it of other elements and motives, exposing its bare, vindictive core. Vengeance itself becomes the moral force driving the plot to its violent conclusion; it is studied, scanned, dissected until the very principle in its sinister and yet seductive nature is open to contemplation, only to be ultimately cast away in an attempt – however unsatisfactory its appeal may be – to achieve an ethical *katharsis*. For it is revenge *per se* that is the problem here. Without pretences to right a moral wrong it is simple villainy; when chosen as means of obtaining justice, however, it becomes a paradox. For in the moral world of modern narratives justice and vengeance are mutually exclusive. That this was hardly the case in classical Greece has already become a venerable orthodoxy. In Attic tragedy revenge quite frequently seems to be not the problem but its solution. One may, however, equally frequently wonder about the exact motives behind this “solution.” “Many

are the desires which fall in one here” says the Aeschylean Orestes as he enumerates his reasons for killing Aegisthus and his own mother: the god’s command, reclaiming his heritage (as well as his present lack of material resources!), liberating his fellow-citizens from the tyranny of “two women”; somewhere among these he also mentions sorrow for his dead father. This motive, however, does not even have a privileged position on his “list,” though in the course of the great *kommos* it is indeed established as the most important one for the young hero. In many other dramatizations of revenge, however, the motives behind the heroes’ actions may appear much less obvious.

The Cyclops’ Cave

Among the few “slices of the great banquets of Homer” found in the extant Attic drama is the story of Odysseus’ escape from the cave of Polyphemus, an epic episode put to stage by Euripides in the trappings of a satyr play. The narrative framework of the story in Homer presents us with a simple and coherent pattern of deliverance. Odysseus and his companions are trapped in the cave of the man-eating monster. The only way out is blocked by a huge stone, which no other but the Cyclops himself can lift. Simply killing him will not work, as long as the exit is closed.¹ Hence the stratagem – to burn his only eye out. This incapacitates Polyphemus while still leaving the possibility of escaping his cave open. And yet even this plot, an obvious device of eluding the Cyclops’ appetites, is introduced in very different terms: as revenge. “If only I could repay him” (*ei pōs teisaimēn*) says Odysseus to himself, as he sets on devising a plan for escape.² He is not only delivering his companions and himself from evil. He is also taking revenge.

The Homeric account quite seamlessly integrates these two motives: in order to set himself free, Odysseus must hurt Polyphemus; and by hurting him, he also avenges the atrocities he and his companions suffered in the cave. This, however, is no longer the case with the dramatization of the story in Euripides’ *Cyclops*. Perhaps narrative coherence – according to the Aristotelian principles of “probability” (*eikos*) and “necessity” (*anankaion*) – was not the most important factor in the plot of a satyr play. Especially when faced with the exigencies of stagecraft, structured, after all, on a pattern of exits and entrances. Here, the Euripidean Odysseus goes freely in and out of the stage building (*skēnē*), which represents

¹ Cf. *Odyssey* 9.300–305.

² αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ λιπόμην κακὰ βυσοδρομεύων | εἴ πως τεισαίμην, δοίη δέ μοι εὖχος Ἀθήνη (*Od.* 9.316f).

Polyphemus' cave.³ It is no longer sealed. Thus, as Burnett has concluded, "He stays, not out of necessity, but because [...] vengeance is his plain duty."⁴ So far, this may seem logical enough: the plot of deliverance seasoned with revenge (Homer) has been replaced by a plot of revenge pure and simple (Euripides). And yet this apparently straightforward pattern is – somewhat artificially – recombined with the motif of escape. Having announced at first his desire to repay the Cyclops, a few lines later Odysseus changes his mind: he is still going back to burn his eye out, only this time – to save his companions, who obviously cared little to leave the *open* cave as the monster lied in a drunken slumber.⁵ In the end, like in the *Odyssey*, revenge is bound together with deliverance, only this time in a much more obtrusive narrative patchwork.

The Blood of Tyrants

The first part of the Euripidean *Heracles* (a play not infrequently deplored for narrative faults of its own, its diptychal or even triptychal dramatic structure), represents the killing of Lycus, an usurper and villain of almost melodramatic blackness. For all intents and purposes, this is yet another plot of deliverance, where saving Heracles' family provides the main dramatic thrust. Lycus seized the throne of Thebes having killed the former king, Creon, who also happened to be Heracles' father-in-law. Heracles himself is absent, presumed dead on his last labour in Hades (there is a clear irony ringing here).⁶ Fearing vengeance from his children – as they are the grandchildren of the slain king⁷ – Lycus is bent on murdering them

³ Hence the need to "explain" this plothole in 480ff: "Le poète souligne lui-même l'in vraisemblance de la sortie d'Ulysse au v. 375" (Euripide, *Le Cyclope*, Edition critique et commentée par J. Duchemin. Paris 1945, p. 156); these lines, however, according to the more recent editorial consensus, are spurious (cf. Euripides, *Cyclops*, Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by R.A.S. Seaford. Bristol ²1998 (¹1984), p. 184; cf. also Seaford, *Cyclops*, pp. 51ff on this and other differences between the Euripidean and Homeric versions; cf. also *ibid.*, p. 187).

⁴ A. Pippin Burnett: *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy*. Berkeley 1998, p. 74; ἄκουε δὴ νῦν ἦν ἔχω τιμωρίαν | θηρὸς πανούργου σῆς τε δουλείας φυγὴν (*Cyc.* 441f); τρώσει νιν οἶνος καὶ δίκην δώσει τάχα (422); the motif of deliverance – cf. 427 – is less intelligible in this context.

⁵ ἐγὼ γὰρ ἄνδρας ἀπολιπὼν φίλους | τοὺς ἔνδον ὄντας οὐ μόνος σωθήσομαι (*Cyc.* 478f); "with Pol.[yphemus] asleep (454, 627) the Greeks might have all crept out to freedom [...]. And so the blinding here must be presented as largely as a matter of vengeance" (Seaford, *Cyclops*, pp. 187f).

⁶ βέβηκ' ἐς Ἄιδου [...] ἔνθεν οὐχ ἦκει πάλιν (24f); cf. 145, 296f, 427; see also: Euripides, *Heracles*, Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by G.W. Bond. Oxford 1981, pp. 103; Euripides, *Herakles*, erklärt von U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, v. 12. Berlin 1895, 2.12

⁷ *HF* 38–43; cf. E. *El.* 40ff; S. *El.* 964ff.

too, along with their mother, Heracles' wife, Megara, and, somewhat incidentally, the hero's aged father, Amphitryon. With little hope of escaping his clutches, they resort to supplication, which thus becomes the theatrical frame to the first part of the play: a tableau of helpless victims grouped around the altar where they seek the protection of the gods. Enter Heracles. With his timely arrival the story undergoes an all-too-familiar twist. To be sure, rescuing his family still remains his main objective. Quite obviously too, this does entail the death of the oppressor. Instead of simply dispatching him though, Heracles solemnly announces gruesome embellishments to his death: he will raze Lycus' house to the ground, cut his head off, and throw his body to the dogs.⁸ Needless to say, none of this is essential to save his wife, his children, and his old father from peril. In the end we are not told explicitly whether he actually did put his sinister threats to action. Whatever the case here, it is clear enough that he sees the killing of Lycus as something more than just means to deliver his loved ones from evil. And not only he: Amphitryon, as well as the equally decrepit chorus of the Theban elders rejoice in his death, quite explicitly wording it out as – vengeance (*dikē*; *antipoina*) for his “misdeeds” (*de-dramena*) and “outrages” (*hybreis*).⁹ These two strands, however, are here inherently bound with each other, both in terms of narrative and character. The fact that Heracles kills Lycus *in revenge*, and that probably in a less than pleasant way, is perfectly intelligible: not only is the victim a monster; he also tried to do Heracles great harm, and now he pays for this dearly. So much for the personal aspect of the vengeance/deliverance plot in this play. Unlike the exploits of Odysseus, however, it does not take place in a social vacuum, in the extreme conceptual wilderness of the Cyclops' cave, the mythical antithesis of society and culture.¹⁰ Heracles exacts his revenge in the very heart of the polis, of which Lycus is the ruler. An “illegitimate” one, to be sure, since he has gained power through force, over the dead body of his “legitimate” predecessor. One, furthermore, who kills people without trial (or at least attempts to); who enjoys the company of the wicked and base; who commits *hybris* against his subjects and treats them as slaves. In short: a *tyrannos* of tragedy and a paradigmatic tyrant in one. Approaching tragic “tyranny” with a list of tyrannical traits in hand (usually taken from the systematic treatments of tyranny in Plato and Aristotle) may not, however, be the best strategy. It is quite unlikely that systematic “tyrannical templates” were already firmly established

⁸ HF 565ff; see below for a full quotation.

⁹ ἔχει γὰρ ἡδονὰς θνήσκων ἀνὴρ | ἔχθρος τίνων τε τῶν δεδραμένων δίκην (HF 732f), ἦλθε χρόνῳ μὲν οὐ δίκην δώσεις θανάων (740), διδοῦς γε τῶν δεδραμένων δίκην (756), ἀντίποινα δ' ἐκτίων (755); ὕβριν ὑβρίζεις ἐπὶ θανοῦσι τοῖς ἑμοῖς (708); ὕβρεις ὑβρίζων εἰς ἀμείνονας σέθεν (741); cf. 261.

¹⁰ Seaford (*Cyclops* 52–56), however, points out that the Euripidean Polyphemus combines the motif of savagery with philosophical (sophistical!) sophistication, expounded in the Platonic *Gorgias* by Callicles, the champion of *physis*.

in the public discourse of the 5th century.¹¹ The term *tyrannos*, while not necessarily a mere synonym for “king” (*basileus*, *anax*), as traditionally assumed,¹² may have connoted very different aspects of one-man rule than its modern derogatory derivative might suggest. Furthermore, one might just as well, if not more plausibly for that matter, argue that the wicked lycanthrope of Plato and his successors was, in fact, created and shaped on the tragic stage – in Lycus and the likes of his.

We have every reason, therefore, to see in Lycus the hideous face of a tragic *tyrannos*: not the god-like power and bliss (deplored by Plato),¹³ but the disease of the polis.¹⁴ This gives Heracles’ revenge an aspect yet unseen in the cave of the Cyclops. The killing of Lycus is no longer following a simple personal vengeance-cum-deliverance pattern. It is also an essentially political act of tyrannicide. Reconciling these two aspects, however, may at first seem an uneasy task. After all, we have been accustomed to see the figure of the tyrannicide as a selfless champion of freedom (and democracy). Revenge on the other hand is frequently seen to give a sinister twist to such noble a feat. Plutarch for instance, when recounting the killing of Caesar, draws a sharp contrast between Brutus, the public-spirited “enemy of tyranny” (*misotyranos*) and Cassius, the personal “enemy of Caesar” (*misokaisar*).¹⁵ And therefore it is to the latter that the “less agreeable aspects of the deed are attributed.”¹⁶ This, however, may have hardly been the case in the ideological context of 5th-century Athenian drama and democracy.

¹¹ A more recent attempt to give a list of the tragic tyrant’s traits (not based on Plato’s and Aristotle’s treatments of the subject) is R.A.S. Seaford: “Tragic tyranny.” In: *Popular Tyranny. Sovereignty and its Discontents in Ancient Greece*. Ed. K.A. Morgan. Austin 2003; according to him the three tyrannical characteristics (emerging in very different guises) are: “impiety, distrust of his close associates (*philo*) and greed” (pp. 96ff).

¹² See e.g. the II Argumentum to the *Oedipus Rex*, found e.g. in Jebb’s edition (Sophocles: *The Plays and Fragments*. With Critical Notes, Commentary and Translation by R.C. Jebb, Part I: *The Oedipus Tyrannus*. Cambridge 1914): οἱ μὲθ’ Ὀμηρον ποιηταὶ τοὺς πρὸ τῶν Τρωϊκῶν βασιλεῖς τυράννους προσαγορεύοντες; cf. Euripides: *Medea*, Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by D.L. Page. Oxford 1938, p. 98 (ad E. *Med.* 348); A. Andrewes: *The Greek Tyrants*. New York 1956, p. 22f; R.P. Winnington-Ingram: *Sophocles: An Interpretation*. Cambridge 1980, p. 192; J.L. O’Neil: “The Semantic Usage of Tyrannos and Related Words.” *Antichthon* 1986, vol. 40, no. 20; for a more recent restatement, see V. Parker: “Τύραννος. The Semantics of a Political Concept from Archilochus to Aristotle.” *Hermes* 1998, vol. 126, no. 2, pp. 158ff; H. Berve: *Die Tyrannis bei den Griechen*. Vols. 1–2. München 1967, pp. 1. 193f applies this indifference more restrictively to Sophocles.

¹³ καὶ ὡς ἰσόθεον γ’, ἔφη, τὴν τυραννίδα ἐγκωμιάζει, καὶ ἕτερα πολλά, καὶ οὗτος [scil. Euripides] καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι ποιηταί. τοιγάρτοι [...] αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν πολιτείαν οὐ παραδεξόμεθα ἄτε τυραννίδος ὑμνητάς. (Pl. *Resp.* 568b); cf. Euripides, *Trojan Women* 1168ff; *Phoenician Women* 503–506; *Arche-laus* fr. 250 Kn.

¹⁴ οὐ γὰρ εὖ φρονεῖ πόλις στάσει νοσοῦσα (*HF* 272); νοσησάσης χθονός (542).

¹⁵ Cassius: ἰδίαι μισοκαίσαρ [...] τὸν ἄρχοντα μισεῖν; Brutus: κοινῇ μισοτύραννος [...] τὴν ἀρχὴν βαρύνεσθαι λέγεται (Plutarch, *Brutus* 8.3).

¹⁶ τὰ δυσχερέστερα τῶν γεγονότων as opposed to the γενναῖον of the πρᾶξις (*Brut.* 1.2).

Harmodius' Revenge

The Athenians had their own Brutus and Cassius (though without Plutarch's contrasting moral differentiation between them) in the figures of Harmodius and Aristogeiton. In reality, of course, they did not overthrow the tyranny in Athens, nor did they even kill the Athenian "Caesar." The death of Hipparchus did not bring an end to the Peisistratid rule, but, in fact, as some sources point out, it made it even harsher and more "tyrannical." In spite of this all, however, the deed of the Athenian "tyrannicides" rose to become the focal point of civic ideology in the emerging democracy of the early 5th century.¹⁷

According to our sources (the very same which question the historical validity of the tyrannicide-myth) the motivations of the two "conspirators" were complex, to say the least. More importantly revenge stood prominently among them, especially in the case of the younger of the two, Harmodius. According to Thucydides his participation in the killing was a straightforward history of revenge (*protimōrēsasthai*) for a grave insult (*hybrismenos*).¹⁸ an essentially "Mediterranean" slur directed at his sister, quite probably hinting on sexual unchastity.¹⁹ Seeing that Thucydides' account reads more like a polemic seeking to diminish the stature of the tyrannicides,²⁰ the fact that he gives revenge as their most important motive may suggest that, just like much later in Plutarch, it may have had sinister overtones. This, however, is hardly the case in the Aristotelian *Constitution of Athens*, where the tyrannicide myth is treated in a matter-of-fact manner, while the motif of revenge is given even more prominence. According to this version, Harmodius suffered a double outrage by Hipparchus: not only was his

¹⁷ On the ideology of tyrannicide in classical Athens cf. K. Raaflaub, "Stick and Glue: the Function of Tyranny in Fifth-Century Athenian Democracy." In: *Popular Tyranny...*, pp. 64ff; J. Ober: "Tyrant Killing as Therapeutic Stasis: A Political Debate in Images and Texts." In: *Popular Tyranny...*, pp. 216–226.

¹⁸ ἐβούλοντο [...] προτιμωρήσασθαι [...] δι' ὀργῆς, ὁ μὲν [Aristogeiton] ἐρωτικῆς, ὁ δὲ [Harmodius] ὑβρισμενός (Th. 6.57.3); the homoerotic relationship between Aristogeiton and Harmodius was also a prominent factor here, since it were Hipparchus scorned advances towards the latter that prompted him to insults.

¹⁹ διὰ τὸ μὴ ἀξίαν εἶναι Th. 6.56.1; on the suggestion of unchastity behind this indirect statement cf. S. Hornblower: *A Commentary on Thucydides*. Vols. 1–3. Oxford 1991–2008, 3.449; cf. *ibid.* on the "Mediterranean" character of this kind of insults.

²⁰ "Where Attic tradition laid emphasis on the heroism of the tyrannicides and saw their act not as an example of fearful jealousy and pride but as an example of a freedom-loving people's reaction against tyranny, Thucydides diminishes the stature of the tyrannicides by emphasizing the element of chance and individual emotion"; see A.W. Gomme, A. Andrewes, K.J. Dover: *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*. Vols. 1–5. Oxford 1945–1981, 1.322; cf. J. Ober: "Tyrant Killing..." p. 221: "Thucydides challenged the tyrannicides' motives and character."

sister humiliated, but also he himself “somehow” insulted as “soft” (*malakos*).²¹ The Pseudo-Platonic *Hipparchus*²² finally hits the nail on the head with a passing remark that revenge for dishonouring his sister was the motive commonly (by *hoi polloi*) attributed to Harmodius, whereas the knowledgeable gentlemen (*chariesteroi anthropoi*) claim that the true reason was homoerotic rivalry between Aristogeiton and Hipparchus (over Harmodius’ affection).²³ And it should be noted that the tyrannicides, as patrons of democracy, were in the first place, heroes of the common folk (*hoi polloi*).

Personal vengeance seems therefore hardly out of tune with the politics of tyrannicide, at least in the discourses of classical Athenian democracy. Tyrannical *hybris*, a victim of which, according to Thucydides, fell Harmodius (*hybrismenos*) is, furthermore, a commonplace in Greek culture, persistent in almost every *tyrannis*-narrative of the 5th century and before. Leaving aside the dubious metaphysical exegeses of this notion, we will find that in most relevant contexts, in accordance with the lexical definitions, it denotes wanton insults and arbitrary violence of the tyrant towards his subjects, which, in turn, invites retaliation.²⁴ Thus, as noted by Fornara:²⁵

²¹ μέλλουσαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἀδελφὴν κανη[φ]ορεῖν Παναθηναίους ἐκώλυσεν λοιδορήσας τι τὸν Ἀρμόδιον ὡς μαλακὸν ὄντα (*AP* 18); the motif of the direct insult offered to Harmodius is found only in this account (cf. P.J. Rhodes: *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia*. Oxford 1983, p. 231).

²² It is frequently assumed, however, that the dialogue is nonetheless classical (cf. V. Wohl: *Love among the Ruins. The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens*. Princeton 2002, p. 215, n. 1) and belongs to the Socratic tradition (cf. Plato, *Oeuvres Complètes*, v. 13.2: *Dialogues suspects*, texte établi et traduit par J. Souilhé. Paris 1930, pp. 54ff).

²³ λέγεται δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν χαριεστέρων ἀνθρώπων καὶ ὁ θάνατος αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι οὐ δι’ ἃ οἱ πολλοὶ αἰτήθησαν, διὰ τὴν τῆς ἀδελφῆς ἀτιμίαν τῆς κανηφορίας – ἐπεὶ τοῦτό γε εὔηθες – ἀλλὰ τὸν μὲν Ἀρμόδιον γεγόνενα παιδικὰ τοῦ Ἀριστογείτονος κτλ. (*Hipparch.* 229c); the motif of homoerotic rivalry was also known to Thucydides (see above).

²⁴ ἔστω δὴ ὀργὴ ὄρεξις μετὰ λύπης τιμωρίας [φαινομένης] διὰ φαινομένη ὀλιγωρίαν (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1378a); τρία ἔστιν εἶδη ὀλιγωρίας, καταφρόνησις τε καὶ ἐπερειασμός καὶ ὕβρις [...] καὶ ὁ ὕβριζων δὲ ὀλιγορεῖ (1378b; see also *Top.* VIII. 1. 156a 32–33 and *Anim.* I. 1. 403a–b1); on the use and abuse of *hybris* in literary criticism cf. M. Vickers: *Towards Greek Tragedy. Drama, Myth, Society*. London 1973, pp. 29ff.

²⁵ Ch.W. Fornara: “The ‘Tradition’ about the Murder of Hipparchus.” *Historia* 1968, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 405f; cf. his remark directly preceding the quoted passage: “Thucydides, such is his genius, makes us think that there is something shabby about them [sc. the tyrannicides] because they acted out of personal motives; he creates the impression that ‘real’ tyrannicides would have been moved to make their attempt in a more exalted cause. What cause? We forget, because of Thucydides’ pleading, that only the second Brutus toppled a tyranny out of devotion to an abstract ideal. Thucydides has managed to condemn Harmodius and Aristogeiton for not having acted out of political and ideological considerations *not even formulated until Thucydides’ own time* [JK]”; cf. also Berve, *Tyrannis* 1.359f; J.F. McGlew: *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece*. Ithaca 1993, p. 152.

[T]yrannies fell from τιμωρία, from chastisement of arbitrary actions of ὕβρις as a consequence of fear in reaction to contempt. «Personal motives» bring out the formation of conspiracies, the action of tyrannicides and the fall of tyrants.

This observation is, in fact, a very traditional one, already articulated by Aristotle in his *Politics*, where it is, incidentally, exemplified (among others) by the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton:

For many subjects turn against one-man rule because of injustice, fear and contempt – and as for injustice foremostly because of *hubris* – sometimes also due to the seizure of their possessions. [...] Of the attacks [against one-man rule], some are directed against the ruler himself, some against his power. The former originate from *hybris*, which, though varying in nature, always leads to anger, and those acting on anger almost always attack the ruler for the sake of revenge (τιμωρίας χάριν), not of ambition. Thus for example the [attack] on the Pisistratidae in revenge for the insult to Harmodius's sister and the outrage offered to himself (for Harmodius took revenge for his sister, Aristogeiton for Harmodius). (Ar., *Pol.* 1311a 25–39)

Tyranny, *hubris* and revenge thus form a causal chain in Aristotle's political theory, eventually leading to the killing of the tyrant and to the overthrow of his rule. The intertwining of tyrannicide and revenge, however, was not necessarily a product of a deep historical and historiosophical inquiry. On the contrary, this motif seems to have been current in various narratives of the classical period, testimony to which may be found in the lost treatise of Phainias (one of Aristotle's pupils and a compatriot of the learned Theophrastus) on the "Slaying of Tyrants from Revenge,"²⁶ a "vast and systematically arranged compilation of concrete historical examples of violent acts of revenge and anecdotes related to them." Unfortunately, only a few scraps remain of this vast study; even among those, however, a story bearing a striking resemblance to the Athenian tyrannicide myth has been preserved.²⁷ An unnamed tyrant of Heraclea²⁸ was slain in the context of another homoerotic rivalry over the affections of a young boy...

A careful scanning and evaluation of tyrannicides' motives – epitomized in Plutarch – appears to have been irrelevant to the early Greek appreciation of this

²⁶ τυράννων ἀναίρεσις ἐκ τιμωρίας (FGrH 1012, F 3–6)

²⁷ FGrH 1012, F 5 = Parthenius (*Erotica pathemata*) 7.

²⁸ A marginal note in one of the manuscripts of Parthenius gives him the name Archelaos (cf. F. Jacoby: *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker Continued*. Part 4: *Biography and Antiquarian Literature*. Ed. by G. Schepens. Leiden 1998, p. 304; see also Berve, *Tyrannis*).

phenomenon. Just like *hybris* is inherently bound with tyranny, with its celebrated Sophoclean epitome: “*hybris* breeds the tyrant,”²⁹ so does tyrannicide seem inseparable from vengeance. That such an avenger-tyrannicide should also be regarded as the saviour of the polis is hardly inconceivable. Such was, of course, the ancient appraisal of Harmodius’ and Aristogeiton’s deed, unmistakably hinted in a couplet quoted by Hephaestio as Simonides’ and identified by Meritt as a dedicatory epigram inscribed on the base of the tyrannicide-monument:³⁰

Truly great light shined upon (φώς γένετο) the Athenians when Aristogeiton and Harmodius killed Hipparchus.³¹

Light is deliverance; this association, still vivid and intelligible, marked its presence in Greek though even from the earliest periods.³² The Greek tyrant-slayer is an avenger and a saviour at once.

Back to Thebes...

Is indeed the Euripidean Heracles – the avenging tyrannicide – a saviour? He manages to deliver his loved ones from the clutches of Lycus only to kill them himself, in a terrible, god-sent reversal. His household, threatened first by the

²⁹ ὕβρις φντεύει τύραννον (*OT* 872); Dawe (cf. Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex*. Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by R. Dawe. Cambridge 1982, pp. 182f) prints Blaydes’ emendation, according to the traditional and commonsense understanding: ὕβριν φντεύει τυραννίς; cf. however H. Lloyd-Jones, N.G. Wilson: *Sophoclea. Studies on the Text of Sophocles*. Oxford 1990, p. 100 and their *Sophocles: Second Thoughts*. Göttingen 1997, p. 58.

³⁰ B.D. Meritt: “Greek Inscriptions.” *Hesperia* 1936, vol. 5, pp. 355f, D.L. Page: *Further Greek Epigrams*. Cambridge 1981, pp. 186ff (ad loc.), both linking it with the later Critius-Neisiotes (477/6) tyrannicide-group than with the first of Antenor (510/9); cf. also J.H. Molyneux: *Simonides. A Historical Study*. Wauconda 1992, p. 72.

³¹ ἦ μέγ’ Ἀθηναίοισι φώς γένεθ’, ἦνίκ’ Ἄριστο- | γείτων’ Ἰππαρχον κτείνει καὶ Ἀρμόδιος.

³² K. Raaf laub: “Zeus Eleutherios, Dionysus the Liberator, and the Athenian Tyrannicides: Anachronistic Uses of Fifth-Century Political Concepts.” In: *Polis and Politics. FS M.H. Hansen*. Eds. P. Flenste-Jensen, T. Heine Nielsen, L. Rubinstein. Copenhagen 2000, p. 264 (on the present passage); D. Tarrant: “Greek Metaphors of Light.” *CQ* 1960, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 183 (“light connotes salvation, glory, virtue”); cf. *Il.* 18.102; *E. Med.* 482 (φάος σωτήριον); *A. Ag.* 522 with: Aeschylus: *Agamemnon*. Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by E. Fraenkel. Vols. 1–3. Oxford 1950, 2.265f (ad loc.); *S. El.* 1354; *E. Or.* 243 with: Euripides: *Orestes*. Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by C.W. Willink. Oxford 1986, p. 125; and: Euripides: *Orestes*. Ed. with Translation and Commentary by M.L. West. Warminster 1987, p. 197; G.O. Hutchinson: *Greek Lyric Poetry. A Commentary on Selected Larger Pieces*. Oxford 2001, p. 82 (ad Alc. PMGF 1.40–1.49); Euripides: *Bacchae*. Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by E.R. Dodds. Oxford 1960, pp. 152, 608; Wilamowitz, *Herakles* 2.125, 177; Bond, *Heracles* 201.

tyrant, is ultimately destroyed by his own hand. There is even more symmetric irony in this violent turn of violence. As we have already seen, the death of Lycus was to be more than just a simple and swift dispatchment of the usurper and tyrant.³³

Since now is the time to put my hand to work, I shall go first and raze the house of the new rulers (*kainōn tyrannōn*), and after cutting off his impious head throw it out as dogs' fodder.

The house of the tyrant is to be razed to the ground, and his mutilated body – cast out unburied. These two motifs – razing of the house (*kataskaphē*) and denial of burial (*ataphia*) – are familiar forms of extreme punishment meted out for the most serious offences in various ancient Greek narratives. Including tyranny.³⁴ The “house” of course, to use Plutarch’s words, was not to be considered merely a “construction of clay and wood,” but in the first place a living social unit:³⁵ a “construction” of the people who formed it, united by ties of kinship. Little do we know of the fate of Lycus’ house seen in this light. Yet another house, however, is seen in this tragedy in detail, as it quite literally crumbles before our eyes.³⁶ The house of Heracles.

The moral of this turn of events seems inscrutable. Quite like the entire theodicy in tragedy – or at least in Euripides. We need not seek an ethical explanation to the hero’s terrible downfall. Two houses are razed to the ground: that of the tyrant and that of Heracles. Those of the two “factions” at war with each other: that of the killer and that of the victim, whose vengeance the former fears and seeks to forestall. All the while the city is in turmoil, in the midst of civil strife (*stasis*), which elevated Lycus to power. A strife, which does not appear to end with the death of the tyrant. This is one of the more startling features of Heracles’ revenge-

³³ ἐγὼ δέ, νῦν γὰρ τῆς ἐμῆς ἔργων χερός, | πρώτον μὲν εἶμι καὶ κατασκάψω δόμους, | καινῶν τυράννων, κρᾶτα δ’ ἀνόσιον τεμῶν | ῥίψω κυνῶν ἔλκημα (565–568); Kraus (“Dangerous Supplements: Etymology and Genealogy in Euripides” *Heracles*.” *PCPS* 1998, vol. 44) points to both dramatic and theatrical parallels between the conduct of Heracles and Lycus.

³⁴ Cf. W.R. Connor: “The Razing of the House in Greek Society,” *TAPhA* 1985, vol. 115, in general; for κατασκαφή and ἀταφία as punishment of tyrants see Nic.Dam. *FGrH* 90 F 60 (Cypselus of Corinth; cf. W.R. Connor: “The Razing...,” p. 81), Plu. *Tim.* 22.1–3 (tyrants of Syracuse; W.R. Connor: “The Razing...,” p. 83). It is especially the mutilation, and not necessarily the denial of burial, that seems most transgressive in Heracles’ revenge (cf. W.R. Connor: “The Razing...,” p. 89); *ataphia* was in Athens employed against sacrileges and traitors; razing of a house reverberates later in the context of Heracles’ madness (861–866, 1053–1057) as noted by Connor (“The Razing...,” p. 89) and Th. Papadopoulou: *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy*. Cambridge 2005, p. 44.

³⁵ οἶκον δέ μοι δοκεῖς, ὦ Αἴσωπε, ταυτὶ τὰ πῆλινα καὶ ζύλινα καὶ κεραμεῦ στεγάματα νομίζεις, ὥσπερ εἰ κοχλίαν ἡγοῖο τὸ κέλυφος, ἀλλὰ μὴ τὸ ζῶιον. (*Mor.* 155b); I owe this quotation to W.R. Connor, “Razing...”

³⁶ θύελλα σείει δῶμα, συμπίπτει στέγη (*HF* 905).

cum-tyrannicide return: it does not bring salvation to the polis. On the contrary, it threatens it with further violence and carnage:³⁷

Those among the Kadmeians, whom I found treacherous, though treated well by me, with this victorious weapon I shall manhandle, and shooting the others (τοὺς δὲ) dispersed with feathered arrows I shall fill the whole Ismenos with the gore of the dead, and the white stream of Dirce will be darkened with blood.

Little did the polis care for its hero, when his family was in peril, and now it will pay dearly for its ingratitude. Both the wicked (*kakoi*) and the simply indifferent will be slaughtered. Eventually, in the fit of madness, he kills his family in a manner eerily resembling his previous threats against the ungrateful Theban citizenry. Two of his children and Megara are killed with a bow, scattered around the house, while his third son smitten with his club (*xylon*). Along with this the city is also, once again (*au*), threatened to be stirred (*anabakcheusei*) with murder (*phonos*), just as Heracles himself was stirred (*ebakcheuse*) – or at least appeared to be to his father – to violence with the gore (*phonos*) of Lycus and the others he killed along with him.³⁸ The *stasis* destroys both the *polis* and the household (*oikos*), following the pattern epitomized by Thucydides in his well-known description of the Corcyrean atrocities.

Back to Orestes...

“Behold the double tyranny of this land” – the first words of the Aeschylean Orestes upon the dead bodies of his mother and Aegisthus vividly articulate the political frame of his vengeance, already hinted in the opening of this paper. Throughout the *Oresteia* Clytemnestra and her lover are quite consistently represented as tyrants, both in deed and word. Thus, yet again, an essentially personal act, a violent satisfaction obtained for the death of the closest kin, is given the unmistakable colouring of tyrannicide. This is most vividly articulated by the Chorus rejoicing in the killing of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus:³⁹

³⁷ Καδμείων δ' ὄσους | κακοὺς ἐφηῦρον εὖ παθόντας ἐξ ἔμοῦ | τῶι καλλίνικῳ τῶιδ' ὄπλοι χειρώσομαι, | τοὺς δὲ πτερωτοῖς διαφορῶν τοξεύμασιν | νεκρῶν ἅπαντ' Ἴσμηνὸν ἐμπλήσω φόνου, | Δίρκης τε νᾶμα λευκὸν αἰμαχθήσεται. (*HF* 568–573); the “victorious weapon” (καλλίνικον ὄπλον) is Heracles’ club (ξύλον).

³⁸ ἢ τάχα φόνον ἔτερον ἐπὶ φόνῳ βαλῶν | ἀν' αὐτὸν βακχεύσει Καδμείων πόλιν (*HF* 1085f); οὐ τί που φόνος σ' ἐβάκχευσεν νεκρῶν | οὐδ' ἄρτι καίνεις (*HF* 966f).

³⁹ ἐλευθερώσας πᾶσαν Ἀργείων πόλιν, | δυσὶν δρακόντων εὐπετῶς τεμῶν κᾶρα (1046f); the MS reading (adopted by West) ἐλευθερώσας has a causal/temporal participle in the place of a finite verb (ἠλευθερώσας; Blomfield’s emendation).

You have liberated the entire polis of the Argives, as you have swiftly cut off the heads of two serpents.

The city has been delivered from the tyranny of the usurpers. This, however, is hardly the case for the *house* of Orestes, as the very same chorus makes it plain just a moment later:⁴⁰

See, this is now the third tempest (*cheimōn*) that has blown like a squall upon the royal house (*melathrois tois basileiois*), and come to an end. [...] And somehow now the third has come – a saviour (*sōtēr*) or doom (*moron*), should I say?

The last word is yet to be said. And it belongs to Athena – in the third part of the trilogy. With the vote she casts, Orestes himself is once and for all liberated, delivered from the Furies, and from the fury of doom (*menos atas*), tearing apart his family for generations.⁴¹ And along with him – his entire household. “O Pallas, O savior (*sōsasa*) of my house!” – are the hero’s first words after the verdict.

In Sophocles the political dimension of Orestes’ (and Electra’s) revenge appears to be comparatively underplayed. Though modern critics are quite generous in applying the terms “tyrant,” “tyranny” and “tyrannicide” to the events and characters of this *Electra*, this tendency might unduly inflate an issue not given so *explicit* an emphasis here, as in the Aeschylean trilogy.⁴² Indeed, the first speech of Aegisthus following the false news of Orestes’ death rings on a clearly despotic tune:⁴³

I tell you to open the doors and to reveal the sight [of Orestes’ alleged remains] to all the Myceneans and the Argives, so that if anyone was previously buoyed up by vain hopes centered on this man, he may now see him a corpse and accept my bridle (*stomia*), and not need violent chastisement from me to teach him sense.

⁴⁰ ὄδε τοι μελάθροις τοῖς βασιλείοις τρίτος αὖ χειμῶν πνεύσας γονίας ἐτελέσθη [...] νῦν δ’ αὖ τρίτος ἤλθε ποθεν σωτήρ – ἢ μόρον εἶπω; (*Cho.* 1065–1074).

⁴¹ ποῖ δῆτα κρανεῖ, ποῖ καταλήξει μετακομισθὲν μένος Ἄτης (*Cho.* 1075f); on *atē* in Aeschylus see R.E. Doyle: *Ate. Its Uses and Meaning*. Fordham 1984, pp. 49–93.

⁴² Juffras (“Sophocles’ *Electra* 973–985 and Tyrannicide.” *TAPhA* 1991, vol. 121) has made her point in arguing that the imaginary praise in 947–989 may have evoked the myth of the tyrannicides; even this allusion, however, appears far removed from the explicitly political proclamation of tyrannicide in the *Libation Bearers*; an example of abusing the motif of tyranny in interpreting Sophocles’ *Electra* is L. MacLeod (*Dolos and Dike in Sophocles’ Elektra*. Leiden 2001); cf. the criticism of P.J. Finglass (“Is There a Polis in Sophocles’ *Electra*?.” *Phoenix* 2005, vol. 60).

⁴³ οἶγεν πύλας ἄνωγα κἀναδεικνύναι | πᾶσιν Μυκηναίοισιν Ἀργείοις θ’ ὄρᾶν | ὡς εἴ τις αὐτῶν ἐλπῖσιν κεναιῖς πάρος | ἐξήηρετ’ ἀνδρὸς τοῦδε, νῦν ὄρᾶν νεκρὸν | στόμα δέχεται τὰμά, μηδὲ πρὸς βίαν | ἐμοῦ κολαστοῦ προστυχῶν φύσῃ φρένας. (*El.* 1458–1463; trans. H. Lloyd-Jones).

The Argives' longing for Orestes' return, contrasted with bridles (*stomia*) cur-tailing their speech and the threats of violence (*bia*), make it clear enough that Aegisthus' is not the rule they want. A shunned monarch, exercising his power without justice (*pera dikēs*) and using outrage (*hybris*) towards others, including the closest of kin – such are, from another side, the reproaches of Electra leveled against her mother.

And yet the polis appears surprisingly infrequently in the context of Orestes' revenge and of the transgressions of his victims. On the contrary it is not the city, but the miseries of the house that seem to be the main focus here. Even the chorus, though consisting here of citizen-women (*politides*), hardly ever speaks “politically” (*politikōs* – to use Aristotle's poetic category); in this they sharply differ from the politically engaged – though thrice excluded through its dramatic identity – chorus of the *Choephoroi*. In the *Electra* the conflict is in the first place a domestic one. As observed by Segal:⁴⁴

In its evil and suffering, house dwarfs city. The chorus cries out, O City (1413), but all the force of the passage rests with the house. The chorus' hopeful evoca-tion of the glorious land of the Mycenaeans early in the play (161–162) or Aeg-isthus' authoritarian reference to all the Mycenaeans and Argives near the end (1459) gives us little concrete impression of the larger political entity. The public landmarks given in the prologue – the temples, the agora – are overshadowed by the ominous ‘much-destroying’ house of the Pelopids as Orestes' goal (1016).

As with the conflict so with the deliverance, the emphasis appears to rest upon the household and its members rather than on the polis. Orestes is the light (*phōs*) and deliverance (*sōtēria*) of Electra (in the latter locus also of Chrysothemis), and the saviour of the house of Agamemnon (*sōtēr domōn*).⁴⁵ In *Electra*'s imaginary enco-mium, which may betray some allusions to the motif of tyrannicide, both she and her sister are praised by the *city* as those who saved (*exesōsatēn*) their... house-hold (*patrōios oikos*).⁴⁶ Her fierce resolve to stand against Aegisthus is focused on personal honour and glory.⁴⁷ However, when the polis finally does come into the picture, its fate is seen to be congruent with that of the household. Perhaps indeed the latter is to be seen as a “microcosm” of the former:⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ch. Segal: *Tragedy and Civilization. An Interpretation of Sophocles*. Norman 21999 (1981), p. 225; πολιτίδες: El. 1227; for πολιτικῶς (as opposed ῥητορικῶς of later tragedians) cf. Ar. *Po.* 1450b.

⁴⁵ φίλτατον φῶς (El. 1223, 1354); ἐκ κείνου σωτήρια (924f); σωτήρ δόμων (1354).

⁴⁶ ὃ τὸν πατρώιον οἶκον ἐξεσωσάτην (978); for this encomium cf. Juffras, *Sophocles' Electra* and above.

⁴⁷ On 1320f, she is said either to “die honourably” or to “save herself with honour” (*kalōs esōs' emautēn*).

⁴⁸ ὃ πόλις, ὃ γενεὰ τάλαινα, νῦν σοι | μοῖρα καθαμερία φθίνει φθίνει (El. 1413f; trans. H. Lloyd-Jones); cf. Jebb: *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments*. With Critical Notes, Commentary

O City, O Unhappy race, now the fate that was yours from day to day is dying dying!

Reading this passage is fraught with difficulties,⁴⁹ though the conjunction of the *polis* and the *genea* – be it for the good or for the bad – appears to be free of any doubt. What comes with the killing of Aegisthus is indeed the deliverance and liberation of the entire *polis*. What is explicitly stated, however, by the Chorus of Mycenaean *politides*, is the liberation of the “seed of Atreus”:⁵⁰

Seed of Atreus, after many sufferings you have at last emerged in freedom (*eleutherias*), made complete by this day’s enterprise.

The last word is given to the household.

Hamlet from Messenia

Quite probably the tragedy making the most of all the motifs discussed so far, binding them together in a closely wrought, coherent plot was the lost Euripidean *Cresphontes*. The vindictive aspect of the story is quite straightforward. It is, in fact, the ancient but hardly acknowledged predecessor of *Hamlet*, with only some marginal differences. Polyphontes has killed his brother, Cresphontes senior, the king of Messenia, along with his two older sons, and married the victim’s wife (this he did, unlike in Shakespeare, against her will). The third son, his father’s namesake, as an infant was smuggled away to his maternal grandfather in Arcadia. Upon reaching manhood, Cresphontes (junior) returns to his land to take revenge on Polyphontes and reclaim his hereditary kingdom. The vindictive aspect of the plot, clear enough from the very arrangement of events, is explicitly underlined

and Translation by R.C. Jebb, part VI: *The Electra*. Cambridge 1894, pp. 188f: “The words ὦ πόλις, ὦ γενεά express the feeling of these πολίτιδες that the cause of the house is that of the city. They hail the approaching deliverance of Mycenae from the tyrants.”

⁴⁹ Thus Jebb, *Electra* 188 (ad loc.): “The μοῖρα καθαμερία is the fate which has afflicted the house day by day. [...] This fate is now being extinguished (φθίνει) by the righteous act of vengeance”; cf. also Sophocles: *Electra*. Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by P.J. Finglass. Cambridge 2007, p. 516; Sophocles: *Electra*. Translation with Notes and Introduction by H.M. Roisman. Newburyport 2008, p. 88; Kells’ reading (Sophocles: *Electra*. Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by J.H. Kells. Cambridge 1973, p. 220, ad loc.) is based on a hopelessly twisted hypothesis, a remote echo, perhaps, of the riddle of Sphinx (“I take the meaning to be that the house of Pelops has a ‘daily’ lot, which waxes in the morning, reaches its zenith at noon and wanes in the evening”).

⁵⁰ ὦ σπέρμ’ Ἀτρέως, ὡς πολλὰ παθὼν | δι’ ἐλευθερίας μόλις ἐξήλθεσ | τῆι νῦν ὀρμηῆι τελεωθέν (*El.* 1508ff; trans. H. Lloyd-Jones).

both in the testimonia⁵¹ and in the text of the play itself, which makes frequent mention – albeit in an inconclusive context – of *echthra*, presumably that of Cresphontes and Polyphontes, along with which we also hear of the anticipated act of vengeance (*antiteisetai*).⁵²

Despite the scant knowledge of the text and structure of the play, it does give a clear picture of the political dimension of Polyphontes' rule – and of the political dimension of his death as well. In the first place there is the coup d'état: the killing of Cresphontes senior, the legitimate king and the founder (*ktistēr*) of Messenia; the wording of the most relevant passage here – uttered by the generic *senex*, who explains to the young hero the doom of his father – may also be revealing:⁵³

By violence and deceit, so that he might rule (*tyranneuoi*) the land.

Though, as already mentioned, the mere presence of notion *tyrannos* and its cognates is anything but decisive, in the context of a violent usurpation it may seem ring on an unmistakably sinister note.⁵⁴ In his quest for power Polyphontes, furthermore, kills his own kin, his own brother along with his two older nephews;⁵⁵ in his search for the victim's youngest son, Cresphontes junior, like the Euripidean Aegisthus, he promises a reward in gold,⁵⁶ which in turn may point to the “tyrannical” trait of the abuse of money.⁵⁷ His mistrust however extends beyond the circle of his family, as he is said to be “unjust towards strangers,”⁵⁸ which contrasts him starkly with the hospitable, even if insincere, Euripidean Aegisthus.⁵⁹ Along with the previous tyrannical trait (abuse of gold) this one is brilliantly integrated into the plot, since Cresphontes Junior, acting incognito eventually gains Polyphontes'

⁵¹ Ut exsequatur patris et fratrum mortem (Hyg. 137.3 = T 5 Harder); ὄψε, [...] ἦκε [...] προσαμύνων (A.P. 3.5.6 = T 7 Harder).

⁵²]εις ἐχθροὺς ἔχει |]ας ἀντιτέσεται[ι (fr. 448a.40 Kn.); οὐκ ἔστι τό[λ]μης τῆς δ' ὀπως ἀφ᾽ἐξομ[αι | σὺν μητρὶ [τ]ὸν ἐμὸν ἐχθρὸν ὥστε μὴ [κτανεῖν (fr. 448a69f Kn.).

⁵³ βίαι δολῶσας, ὡς τυραννεύοι χθονός. (fr. 448a.49 Kn.); κτιστήρᾳ γ' ὄντα τῆσδε γῆς Μεσσηνία[ς (fr. 448a19 Kn.).

⁵⁴ Cf. A., *Ag.* 1355, 1365, 1633; see also Euripides: *Medea*. Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by D.J. Mastronarde. Cambridge 2002, p. 185 (ad E. *Med.* 119); Euripides: *Medea*. Ed. with Introduction and Commentary by D.L. Page. Oxford 1938, pp. 98f (ad E. *Med.* 348).

⁵⁵ οὐκ, ἀλλὰ δισσοὺς συγκ[ατέ]κτεινεν κόρους (fr. 448a.24f Kn.); apparently, like Lycus in the *HF*, “to extinguish vengeance (φόνον) with murder (φόνωι).”

⁵⁶ Hunc Polyphontes maxima cum industria quaerebat, aurumque pollicebatur si quis eum necasset (Hgn. 137.2).

⁵⁷ This is the first of the three tyrannical characteristics proposed by Seaford (2003: 96ff), see above.

⁵⁸ μ[ὲν ἄδικο]ς οἴκων δε[σ]πότης περὶ ξένους; (fr. 448a.13 Kn.).

⁵⁹ Noted by Harder (*Euripides' Kresphontes and Archelaos*. Introduction, Text and Commentary by A. Harder. Leiden 1985, p. 16); on the alleged insincerity of the Euripidean Aegisthus, cf. A. Pippin Burnett: *Revenge...*, pp. 233ff.

trust introducing himself as his own killer. Like the Euripidean Aegisthus finally – and, for that matter, Hipparchus the Peisistratid of both popular and historical tradition – Polyphontes is killed during a ritual (*cum rem divinam faceret*), and apparently in the proper victim’s stead.⁶⁰

The *sōtēria* pattern is far less explicit in the fragments we possess, though the very outline of the plot is enough to conjecture that in killing Polyphontes the eponymous hero saves both himself – from death (since a reward has been put on his head) and his mother – from sleeping with the enemy. So much for the *oikos*; the *polis*, however, may have stood more prominently in this particular revenge, as one may be entitled to judge from the choral “ode to Peace”:⁶¹

O Peace, abundant in riches, most fair of all the blessed gods, how long I for you, as you tarry. I fear that old age will overcome me with troubles, before I see your graceful time and the songs of beautiful choruses and the garland-adorned revels; may you come, o queen, to my polis. But keep the hateful Strife (*Stasis*) away from the houses and the raging Quarrel (*Eris*), who delights in sharp swords.

Despite Euripides’ notoriety for introducing irrelevant choral parts,⁶² this particular passage is unanimously considered to “refer to the action” of the play.⁶³ What exactly does it refer to, however, is anything but clear. It is more likely to concern a civil strife than mere domestic quarrel, if so, however, the *stasis* is represented here as actually taking place. Perhaps quite like the one ravaging Thebes during and after the death of the tyrant – Lycus.⁶⁴ It may, however, also refer to

⁶⁰ “[...] hospes falso simulavit se hostiam percussisse, eumque interfecit”; on the similarities of Polyphontes with Lycus from *HF* and Aegisthus in *Electra* cf. Euripides: *Selected Fragmentary Plays*. With Introductions, Translations and Commentaries by C. Collard, M.J. Cropp and K.H. Lee. Vol. 1. Warminster 1995, p. 125; T.B.L. Webster: *The Tragedies of Euripides*. London 1967, p. 141.

⁶¹ εἰρήνα βαθύπλουτε καὶ | καλλίστα μακάρων θεῶν | ζῆλος μοι σέθεν ὡς χρονίζεις. | δέδια δὲ μὴ πρὶν πόνοις | ὑπερβάλλῃ με γῆρας, | πρὶν σὰν προσιδεῖν χαρίεσσαν ὥραν | καὶ καλλιχόρους ἀοιδᾶς | φιλοστεφάνους τε κώμους | ἴθι μοι, πότνια, πόλιν. | τὰν δ’ ἐχθρὰν Στάσιν εἶργ’ ἀπ’ οἴ-| κων τὰν μαινομένην τ’ Ἔριν | θηκτῶι τερπομένην σιδάρωι. (fr. 453 Kn).

⁶² *Ar. Po.* 1456a27; D.J. Mastrorade: *The Art of Euripides. Dramatic Technique and Social Context*. Cambridge 2010, pp. 116–152.

⁶³ Harder, *Kresphontes – Archelaos* 102 (with an overview of previous discussions on this subject, 102f); cf. Collard – Cropp – Lee, *Euripides... Fragmentary* 144.

⁶⁴ Thus e.g. Jouan – V. Looy (Euripide, *Tragédies*, Vol. VIII : *Fragments*, Vols. 1–4, texte établi et traduit par F. Jouan et H.V. Looy. Paris 2002–2003, 2.269): “[il] pourrait trouver sa place dans un chant lyrique après l’élimination de l’usurpateur”; their subsequent reading “le chœur espère que la discorde dans la cité prendra fin” however is quite at odds with the despair pervading the first part of the ode; Harder (*Kresphontes – Archelaos* 103) juxtaposes this passage with *HF* 568ff, arguing however that it seems unlikely to refer to a *stasis* which has originated after the tyrannicide since “(1) all testimonia suggest that all was well as soon as Polyphontes was killed, (2) what is

Polyphontes' tyranny itself. As such they would fit in the parodos, as argued by Webster, expressing thus the thought that "the whole city is upset by the strife between Polyphontes and those like Merope who are loyal to the memory of the old Kresphontes."⁶⁵ It might be tempting, however, to locate this passage right before the death blow is dealt to the tyrant, congruent with the incertitude and ambivalence of many other choral songs, which accompany the tyrant's and/or villain's last way, as he is led offstage to be killed.⁶⁶ After years of tyranny the chorus longs for peace, which it despairs to ever see; with the tyrannicide at hand, however, things, as usual, threaten to get worse, hence the apotropaic appeal to keep *stasis*, delighting in violence, away.

Conclusion

It is a truism to argue that the discourses of Greek tragedy are pervaded by the vindictive principle of "helping friends and harming enemies." A more promising approach is to explore how this essentially positive injunction, far from being simply reaffirmed, was instead problematized on the tragic stage. In this paper I have attempted to show that even apparently unproblematic, straightforward plots of revenge (*Cyclops*, *Heracles*, *Cresphontes*) present us with complex dramatic phenomena, where retribution for wrong is closely intertwined with the motif of deliverance, which in turn, in the social context of the polis, may acquire the political dimension of liberation from tyranny, or, on a more sinister note, civil strife (*stasis*). The uneasy relationship between these three phenomena brings out even further the tragic dynamics of those plays, where revenge as such appears to be a choice far from obvious (the Orestes saga).

expressed in this ode is a longing for Peace, who is slow to come and such a disre strongly suggests a strife which had already lasted for some time."

⁶⁵ Webster, *Tragedies* 141, cf. Harder above.

⁶⁶ *HF* μεταβολὰ κακῶν, 735; *El.* ἀμοιβαὶ κακῶν; cf. S., *El.* 1387–1394.