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CHAPTER 1

Dignity in Homer and Classical Greece

Patrice Rankine



War is war, but dinner should be served on time.

—UKRAINIAN SAYING

Woven into the distress of Homeric epic, which often laments the terrors of war, the violence of passion, and the desperation of life, are records of ancient customs that hint at a deep respect for culture and human worth. To take but one example, recall Hector's refusal to take wine from his mother when he is bloody from battle. This moment is apt to strike modern readers as trivial. In fact, it reifies important ancient distinctions between war and peace, home and battlefield, and the equally ancient sentiment that to everything, there is a season. In this case, no matter what has occurred in war in Homer's *Iliad*, the poem makes clear there is a time to put away unrest, eat together, and, afterward, revere humanity. That is, there is an injunction to make space for acting in ways that acknowledge mutual value. Thus a

repeated formula throughout the epics to affirm that “after they [often male warriors] had put away their desire for eating and drinking,” then comes a time for the bard’s entertainment, games, or strategic discussions (e.g., book 12.310).¹ As Jasper Griffin describes this element of the epics, “Eating together is a universal mark of union, creating a bond.”²

Given such a framework, one begins to wonder whether a concept of human dignity existed as early as Homeric society (twelfth through the eighth centuries BCE). Admittedly, there are reasons to balk. Homeric Greeks engaged in ruthless war and acts of pillage, and at times mundanely bought and sold persons at a price, as slaves. Moreover, nowhere do the epics offer anything like explicit, formal criteria of human worth that could be aligned easily to our contemporary western notion of dignity. Homeric epics do not speak explicitly of an inherent or unearned moral status, which status all humans share equally, and which is supposed to ground fundamental human rights or protections.³ Nevertheless, I shall argue that the epics do describe an array of social practices that can be understood as precursors to such formalized criteria. Normative practices, such as sacrifice and reverence for the gods and the treatment of others, demonstrated in such moments as mealtime, suggest that there was indeed a sense in which individuals were “raised above all price,” to borrow the Kantian language for human dignity (AK 4:434).

To make this argument, it will be worth framing my chapter in terms of one specific claim regarding human dignity, namely, that dignity culminates in protections through law or through universal declaration, for example, as is true in the Universal Declaration of Human

1 For all translations, I have used a combination of my own reading of the Greek, along with some aspects that I like from Richmond Lattimore, western’s translation, Stanley Lombardo’s, and the Loeb translation by A. T. Murray.

2 Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

3 In speaking of “formal” criteria, I’m alluding to Remy Debes’s distinction between substantive and formal claims of human dignity. Remy Debes, “Dignity’s Gauntlet,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2003): 52.

Rights of 1948. Now, on the one hand, some have thought declarations like these to be mere historical contingencies because dignity itself is contingent. Leonard Harris makes such an argument in his critique of postcoloniality.⁴ For Harris, postcolonial theorists would make claims like this to restore historically “impotent agents”—blacks, women, non-Europeans—with a kind of dignity, as if dignity itself were not always contingent (255). Harris argues that there are only “casual agents” within contingent contexts, and thus even seeming fundamental moral “truths” like human dignity are correspondingly limited (254). On the other hand, of course, many others think declarations of fundamental protections and rights reflect an important reality about the “true” inner worth of humans.⁵ But which side of this particular debate is correct doesn’t concern me here. For my purposes, it suffices to highlight the tendency to run together the existence of a concept of dignity with its explicit enshrinement in something like a formal declaration of rights. I will show that this tendency risks misleading us when it comes to the Greeks. Thus, consider my hypothesis again, now reformulated: The Greeks *expressed* a belief in human dignity. Although they made no explicit (or philosophical) claim such as the Universal Declaration asserts, they endorsed what Remy Debes calls a “substantive” concept of dignity implicitly in practice; that is, they *treated* human nature as being something that made it the basis of a fundamental worth or status, though they did not theorize about the

4 Leonard Harris, “Honor, Eunuchs, and the Postcolonial Subject,” in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (New York: Blackwell, 1997), 252–59. I am grateful to Professor Harris for reading a draft of this chapter and suggesting improvements.

5 As the prevailing view, examples of this alternative claim are in the offing. Thus, consider that “post-human” theories now speak of the “indignity” that we, as human subjects, might someday avoid by using technological advancement to overcome disease, deprivation, decay, and even death. These post-human theories strike many as wrongheaded precisely because they turn on a basic misunderstanding of what dignity is. As Charles T. Rubin argues, such an approach takes a “contemptuous attitude to what we actually are” (161), as if to be limited in any way is to suffer the loss of dignity (making a “dignified death” an oxymoron). Charles T. Rubin, “Human Dignity and the Future of Man,” in *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, ed. Edmund D. Pellegrino, Adam Schulman, and Thomas W. Merrill (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), 155–72.

general conceptual features of that status.⁶ In particular, they typically did not see the dishonor of others—such as non-Greeks or enemies—in terms of either impotence (as one might see an orphan in ancient times) or the hyperhuman (giants, Cyclops, etc., which also is to deny humanity to an other). On the contrary, the Greeks asserted a substance of dignity to be offered to others, even to those unlike themselves. The substance of this dignity is a precursor to a formal claim such as Kant's.

To be perfectly clear, then, the goal is not to argue for some hitherto unnoticed explicit *doctrine* of dignity in Greek thought. Despite the formalization of so many philosophical concepts by ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, human dignity was not one of them.⁷ Indeed, there is simply no succinct language for such a concept. The Greek adjective *axios* is the closest approximation to the Latin word that will come to be translated as “dignity,” *dignus* (adjective), or *dignitas* (abstract noun) (which itself does not go as far as a universal or legal claim).⁸ And yet the word *axios*, derived from the verb *agō*, “lead,” “carry,” “hold,” has to do with the value *given* to persons and things, as with “worth” in English. It is no surprise, then, that what has “worth” (*axios*) in Greek is something with an equivalence to other things, in terms of value. The advent of coinage in Greece allowed for a correspondence of the item of worth to a monetary value. Thus a diamond, of a certain monetary value, also has *worth* within society, in terms of those things with which it can be exchanged. And the same connotation of *axios* is applied to people in Homer. This is only a connotation because it is clear that human reason and emotions

6 See Debes's introduction to this volume.

7 See George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). When formalization of human dignity first occurred is as yet an open question and one being explored in this volume. The philosophical formalization might be attributed to Kant (see *Sensen* in this volume), but the legal claim of universal human dignity does not occur until after World War II, as LaVaque-Manty argues in this volume.

8 See Griffin in this volume.

differentiate us from inanimate things. At the same time, the listener hears that a handful of heroes are not worth—not equal in value to—Hector.⁹ The statement is an evaluation of Hector's military prowess and, from what we know of Hector throughout the poem, his own system of values, which prioritizes the gods, family, the city, and his fellow man. Because of these values, Hector is worth much to his city, Troy—more than money, more than other men. In short, persons, like material objects, have value in comparison to other objects—and even to other persons.¹⁰ Moreover, “worth” is cognate to the Sanskrit *vart-*, Latin *verteri*, “to turn,” which takes on the meaning of “to become,” as in changing or “turning” into something else. The link between “worth” and “becoming” (*verteri*, and also *ago*) already hints at *axios* in Greek as *not* an intrinsic value but as something one moves toward, something even earned, further buttressing a sense of value that comes about in relation to other things. *Axios* is thus not the equivalent to human dignity as that concept is generally understood today. Instead, *axios* points to the complex of words linked to human value in Homeric society. Such value is always contingent, comparative, not intrinsic. It might be argued that each individual *was* raised above price, such that a slave in Homer (Eumaeus) is understood to be (and to have been) noble. Conversely, a noble could become a slave. Yet there was no widespread threat to human dignity that necessitated the philosophical position.

Indeed, the Greek *axios* slowly became an attribute linked to social class or rank in society. By the fifth century, for example, abstract forms of *axios* (e.g., *axiōma* and *axiōsis*) began to appear in Herodotus and the playwrights and were clearly references to the “honor” or reputation of persons, making its ultimate meaning very close to the later

9 Liddell and Scott's entry for Homer 8.234.

10 The parallel passage cited in Liddell and Scott is from Herodotus, where Solon implicitly corrects Croesus's sense of what is valuable—namely, noble stock—for the worth of common Athenian youth, Cleobis and Biton, who sacrificed their lives by taking on the yoke of oxen to make sure their mother arrived at the temple of Delphi. See Herodotus 1.31–32. Whether their good behavior is a result of their Athenianness begs the question of human dignity, despite the emphasis on their low social standing that might evidence universal dignity.

Latin *dignus/dignitas*. *Dignus*, which is used in Latin much the way *axios* was used in Greek, stems from a complex of words having to do with appearance: Greek *doceō*, *doxa*, and Latin *decet*, *decus*, “seemly,” “comely,” derived from the Sanskrit word having to do with fame, *daḥ-as*. And obviously nothing in this family of meaning points to a sense of dignity as a moral worth or stature that transcends contingencies, with which a person might perhaps be born.

Despite the absence of a universal or formal claim to human dignity, however, or even the explicit language that would support such a claim, it would be a mistake to conclude that the substance of a concept of dignity did not exist in Homeric Greece. In other words, just because we don't find a *theory* of dignity in Homer, we should not think the *content* is completely absent. Dignity is a concept similar to what Orlando Patterson argues regarding “freedom,” in *Freedom in the Making of Western Civilization*, if only in the following respect: like freedom, dignity is a widespread human value that is not articulated, argued for, or formalized until extensive threats to it arise, along with the possibility of its loss.¹¹ Certainly honor can be lost in Patterson's analysis, and slavery brings its indignity. Here I am simply echoing Patterson's argument for “freedom” as that argument pertains to dignity: widespread threats to Greek freedom, according to Patterson, occur in the fifth century BCE, when the rise of chattel slavery suddenly made peoples vulnerable who hitherto had not faced the possibility of enslavement.¹² Although the Greeks (from 1600 BCE to at least the Hellenistic period) were not immune to violations of human dignity—which is to say, they did act in ways that today we would say violate dignity—still, there was no cultural catastrophe so devastating as to require its formal amplification *for all Greeks*, whether in legal or other discursive terms. The incidental slave, captured enemy, or fall of a city were not enough to cause these casual agents to come to a universal

11 Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Civilization* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

12 Patterson, *Freedom*.

formulation of what they had lost. Instead, human dignity is a substantive given, and it is evident in several respects, from Homeric epic through the classical period in Greece. In particular, it is literally *put into practice* throughout the literature from Homer to the playwrights.

Thus, while it might seem that the treatment of Achilles or Hector and their peers in Homeric epic stems only from their elevated status within society, their nobility, or their fame, I will argue that a close inspection of how the wider world is treated belies such a reading. Alongside the representation of these high-ranked individuals, the treatment of slaves, animals, and the material world shows that the value extended to the noble classes is to a great extent also afforded to others.

THE HOMERIC CONTEXT: ACHILLES'S TREATMENT OF HECTOR IN THE *ILLIAD*

The last book of Homer's *Iliad* has as its centerpiece a scene that is one of the most poignant expressions of human dignity. The eighth century BCE epic poem opens with Achilles's *menis*, a cursed (*oulomenên*) "anger" that "brought countless pains on the Achaians, and hurled the strong souls of many heroes into the depths." The immediate reason for Achilles's anger is that he feels he has suffered the violation of his honor (*timê*), his contextual claim as a chieftain, at the hands of Agamemnon, who has come to Troy on behalf of Agamemnon's brother Menelaus to retrieve Helen. In Homer, Helen is the cause of the conflict, whereas the classical Athenian historian Thucydides attributes the war to Agamemnon's ambition, which his formidable navy affirmed.¹³ Archaeological remains corroborate ongoing conflict at the site of Troy leading into the twelfth century BCE. Whatever the cause of the culminating battles, Homer allows a focus on a culture and its

¹³ See Thucydides 1.1–23.

values, the violation of which leads to Achilles's anger within the epic, poetic frame. This context allows for a focus on what human dignity might look like in the hands of the Greeks.

By the opening of book 1 of Homer's *Iliad*, the Greek forces have sacked the stronghold of Eëtion, and Agamemnon has taken as his war prize (*geras*) Chryseis, the daughter of a priest of Apollo. When her father Chryses comes to retrieve Chryseis, Agamemnon not only insults the holy man, but later threatens to take Achilles's *geras*, Briseis, should he be forced to return his. The threat to Achilles—of the loss of Briseis—is the first of a series of slights—perceived or real—to Achilles (breaches of his honor) in the *Iliad*. The audience soon discovers (later in book 1 and in book 9) that Achilles's excessive reaction is really about his own mortality, the poignancy of war revealing both the fundamentally human reality of impending death and the few consolations that living might bring in the meanwhile: the esteem that others can grant, rewards for our labor, trust in social, cultural, and legal processes, to name only a few. Charles Rubin's framework of the "hyperhuman" would see indignity in mortality and death itself; for the Greeks, the treatment of the person in light of these realities is where dignity is preserved.

If book 1 establishes the motif of Achilles's *menis*, then the twenty-fourth and final book of the *Iliad* resolves this central theme. Whatever the deeper causes, Achilles immediately refuses to fight the Trojans because of Agamemnon's theft of Briseis, and the result is the loss of the best warrior on the battlefield. The enemy brings fire to the ships of Achilles's forces, the Myrmidons, and this in turn incites Patroclus to enter the battle (in book 16), dressed as Achilles. In book 1 and throughout, we learn that along with Briseis, Patroclus is the only other person at Troy dear to Achilles; some aspects of the reception tradition (pottery, for example) even have Patroclus as Achilles's lover. The intimate friendship or love relationship sets up a catastrophic loss for Achilles when Hector, the most beloved of king Priam's fifty sons and the foremost fighter of the Trojans, kills Patroclus. Patroclus' death sets the stage for the central battle of the *Iliad*, that between Achilles

and Hector (book 22), which Achilles wins. By this point in the narrative, Achilles's cursed and overweening anger first at Agamemnon, then at Hector, but essentially a struggle with his own mortality—is such that he begins to drag the corpse of Hector around the city of Troy to exact vengeance for Patroclus's death. He drags Hector's body three times initially, when he first kills Hector, and continues to do so for twelve days. He refuses to eat or drink during that time.

My argument, in light of the foregoing summary, is that the violation of a substantive human dignity is evident in Achilles's implicit rejection of the idea of forgiveness and reconciliation. He would express remorse—or at least cessation of his activities—in his willingness to eat and to allow Hector's family to bury their son. Instead, he performs actions roundly repudiated throughout the culture, whether we look to the actions that the gods model, or normative behaviors that demonstrate where Achilles has gone wrong.

Book 24 opens with Achilles's wayward ritual, one that replaces the normative processes that preserve a sense of value (or dignity), practices of assembly, meals, and sleep:

Patroclus' funeral games were done, and the hosts scattered, each and every man going to his own ship. Surely they provided for food and delighted in sleep. Not Achilles. He wept at the memory of his beloved companion, nor did sleep that tames all take him, but he turned this way and that, longing for the manhood and valiant might of Patroclus. He wound through the memories of all he had done with Patroclus and all the pain he had borne. Achilles thought about his own experiences in men's wars in grievous waves. Remembering these things he would cry profusely, turning to and fro in his bed, now on his side, now on his back, and now on his face. Then again he would get up and roam along the shore of the sea, distraught.

At daybreak, as the sun shone over the sea and the beaches, he'd be ready. Every time, he would yoke his swift horses to the chariot,

and bind Hector behind the chariot and drag him. When he had hauled him three times around the dirt heap coving [Patroclus] the dead son of Menoetius, he would pause again in his tent, but he would allow Hector to be outstretched on his face down in the dirt.
(24.1-18)

Into this madness of Achilles's sacrilegious ritual enters Priam, an aged, wise, and highly esteemed ruler, to retrieve the body of his son. The fact of this juxtaposition of dead and living, defeated and victorious, is the crux of why the scene matters to the substantive discussion of human dignity. Dignity as a substantive virtue in Homeric society underpins the passage. Achilles has, for a time, ignored the ritual economy of war and peace—enemies, but human—and has violated the worth of his adversary. It is precisely a restoration of worth that Priam would seem to request. Thus, Priam slips unseen, with the help of the gods, who support the restoration of dignity, into enemy territory.¹⁴ Arriving at Achilles's hut, Priam "clasped in his hands [Achilles'] knees, and kissed his hands, the terrible (*deinas*), man-slaying hands that had slain his many sons."¹⁵

This phrasing of Priam's plea, along with many aspects of the passage, is easily read as a substantive entry into the subject of human dignity for the Greeks. In "Dignity's Gauntlet," Remy Debes cites the chorus of *Antigone* on the wondrousness of human beings, who are "*supremely* valuable." The use of *deinos*—which I translate above as "terrible"—in both the choral ode of *Antigone* and this passage is not accidental. "Many are the wonders," the *deina*, but none is more "terrible" or wondrous than the human being, as the chorus of *Antigone* puts it. Similar to the human being (*anthropos*) in the chorus of *Antigone*, Achilles's

14 I am perhaps evading an important aspect of the passage, namely the role of the gods in dignity and its restoration. I hope to handle this to some extent through the notion of reverence.

15 See Homer, *Iliad*, 24.478-79. As elsewhere, I here work from Murray's Loeb translation, adapting it based on my own interpretation of the Greek.

hands are not simply *deinas* because of the terrible damage they can cause. Rather, these terrible hands are a sign of humankind's capacity for both the destructive and the wondrous, a range conveyed in a word with no parallel, *deinos*. As Debes puts it with regard to the tragic chorus, "Of course, those lines [from *Antigone* pertaining to man's distinctiveness] are juxtaposed against the tragic plot of that play and all of Creon's folly and hubris."¹⁶ Similarly, the word *deinas* in *Iliad* 24 conveys the damage that Achilles has done, but like the choral ode in *Antigone*, it does so against the backdrop of awe.

So consider again Priam's approach to Achilles in a fuller context:

Great Priam slipped into the tent without being noticed. He went right up to Achilles and clasped in his hands his knees, and kissed his hands, the terrible (*deinas*), man-slaying hands that had slain his many sons. As when confusion (*atē*) comes on a man, who in his country killed another human being and goes to the home of others, to some rich man, and amazement comes on those who look on him, so was Achilles struck with wonder at the sight of godlike Priam. They marveled (*thambēsin*) at each other. They stared at each other. (24.477–84)

The simile compares human to human, whereas most Homeric similes are human to animal. The poet compares the sight of Priam to that of a murderer, and by extension Achilles to that of a man of wealth. The inversion is telling from the standpoint of human value. Achilles, the murderer, is an object of wonder, as if a rich man; Priam, a rich man, is likened to the murderer but also evokes wonder. In normative terms the murderer is *removed* from a place of value in society; he leaves his community, cast out, for a time of purification. The rich man, in those same terms, could be said to be in an *elevated*

¹⁶ Debes, "Dignity's Gauntlet," 52.

place of value, that is, of greater “worth,” at least within community. The community values a rich man more than it does a murderer, and rightly so. We might return here to the concern expressed earlier in this chapter that perhaps only some, for example, the elite, the rich, have a high comparative worth, or are *axios*, in Homeric society. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of the one removed from society, the murderer, with the rich man, who has *axios* measurable in monetary terms, does not in this passage point to comparative value. That is, the murder is *worth* no less. Rather, the comparison shows that both the rich man and the murderer are *deinos*. Awe is what equalizes both. Though removed from his local community or *ethnos*, the murderer is not removed from a space of *human* worth: he in fact arrives elsewhere, though outside of his own community, to a place of care. Nor *because of his money* is the rich man “raised above all price,” the Kantian claim of incommensurable value to which Debes returns in his discussions of human dignity. Rather, the rich man embodies a kind of value that approximates virtue, as only a person (as opposed to an animal) can achieve wealth and has the power to wield it well or destructively. The rich man is *deinos*. The murderer, though, is also *deinos* and is valued simultaneously, in spite of his act—counterintuitively, in fact is valued *because* of it. Many the wonders, but nothing is more *deinos* than humankind, in the ability both to build and to destroy, to be awesome, and awful.

Similar to the rich man, Priam is a ruler of a kingdom who has enough wealth to have attained concubines for fifty sons and as many slaves. Given the depletion of energy and resources that comes with war, which is a wielding of wealth and power to destructive ends, Priam is on the brink of losing all, not unlike the murderer. Paradoxically, given his former status, Priam—virtually a pauper in terms of his loss—stares at Achilles in the same way one would stare at the man of means. Achilles, though, is in fact not a rich man but herein the murderer, even if the killing occurs within the sanctioned context of war. What an unlikely comparison! Each man is *deinos* for the way in which the

condition of each—belonging and the loss of belonging, elevation and demotion—illuminates broader aspects of a shared, human condition.

Throughout the passage the language of wonder is repeated: *deinos*, *thambos*. Achilles, now like the rich man, is something *deinos*, something rare in nature. If an expression of human dignity is the extent to which we treat others as an object of wonder, or reverence, then the wonder with which Priam and Achilles stare at each other is telling; they marvel *at each other*, *thambeō*. The emphasis in the passage on their visual regard for one another gives pause, as they momentarily interrupt the normal course of things—war, their mutual loss, their status as enemies—to take in all that it means for enemies to inhabit the same space and status. It might sound odd to reverence a murderer, whether the one within the simile, or Achilles himself, but this is just the right term. Reverence might be defined as “the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have.”¹⁷ Many the awe-inspiring and awful things, but nothing is more awe-inspiring or awful than a person.

From the passage, three interlinked aspects of the substance of human dignity, that is, what it looks like in practice even if Homer never formulates a thesis on what it is, are evident. First, that Achilles and Priam regard each other as one would wonder at the rich man—or the murderer—is telling. They share the status of enemies, but this very fact is why the moment is poignant. Achilles’s and Priam’s common status as enemies paradoxically points to their *stature* as human beings.¹⁸ Each person has lost a loved one in war, and their common *loss* unites them, momentarily, in grief.

If regard, wonder, or reverence, is the first clue to human dignity in this passage, then “stature” as the reason for this wonder is the second. Although the idea of the *imago Dei*, the human being as made in the

17 Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

18 Kateb, *Human Dignity*.

“image of God,” cannot be said to be operative here in the same way that it is in a Judeo-Christian context, the wonder, the *deinos*, is a result of a certain stature even in Homer.¹⁹ It is telling that the same epithets denoting godlikeness are used of Hector upon his death. Jasper Griffin’s comments are relevant here:

The immediate juxtaposition of “god-like Hector” and “acts of humiliation” enables the poet to bring out, without sentimentality, the pathos of the greatest possible fall for a man, from god-like status to humiliation and helplessness.²⁰

In an oral context where epithets often do not add meaning and sometimes serve merely metrical considerations, it is important to add that Priam is *consistently* “in the image of a god,” *theoeidēs*, or great, *meγas*, throughout the passage. Griffin’s comments regarding Hector extend both to Priam and to Achilles in this passage. The “godlike” reminds us of how far they have fallen in status, and yet their stature as worthy of value has not changed.

So what accounts for this stature: the fact that even those who have individual status as enemies, as murderers, as kings, are to be treated in a certain way? The answer to this is the third aspect of dignity in the passage: the men *share* in reason, a sense of shame (akin to reverence), and an ability to pity one another. While reason might be privileged in some contexts (*cogito ergo sum*), the interplay between reason and shame in the ancient world is critical to Greek selfhood. Dignity discourse often focuses on the first of these, reason, and yet shame and pity are linked to reason in the Homeric text.²¹ Because Priam and Achilles have shared human stature, evidenced in reason, pity, and shame—all of which led to a *mutual* reverence—they are part

19 Later in this volume, Bonnie Kent addresses dignity vis-à-vis the *imago Dei*.

20 Griffin, *Homer*, 85.

21 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

of a moral community of unearned worth.²² “Remember your father,” Priam says to Achilles, also, tellingly, *theooidēs*, in the “image of a god.” Given their shared stature and loss (ontological and experiential), it is fitting that Achilles have a sense of shame toward the gods, *aideio theous*, and pity (*eleēō*) Priam. These men are human not only because they reason, but also because they have a developed and cultivated sense of pity and shame. The wonder that comes from reciprocally recognizing in the other—from reason, awe, and a sense of mutual suffering—a human condition reflects the substance of dignity in Homer as a “special value to humans.”²³ Achilles and Priam: each has human dignity, qua status, as a unique individual with special circumstances of loss, and qua stature, as beings of equal, unearned value. Recognizing this, Achilles must now return Hector’s body.

The poignant exchange between Achilles and Priam is one of three types of human relationships in the Homeric poems that evidence a regard for what might be identified as the substance of human dignity in archaic Greece. This first relationship, one that Achilles and Priam represent, is that of enemies toward each other. Similar to the other two relationships, the treatment of enemies throughout the poems points to the possibility of dignity’s opposite, the possibility of the “erasure from the space of value.”²⁴ Burial and other ritual aspects of the treatment of enemies hint at a substantive sense of the value of all human life. In fact, if the exchange between Achilles and Priam is a moment of reconciliation and the high point of the epic, it is possible to find dignity’s opposite in Achilles’s treatment of Hector, the desecration of his body. The gods, particularly Apollo, express how appalled they are at Achilles’s behavior in language that anticipates the right order of things at the epic’s close. Apollo argues that Hector honored the gods

22 Debes, “Dignity’s Gauntlet,” 58.

23 Remy Debes, “Human Dignity,” review of *Human Dignity* by George Kateb, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, May 2, 2011.

24 Debes, “Human Dignity,” on Kateb.

in life, and thus they are to feel shame in holding back from helping him now. Achilles is clearly out of step with the norms of Homeric society, which include the value given to one who had reason, felt pain and pleasure (emotions), and is *deinos* (had loved ones, did wonderful and destructive things):

His mind is not right (*phrenes, enaisimoi*), and his intentions (*noēma*) are bent, like a wild lion, who goes among the sacrificial beasts of men with great force and fierceness in order to take his feast. In this way Achilles has destroyed pity (*eleos*) and has no shame (*aidos*). This condition harms men greatly and does not profit them. (24.40–45)

The human-to-animal simile that follows offsets the human-to-human simile of the exchange between Achilles and Priam. Reason, the thoughts and intentions of a human being, it might be said, separates people from raging lions and other animals. Reason, of course, is the “uniqueness claim” associated with human dignity. Similar to a lion, a raging Achilles lacks the “inwardness” that makes of a beast a sacrificial animal (*mēlon*), something more than food. But reason does not stand alone. It enables a developed sense of shame, and pity. Whereas Priam asked Achilles to have pity (*eleos*) and a sense of shame (*aidos*) toward him, Apollo notes that Achilles lacks *eleos* or *aidos* toward Hector. Put in terms of dignity, Achilles has erased Hector from the space of value. His treatment of his enemy has reached a point of no return, the type of crisis that prompts divine intervention throughout Homeric epic.

Thus the example of Achilles makes a positive case for a substantive understanding of human dignity in Homeric society. His mistreatment of Hector, whom Achilles wants to give to dogs and birds of prey to devour, demonstrates what it would mean for a person within this social setting to dip below normative value, being now not worthy, *axios*, of good treatment. Through the gods, the presence of Priam, and Achilles’s capitulation, the poet establishes this treatment as a violation

of the norm. The example of Achilles is emblematic of an approach to human dignity found throughout the Homeric poems.

Although space here does not allow for an exhaustive study, I will briefly move from the arguments for a substantive claim to human dignity in Homer to an overview of other cases of the claim. These cases are the (1) treatment of slaves and the treatment of the less-than-human, which would include animals, and (2) the natural landscape, the environment.

EXAMPLES OF VIOLATIONS TO DIGNITY FROM THE *ODYSSEY*

There are slaves in Homeric society, and this fact calls human dignity into question. Briseis and Chryseis are slaves, prizes won in battle and not free to come and go at their own will and pleasure. At the same time, the contrast in their treatment—the former loved by Achilles and the latter merely Agamemnon’s possession—demonstrates in brief the contrast in dignity studies between “unearned worth” (to love, cherish, value) and “equal worth” (to rule, to be able to enslave, to be able to have different social statuses within a class structure). As Debes explains, unearned worth is a metaphysical or conceptual claim, whereas equal worth is a normative claim.²⁵ As a normative standard, a society might not extend equal worth to every individual—a king is in tangible ways worth more than a beggar—while at the same time recognizing certain claims for all (slaves, women, and so on). In Homeric society as much as in modern parallels, how one treats the slave—the pauper, the beggar—is critical to the question of whether the person is revered or erased from the space of value. It is difficult to make this point without giving an impression of condoning slavery. Nevertheless, evidence abounds that slavery, at least as it pertains

²⁵ Debes, “Dignity’s Gauntlet,” 59.

to the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, was at times the best recourse available to many members of society, such as the poor, the orphaned, and the defeated in war.²⁶ Whereas the battlefield context of the *Iliad* does not feature slaves and therefore does not give abundant examples of their treatment, notwithstanding the women won in battle, Homer's *Odyssey* allows entry into domestic spaces where slaves abound in ancient Greece and even in Homeric society. In this context, the slave Eumaeus and his reflections are of critical value.

In the discussion of Hector above, his mistreatment was only for a time, a result of a momentary lapse on the part of Achilles. In contrast to this, Eumaeus endures years of mistreatment at the hands of the suitors, in the absence of his master Odysseus. Upon Odysseus's return to his homeland of Ithaca from ten years of war and ten years of wandering, Eumaeus, his slave, secures Odysseus's entry into his own home. The story of how Eumaeus became a slave points to human dignity and its erasure. Unlike his current handlers, Odysseus treated Eumaeus well, and despite his current condition, Eumaeus seems to believe that Odysseus, although disguised as a beggar, is deserving of good treatment. Similar to Odysseus's incidental status, slavery for Eumaeus is a condition into which he has simply fallen. His current status belies his true worth. Eumaeus's father, Ctesius, was a man of status *epieikelos athanatoisin*, "like the gods." Ctesius is a ruler of not one but two cities in Syria, but the advent of Phoenician traders disrupts domestic bliss. These greedy men (*trōktoi*) seduce Eumaeus's nursemaid, who is also Phoenician and eager to reconnect to her group. The traders take the Phoenician woman and the young Eumaeus away from his homeland and sell them for profit (more money, more food).

Given the distinctiveness or moral specialness claim in discussions of human dignity (which has been evident thus far from Homer's *Iliad*),

²⁶ Patrice Rankine, "Odysseus as Slave: The Ritual of Domination and Social Death in Homeric Society," in *Reading Ancient Slavery*, ed. Richard Alston, Edith Hall, and Laura Proffitt (New York: Bristol, 2011), 34–50.

it should not be surprising that *trōktoi*, the greedy Phoenician men, is linguistically rooted in eating: for example, animals eating meat raw. The connection to Achilles, who threatens to eat Hector's body raw, is easily drawn. Like Achilles, the Phoenicians practice a vice; they do not know limits. They are out of step with their broader human community. This is in fact the problem with traders as they are represented in Homeric society: they disrupt a value system by conferring value on coinage and trade based on approximate value.

Eumaeus, like anyone in human society, finds himself at some point at the mercy of others. If one is bereft of homeland or a means of re-entry (like the murderer in the Iliadic passage), in a frontier outside of cities and their civic order, the kindness of strangers (e.g., kings, rich men, that is, persons of higher material worth and those of more stable statuses in society) is paramount. The poet describes Eumaeus as a man "who could have commanded a platoon in war" (14.25). In other words, his unequal status in society as a slave does not destroy his unearned worth as a person. Slavery disrupts only his human *potential*, not his *humanness*. One might go as far as to say that Eumaeus, if not "esteemed beyond all price," is richly valued, despite the suitors' treatment of him. His father certainly richly valued him. He has noble birth, and the poet addresses him by apostrophe, the second-person address reserved for a few beloved characters in Homeric poetry. The fact that Eumaeus spends his time as a slave "cutting the tanned leather to size" does not make him any less godlike (*dios*), even as he speaks of his master Odysseus with an awe similar to that which is owed to Eumaeus (*antitheos*).

Odysseus's disguise as a beggar, necessary for his re-entry into Ithaca, allows the audience some view of the domestic space in Homeric society, where slaves and other dependents are present. Odysseus's disguise and his lies about having been a slave express a set of cultural truths, and in particular underline his shared humanity with Eumaeus.²⁷

27 Rankine, "Odysseus as Slave," 34–50.

Odysseus's higher social value—his status—as a king does not ultimately protect him from the potential violation of his unearned membership in a moral community. That is, he is now similar to a slave. What protects him from mistreatment, now that he is not a ruler? On the other side, Eumaeus has undergone both kind and unkind treatment, and he chooses to extend hospitality to the stranger whom he does not yet recognize as his own master:

Stranger (*xenos*), even if someone worse than you came, it would not be right (*themis*) for me to dishonor a *xenos*. From Zeus come all *xenoi* and beggars. Our gifts to them are small but dear. This is how it is with slaves because we are always in fear, especially when young kings rule. (14.56–61)

A sense of what is right (*themis*) even toward those of lesser social status (“someone worse than you,” *kakiōn*) drives Eumaeus's thinking, intention, and practice toward strangers (*xenos*). Strangers and beggars are like slaves because they are dependent upon the kindness of those of higher social status or those more tightly woven into the community. Odysseus weaves a false tale of how he too was sold into slavery and made to work (*ergon*) as the telos of his value. These stories of Odysseus as slave, though lies, link up with Eumaeus's narrative and thus express the deeper truth regarding human value in the Homeric poems.²⁸

The treatment of enemies emblematic of the exchange between Achilles and Priam, along with the treatment of slaves and all those of lesser rank in society (strangers, beggars, the poor, the orphaned), is a case for the substance of human dignity in Homeric society. Both kinds of treatment point to the human being's unearned worth, and specifically, something like unearned membership in a shared (human) moral community.

²⁸ Rankine, “Odysseus as Slave.”

The third and final relationship to consider in Homeric lore is the treatment of the less-than-human, which is an aspect of the philosophical discourse of dignity attributable to Kateb.²⁹ As he argues, because of the stature of the human being, which is linked to reason, the ability to express reverence and pity, and even the ability to protect others, we are given stewardship of nature, namely “the impossible task of making nature be *to* itself.”³⁰ Stewardship of nature is an expression of reverence, or awe, a sense that nature, like man, is itself *deinon*, a “marvelous thing.” As it pertains to the Greek context, the Homeric poems show a profound regard for this aspect of dignity. The presence of dogs in the domestic space of the *Odyssey*, for example, is canny because of what it might be read to signal about the way the stature of a person impacts his or her surroundings.

In one of the passages discussed above, where Odysseus first appears in Eumaeus’s hut, dogs rush the stranger. Eumaeus shoos them. While the incident could be treated as one of those throwaway, possible subplots that Eric Auerbach talks about in terms of the “retarding” style of epic narrative (with all possible plots foregrounded and none subordinated),³¹ Eumaeus’s shooping of the dogs is more telling than it might seem at first glance. As Eumaeus himself puts it, he is accountable (*elenchō*) for the hounds. Had the dogs mauled the stranger of low status, Eumaeus (or his master) would have been liable, and he already has enough grief (*algea, stonachas*) in his life, having been bereft of homeland, family, the safety of status, and even Odysseus over the foregoing twenty years.

Of course, Eumaeus’s relationship to these nameless dogs parallels that of Odysseus to Argus, the faithful dog that the master left behind for twenty years, who now lies in lice and disregarded in dung that

²⁹ Kateb, *Human Dignity*.

³⁰ Kateb, *Human Dignity*, 117.

³¹ Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

could have been used to fertilize the land. (There is such an economizing of resources in the Homeric worldview.) And yet Argus cannot die until he recognizes that his master, even disguised, has returned (17.290–305). Such is his loyalty. Through the animal, the third expression of how human beings treat others, the poet makes a deliberate though as yet untheorized point about dignity.

PRECURSORS TO UNIVERSAL DIGNITY IN CLASSICAL GREECE AFTER HOMER

My aim here has been to raise the premise of a substantive claim to human dignity in Homeric society, the fictive context from which much of our sense of preclassical Greek society after the Bronze Age derives. Rather than a history of the emergence of dignity, the Homeric poems and context show dignity operating as a substantive claim from the beginnings of Near Eastern and early European societies.³² What would be left for philosophers is the theorization of dignity as a formal or theoretical concern. In the pages that follow, I would like to suggest that there are further seeds of the discourse of dignity in classical Greece. It will be left to other scholars to amply these claims or reject them.

In many areas of thought, Homer, as Eric Havelock argues, is a kind of preface to Plato.³³ The moral, ethical, and social arrangements in these poems are a baseline to which the Greek playwrights and, later, Plato and Aristotle will return. Greek popular morality can to a great extent be derived from these poems, and examples abound: the playwrights' indirect references to Homer in such plays as Euripides's *Hecuba*; Socrates's citation of Hector's bravery in death, in the *Apology*; or Aristotle's use of examples for moral persuasion, in *Rhetoric*. Thus if there is any substantive evidence of human dignity in the Greek

³² Rankine, "Odysseus as Slave."

³³ Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982).

context, finding that evidence would mean starting with Homer. From there, we might draw examples from the playwrights for places where a demonstration of what looks like dignity might be found. Each of the playwrights presents ample evidence of dignity and, what is more, its violation, given the context of ritual sacrifice and loss at the festival of Dionysus.

Examples from Aeschylus might include Agamemnon's violation of a certain reverence for the life of his daughter Iphigenia (*Oresteia*), a sacrifice that resounds even as far off as the Roman poet Lucretius in the first century BCE as an instance of religion's failure "to guard and protect what has dignity";³⁴ In the *Oresteia* (458 BCE), Aeschylus is interested in the shift from greatness to defeat, such as is found in Agamemnon's downfall. This concern perhaps parallels the decline of great aristocratic families that marks the historical advent of democratic society. If Agamemnon loses his status and faces the violation of his dignity in his manner of death in the first play of the *Oresteia*, by the end of the trilogy Orestes has not only restored his family's honor in his slaughter of his mother Clytemnestra, his father's killer, but he has also yielded to the power of the Athenian state, where the Furies protect the ancient blood-price for Clytemnestra's death at the court of the Areopagus. Aeschylus's *Persians* is also important to the discussion, as a play that reifies the deep divide between Greek and non-Greek, what Edith Hall calls the invention of the barbarian (the beginning of an ancient orientalism),³⁵ which would continue throughout the classical period. And yet, despite the inadvertent inscription of the *Persians* as "other" in the play, the profound humanity of their plight—the groaning, Atossa's lamentations, the general sense of this foreign people's loss in status as a result of the Persian Wars—is central to Aeschylus's representation.

34 Debes, "Human Dignity," 60.

35 Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford University Press), 1989.

Any place where a shift in status attends, the substance of dignity can be felt because such a shift calls into question the worth of the person, his or her stature as raised above all price. If there were a moral community of unearned worth that transcends the local community (the *ethnos*) or the city-state (the *polis*), a shift in status would expose the limits of the local context. For example, Euripides's *Hecuba* (424 BCE) has been one play that features the degradation of the captive, slave woman, but it is only one of many.³⁶ Hecuba's shift from queen to slave, similar to Eumaeus's experience, disrupts how *axia* or "worth it" she might be to her own society, but it also enables her to claim a value that transcends her local environment. How a society treats enemies, slaves, and the less-than-human matters to dignity, and thus Hecuba indicts the Greeks because of their poor treatment of her. In fact, the playwrights could be said to be working through the very problem of human dignity, even though the historical circumstances of fifth-century Athens engendered no deeper reaction, no more profound theorization, than they offered.

Similar to Eumaeus and even Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, Hecuba has happened into a shift in status, from queen to slave, as a result of the fall of Troy. The circumstances of the play have been read as an ongoing dehumanization of Hecuba. As if slavery were not enough, pressure is put on her throughout the play, such that continued insult leads to behavior not becoming of a queen. First, in addition to suffering a shift in status to slave, she learns that the Greeks will kill her daughter, Polyxena, in a sacrifice over the tomb of Achilles. The externalization of a process of reason comes in the Greeks' debate about whether or not to conduct this sacrifice, until Odysseus, a *democharistes* ("crowd-pleaser"), casts the dice. Euripides, similar to Thucydides in his treatment of Cleon (a *demagogos* or "demagogue" who sways the community with arguments toward questionable ends), casts

³⁶ Patrice Rankine, *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature* (University of Wisconsin Press), 2006.

Odysseus in a complicated role, that of a sophist who might be making the weaker argument appear the stronger. Hecuba appeals to the same question of how far the ethical community extends to what Philoctetes prompts in that play. She claims to have once saved Odysseus's life at Troy, respecting his stature as human being over his status as an enemy in war. Odysseus rejects the argument, offering no friendship in war, no treaty among enemies. In the play, Hecuba suffers what might be deemed to be existential harm because she is outside of any and every community: her Trojan community is lost, and the Greeks respect no treaty or bond with her. What is more, she discovers that her ally and friend in Troy, Polymester, has killed her son Polydorus, whom she and Priam sent away from Troy to him for safekeeping at the beginning of the war. Now all is lost, and Hecuba resorts to the primitive justice of vengeance with which the *Oresteia* opened (that is, an appeal to human rights, *laws* that extend to strangers and slaves, more than the *ethical* practices we saw in Homer, etc.). In the absence of dignity as part of ethics, Hecuba is subject to existential harm, but this is a tragic frame, a space of crisis, not the normal state of things in classical Greece.

The impact of the democratic shift on ethics—the treatment of enemies, friendships, and relationships to the state, which Hecuba calls “equality under the law”—continue to be felt throughout the playwrights. In Sophocles's *Philoctetes* (409 BCE), Neoptolemus, son of the late Achilles, faces a moral dilemma in his attempt to retrieve Herakles's bow and arrow from Philoctetes, whom the Greeks, led by Odysseus, abandoned on a deserted island at the beginning of the Trojan War because of his festering wound. They have left him there for ten years, but a prophecy now reveals that they cannot defeat Troy without the bow and arrows. The moral dilemma comes when Odysseus enjoins Neoptolemus to retrieve the bow and arrows. Spending time with Philoctetes causes a shift for Neoptolemus, what amounts to an *ephebic* rite of passage that challenges his ethics. Not only has he come to pity Philoctetes, with *pathos* as a starting point for the regard of the other, but Neoptolemus has also come to regard Philoctetes as a friend

because of the man's friendship with his own father. That is, if Greek popular morality, as Kenneth Dover put it, calls for helping friends and harming enemies, why would Neoptolemus continue the ongoing harm that the Greeks have done to Philoctetes, who is a friend of his friends?³⁷ Where human friendships end—how far the civic community extends to a broader human community—is unsolvable in the play's final resolution, as it is in *Hecuba*. *Philoctetes* attempts a solution through a *deus ex machina*, in which Herakles, now a god, appears to tell the Greek community that they need his bow and arrow *as well as* Philoctetes himself. No warrior should be left behind; Philoctetes has worth, despite the decade of devaluation that left him bereft of friends, food, and shelter, and a legacy commensurate to his former status. The loss of worth that a Greek noble can endure challenges the system of values in the classical texts, just as it did in the Homeric context.

EPILOGUE

It is worth returning to the search for a formal claim to dignity among the Greeks with which I opened. The evidence of dignity as a substantive reality in Homeric society and in classical Greece should be clear. People have dignity throughout the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, if we base this on the cultural standards for how enemies are treated; how strangers, slaves, and beggars are to be treated; and how these societies regard the less-than-human. Thus, while the Homeric epics represent Greek society at its best—even in the context of war, wandering, and the bad behavior of rulers in the absence of the kind king—the representation of violations to human dignity in tragedy gives deliberate pause to the emerging concern of a widespread dehumanization of others. This existential threat to human dignity results from the premise of imperialism that marks the classical

³⁷ Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

period. The playwrights, along with Thucydides, whose descriptive and diagnostic treatment of Athenian imperialism falls short of a theory of human dignity, nevertheless continue the epic tradition of asking where the human and ethical community begins and ends. Following Thucydides's analysis of such events as plague and civil strife, it is clear that the good treatment of everyone within and outside of particular local communities is an ideal to be guarded jealously. Human dignity, in practice, is clearly a virtue that can easily slip away, or as Thucydides puts it of war, plague, and civil strife, human nature, being what it is, these things will happen again.