

# The Role of Principles and Personal Relationships in Greek Tragedy and Epic

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## I. Introduction

What is most telling about a character is not what or who, or even how, a person fights, but why he fights. Understanding motivations are vital for understanding any characters, especially ones so far removed from contemporary society. Through this paper I will attempt to explore the tug between principles and close personal relationships that is often central to ancient texts and manifests so prevalently in the genres of tragedy and epic. The texts I have chosen represent characters that have distinct conflicts between principles that they hold and intimate personal relationships that are shown in the stories.

The problems that arise in these texts often put these two areas into direct conflict and the way the protagonist responds is what defines them as a person. When faced with the choice, characters that choose to follow vague principles usually have tragic ends because of their disregard for the relationships established in the text. The two examples that I believe best exemplify the tragic fall of characters who place principles above all else are Sophocles' titular protagonist from *Antigone* as well as Euripides' Agamemnon from *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

Alternatively, upon examining the Achilles of Homer's *Iliad* and Ancient Greece's paradigmatic hero, one sees that he is motivated by the personal relations he has. It is because of these intimate ties that Achilles is able to process the loss he experiences and have a hopeful resolution to his story.

## II. Genre

The first thing that must be established is the critical difference between the genres of tragedy and epic as well as the role the characters play in each, as both of these determine unchangeable aspects of the characters and the functions they serve in their stories. Through this

section I will be sharing the definitions of the various genres I am referring to throughout the paper. I will also be discussing the role of tragedy in Greek society and the role of epic in Greek society as well as the way the characters I have chosen to analyze operate in the works within which they exist.

### **A. Definitions**

Ancient epics served a wide array of purposes in Greek society, however all epics share some defining characteristics. They are poems, they follow heroes, usually children of gods, and they evoke the muses for inspiration. However, what interests this paper is the content of ancient epic. Andrew Ford writes that the ancient epic consists of a “...heroic story involving suffering, and the gods take a part in it. It is itself a massive and complex action and yet also part of a larger story.”<sup>1</sup> Readers see this to be true through the two major epics that come out of Ancient Greek tradition, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the prior of these two the subject of this paper. Both of these stories center on the struggles and conflicts of a hero fighting with and being aided by various gods, as well as the fact that both are part of a larger story told through the time period, in this case, the Trojan War story. Epic stories were pleasing to listen too and were told primarily through celebrations and dinner parties<sup>2</sup> as a means of passing down stories and entertaining guests and hosts alike.

Tragedy, like epic, served a specific purpose in Greek society. It was a vital part of the cultural fabric of Ancient Greece. Attending the theatre was the equivalent of a civic duty in some places.<sup>3</sup> The arts in general and specifically theatre were obviously very important to Ancient Greek societies, but tragedy in particular played an important role in education, life, and society.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Ford, *The Genre: Traditional Definitions of Epic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Nagy, *The Epic Hero*, (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2005), 25.

<sup>3</sup> National Theatre, *An Introduction to Greek Tragedy*, (2013).

In Aristotle's *Poetics* he defines tragedy as "...events that evoke pity and fear."<sup>4</sup> This evocation of emotion ideally ends in the feeling of catharsis. A good tragedy will make you feel anger, grief, sorrow, pity, and fear. Through watching characters in situations that evoke these emotions one cleanses themselves of those emotions. Tragedy also allowed for moral instruction, the focal point of the genre in this paper. Ideally, after watching a play you would learn from the characters and the mistakes they made and hopefully learn how to prevent such things in one's own life. Tragedy was performed as a play with a chorus, actors, sets, masks, and costumes, as opposed to a bard. Tragedy ends with the death and destruction of the main characters (more often than not this is the tragic hero) and a lesson imparted to the audience as to what the tragic flaw and reason for their downfall was.

### **B. Role of Tragedy in Greek Society**

As previously mentioned above, tragedy served two main roles in Greek society; there was the feeling of catharsis and the imparting of moral instruction to citizens and watchers. Aristotle describes the intended effects of catharsis in his *Poetics*. He writes that "Through pity and fear it achieves purification from such feelings."<sup>5</sup> People watching tragedy would allow themselves to feel normally unpleasant emotions in order to be cleansed of them in the day to day. It was part of the reason for the unpleasant and often gruesome end to characters in these plays.

The other thing that tragedy allowed for was a lesson of morality to be imparted to the audience. This idea has a great bearing on characters and their roles in the genre, as they often serve to illustrate themes, concepts ideas, virtues, and vices. Aristotle writes on the relationship between tragedy and moral instruction, as well:

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 1450b

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, 1449b25.

For tragedy is an imitation, not of human beings, but of an action and a way of life and happiness and unhappiness. Happiness and unhappiness are found in action and the end we aim at is the type of action, not a quality of character; people's character make them people of a certain sort, but it is their actions in a drama to imitate characters, but rather include the characters in order to imitate the actions. And so it is the actions and hence the story that are the end of a tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle is clear about how audiences watching tragedy were meant to interpret the characters they saw on stage. Characters were secondary to the actions that happened to them in tragic works and the lessons that were taught were about the mistakes they made, not the character themselves. Arlene Allen and Ian Storey write about this as well in the book *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*, where they comment further on the role of a character in the play. Storey and Allen write that "...characters are good but imperfect persons who create pity and fear in the spectators not because of the sort of person they are, but because of the mistakes they make..."<sup>7</sup> as well as the fact that "...characters are more important for what they represent and how they act than for their uniqueness as individual personalities."<sup>8</sup> Storey and Allen's assessment alongside Aristotle's *Poetics* and his observations about the genre as a whole show that the success of a Greek tragedy hinged less on the evolution of a character or the person themselves and was far more focused on what happened to them through the plot of the story. Characters represented vices and virtues alike. This allowed for audiences to see the tragic flaw of the characters easily and in turn be able to use this information to pinpoint precisely what choices led to the inevitable downfall of the tragic hero.

### C. Role of Epic in Greek Society

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, 1450a15-23.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Storey and Arlene Allen, *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*, (Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 84.

<sup>8</sup> Storey and Allen, 85.

Epic served a slightly different purpose in society than tragedy did. Like I discussed in the early sections of this paper, epic was used much more socially than tragedy and was often entertainment for communal and social occasions. None of this precludes the lessons that one can take away from epic, but it was not the central function. Andrew Ford writes that one might “...take Homer and Hesiod at their words when they describe the purpose of poetry as pleasure: it is necessary, however, to understand such pleasure not as aesthetic appreciation but as an experience of what I will call vividness, a sense that the past is somehow present before us.”<sup>9</sup> This is certainly true as we start to look at the *Iliad*. Despite questions about authorship and origin, morality and a lesson are clearly not the focal point of Homer’s epic and one can see what Ford refers to as vividness evident in Homer’s descriptions of both battles and camp life alike.

However it should not be overlooked that many scholars view Homer’s poetry as almost subversive as well and see social commentary in his work as well. G.K Zanker and Caroline Alexander write on Homer’s language and the way he uses it as well as his distinct anti-war sentiments through the epic. Zanker argues in his book, *The Heart of Achilles*, that Homer offers readers of his work not only a horrifying description of war but also poignant and evident social commentary on the honor based culture that he lived in.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Alexander writes that Homer “...used conventional epic events and heroes to challenge the heroic view of war...”<sup>11</sup> Much like the someone like Charles Dickens, who wrote for the entertainment of his readers but wove in biting social commentary on poverty, class, and industrialization, the dual intent of Homer’s poems add to our understanding of characters like Achilles and how he relates to cultural ideas of honor, masculinity, and war. This dual intent behind the text also adds complexity to his character

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<sup>9</sup> Ford, 49.

<sup>10</sup> G.K Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Alexander, *The War That Killed Achilles*, (London, UK: Faber, 2011), 14.

and motivations that someone like Antigone or Oedipus, characters of tragedy, lack because of the singular desire of the text to educate and teach.

The multifaceted Achilles serves through Homer's *Iliad* as much more than a simple representation of values, virtues, or vices. He is far too complex. The hardships that Achilles faces are a mixture of personality drive, plot based, and situational. Unlike the characters of tragedy, where we find usually only a single fatal flaw and situational elements that drive them to ruin. If one solely looked at Achilles as a representation of vices and flaws, one would struggle with the positive choices he makes towards the end and the hopeful resolution he attained. If one were to argue he was a representation solely of virtues, you would look at his slaughter of men and children alike in the second part of the poem and question the virtues of said society.

Epic, and the *Iliad* specifically, entertained but also shed light on the nature of humanity in a way that tragedy did not. While tragedy has complicated moral and ethical problems, evidenced in Antigone and Iphigenia, it is clear to see where and why characters went wrong, as opposed to the *Iliad*, which presents a much more nuanced view of the human condition.

This also perfectly illustrates the difference in intent between the two genres; tragedy was meant to teach a clear and defined lesson, epic might have included social commentary but it was far more about the characters, emotions, and relationships than the events. Andrew Ford writes about the differences of intent as well. Ford writes that:

Homer certainly became the moral educator of the Greeks, but that is an entirely separate issue from whether Homer himself saw his poetry as instructive...If we are compelled to allow that any poetry, whatever its claims for itself, can not fail to teach us something, the truest and most profound teaching that epic poetry may have done in its time would appear to have been the very indirect and unconscious persuasion of its audiences to enjoy and admire a directly presented and unreplicated image of heroic life.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ford, 51-52.

While people can and did learn from the *Iliad*, Homer's characters serve as more than moral extremes, like Antigone and Creon, or a representation of vices, as someone like Oedipus or Agamemnon. Homer's characters are not meant to be representations of ideas, rather they are meant to reflect human beings as they are. Tragic heroes serve to reinforce what society deems virtues and denounce what society deems flaws and vices. The *Iliad* is a condemnation of people and society as they were and a refutation of the value system, rather than a reinforcement of it.

#### **D. Characters Roles in Tragedy and Epic**

Much like these different genres filled specific roles in Greek society, characters in their respective works operated with various roles as well. Antigone and Agamemnon, the main characters in their respective works do not exist to grow and change and develop the way Achilles does. While some critics have argued that character development is a modern notion and can not be applied to ancient texts, through this section I will not only show the difference in the specific characters roles in their stories but also explore the critical reception to these characters.

At the start of the play, Antigone is disgusted by King Creon's refusal to bury her brother as well as her sister's refusal to aid her in an act of civil disobedience by granting her brother, Polynices, proper funeral rites. Charles Segal asserts that Antigone's character makes a "...unqualified declaration for absolute values..."<sup>13</sup> and it is this adherence to her absolute values, her polarizing thinking, and obsession with principles that causes Antigone's downfall in the play. Antigone does not change and develop. Her role is to convey in what ways an obsession with principles hurts oneself. She operates as a representation of what happens when an unhealthy adherence to ideals is followed above all else.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the "Antigone"*, (Boston, MA: Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics, 1964), 140.



Agamemnon operates similarly in *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Faced with the choice of ritually sacrificing his daughter and sailing to Troy or allowing his daughter to live and giving up the expedition, he weighs the morality of killing his daughter against the danger and disgrace he would face if he backed out in front of the entirety of the Greek forces. Agamemnon says that leaders, like himself “...use pride to guide our lives...”<sup>14</sup> Agamemnon doesn’t want to risk humiliation in the eyes of the Greek army and places his reputation among his men above all else, namely his daughter’s life. This fixation on honor mirrors Antigone’s fixation on piety and much like Antigone, this elevation of his principles above the life of his daughter and wellbeing of his family causes the downfall of his character.

Part of what makes Achilles different from both tragic characters is the fact that the Achilles of Homer’s *Iliad* exists in the world of epic, rendering him a different role in the story than the characters mentioned above. Achilles acts how humans truly act and changes in a way recognizable to people, even today. Marta Gonzalez writes that Achilles interests schoolers because of what he tells us about the “...human condition...”<sup>15</sup> He is complicated in a way that neither tragic characters are because of his mixed motivations and evolution through the text. Gonzalez writes that the actions of complicated characters, like Achilles are so interesting because they are “...are inspired by emotions like ours; fear, anger, desire, hatred, shame, and compassion.”<sup>16</sup> Human beings are not driven solely by singular factors, like Antigone or Agamemnon. Human beings are complex with conflicting feelings and emotional responses and it is this reflection of

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<sup>14</sup> Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2011), 449.

<sup>15</sup> Marta González, *Achilles*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 11.

<sup>16</sup> González, 30.

humanity that distinguishes Achilles from the solely goal driven Antigone or the unrealistically ambitious Agamemnon.

### **E. Criticism of Achilles' Development**

The *Iliad*, with the exception of a few books and scenes, follows Achilles' perspective for most of the duration of the story. Some critics (one of the most notable that I have looked at being Gregory Nagy) argue that the notion of character development does not apply to Achilles and that the idea is a modern one, not applicable to ancient texts.

Nagy writes that Achilles has a "...monolithic personality..."<sup>17</sup> and lacks the depth that other epic heroes have for this very reason. While I have drawn much inspiration from and used many aspects of Nagy's work in this paper, I disagree with the conclusions he reaches here and the assertion that he makes. I think there is a marked difference between Achilles at the start and then the finish of the epic and readers can see exactly where and why Achilles changes. I would go further and argue that these changes are not just due to things that happen in the story, like Aristotle argues is the case with tragedy, but also because of his own actions and what he learns from them.

Gregory Nagy's argument centers mainly around Achilles' reaction to events with anger and rage. The issue that I find with Nagy's conclusions are the fact that he bases his claims on the fact that Achilles has a singular reaction, anger, and the fact that this often lines up with his singular skill, his military prowess. However, I think the information that Nagy does not take into account the difference between the reasons for Achilles' anger and the way he expresses this anger,

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<sup>17</sup> Gregory Nagy, 47.

which is incredibly different from the start of the story to the end; this shows his changes and, what I would argue, is his development as a character as well.

During the opening book of the *Iliad*, Achilles is humiliated by Agamemnon, who takes his war prize, his favorite concubine by the name of Briseis. He is enraged by this slight and asks his mother to assure victory for the Trojans after refusing to aid the Greek army anymore, even threatening to return home. His anger here results in a passive action, far different from his rage at Hector after the death of his longtime friend, Patroclus.

After Patroclus' death, Achilles feels something that he did not express at all during the initial books of the *Iliad* and that is guilt. He tells his mother that he is to blame for what happened claiming that "I loved him/And I killed him."<sup>18</sup> As well as berating himself for being "...a dead weight on the earth..."<sup>19</sup> Achilles is angry after Patroclus' death, this is evident, but as the recipient of his anger changes from Agamemnon to himself, readers see an evident difference in the way this rage manifests. He is much more violent, slaughtering Trojan soldiers and children alike with, what G.K Zanker calls, a "...horrifying impartiality..."<sup>20</sup> Not only is the rage here magnified but his actions are active, rather than his initial passive response. Both reactions are anger and result in death and destruction, Nagy is right, but what he overlooks in his analysis is the distinctly human differentiation between the situations and Achilles' reasoning, which is anything but monolithic.

While I can certainly concede that Homer might not have understood character development as a modern reader and novelist do, one can look at Achilles at the end of the *Iliad* and recognize that this is a changed character from the man readers see at the start of the story.

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<sup>18</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 18. 85-86.

<sup>19</sup> Homer, 18.109.

<sup>20</sup> G.K Zanker, 104.

While Agamemnon and Antigone might be changed, they are not changed because of something that happens internally, they are changed because of the events that happen to them. Achilles is changed because of the way he reacts to those events.

### III. Principles

The initial claim that I made was that principles are what leads to the downfall of characters in tragedy. One sees this exemplified expressly in both plays I have chosen to analyze. Antigone's prioritization of her piety and ethics is obvious to most scholars who analyze the play. Helen Foley describes it as an "...unflagging, even obsessive, devotion to principles..."<sup>21</sup> and Charles Segal writes that Antigone "...rejects life with its compromises for the absolute of death."<sup>22</sup> This proves to be true, as one looks at Antigone's language around her choice to bury Polynices. Antigone's defiance might initially seem to be the product of filial concern, but a closer examination of her speeches yield where her true loyalties lie and show that while love for her brother might play a role, she is primarily driven by principles, rather than emotion or even an intimate relationship with her brother.

Antigone constantly, throughout the play makes constant references to her "...noble death..."<sup>23</sup> and calls her burial Polynices a "...crime of reverence..."<sup>24</sup> Antigone's repeated choice of words highlights her nobility and respect as opposed to any emotion she has regarding her crime. We can also see this when her sister, Ismene tries to share the blame for the deed with her, despite refusing to actually help her. Antigone shuns Ismene's desire to share the blame for Polynices' burial, despite not actually assisting. She is quick to correct her, not out of love for her

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<sup>21</sup> Helene Foley, *Antigone as Moral Agent*, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1996), 65.

<sup>22</sup> Segal, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 73.

<sup>24</sup> Sophocles, 74.

sister but out of disgust for Ismene's earlier cowardice, which enrages Antigone. During this scene, she taunts her sister and tells her to "...show your colors..."<sup>25</sup> then asks her "...Are you true to your birth? Or a coward?"<sup>26</sup> She concludes by arguing that Creon "...has no right to keep me from mine own."<sup>27</sup> Interestingly enough, through the entire first speech she makes to her sister, Antigone makes no appeal to her sister's emotions. There is no mention of the relationship the two girls hold or even of her brother. Any mention of Polynices is to speak of the duty that she owes him or the wrong that Creon committed. Antigone's arguments never turn to the connection that she shared with him. An emotional appeal would have had a better chance of actually convincing her sister, given that Ismene is clearly the more emotionally driven of the two sisters. Instead of this though, Antigone attempts to convince Ismene with an appeal to the same unwavering sense of right and wrong that Antigone herself holds. This proves that, while she might love her brother, love has little to do with why she buries the body to begin with and even less to do with why she wants Ismene to help her.

Even given this information, one might still argue that Antigone buries her brother out of a sense of love, however this does not seem to be the case. Due to the fact that Antigone believes what Creon did "...wasn't justice..."<sup>28</sup> she is intent on dying a martyr for her ideals. Through her conversation with Creon this becomes evident as she explicitly states that "...if I die young, all the better..."<sup>29</sup> Antigone also repeatedly romanticizes the fact that she knows she will die, as a result of her crime and is evidently eager and willing to do so.

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<sup>25</sup> Sophocles, 36.

<sup>26</sup> Sophocles, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Sophocles, 48.

<sup>28</sup> Sophocles, 451.

<sup>29</sup> Sophocles, 466.

However, perhaps the most telling facet of this is the fact that Antigone learns nothing from her experience. Unlike Achilles who clearly feels guilt for his part in Patroclus' demise, Antigone feels nothing of the sort for her scorn of her sister. Instead, despite being told she "...knows not when to yield..."<sup>30</sup> and that she "...chose anger and anger destroyed you."<sup>31</sup> Antigone, before taking her own life, does not respond not with regret or an admission that she perhaps did go too far, she does not speak to her frayed relationship with her sister or wish her fiance goodbye, instead, Antigone proclaims that "I hope they suffer every bit as I do now."<sup>32</sup> This hateful declaration proves that Antigone not only feels no remorse but that she actively wishes harm on people who, Antigone feels, did not abide by her principles. For instance, Ismene refused to bury the body but attempted to help save her from Creon's anger and take the blame with her. Yet, Ismene, because she did not live up to Antigone's idea of what loyalty should be, is included among the people she wishes would suffer.

Euripides' Agamemnon from *Iphigenia at Aulis* has a similar conflict between principle and emotional attachments. Agamemnon, at the start of the play, is devastated about having to choose between his daughter's life and a successful voyage to Trojan shores. However, Agamemnon, like Antigone, ultimately operates driven by his principles as well. The choice to sacrifice his daughter is made for a few reasons, all driven by ideals and the promise of Agamemnon's goals being fulfilled. Much like Homer's Agamemnon, Euripides chooses to use pride and honor as the principles that drive his tragic hero. Agamemnon's pride has been called into question by not only his wife, but also his own brother who argues:

Have you forgotten when you were on fire to be leader of  
the Danaan forces against Troy— you pretended not to care but

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<sup>30</sup> Sophocles, 471-72.

<sup>31</sup> Sophocles, 953-75.

<sup>32</sup> Sophocles, 928.

you wanted it, all right— how humble you were, shaking hands with everybody, keeping your doors open to whoever wanted to come in, and giving ear to all even if they had nothing to say? That was how you tried to bribe your way into office. Then when you had reached your goal, you changed; you were not much of a friend to your old friends, but unavailable, aloof behind your bolted doors. A man— unless he's a villain—should not change his ways when he succeeds<sup>33</sup>

Menelaus, here, points out Agamemnon's desire for power and how his position took residence over the relationship that the two brothers also once had prior to the start of the play. While one might accuse Menelaus of lying, as his brother does, one should keep in mind while reading that Agamemnon lies constantly and probably throughout the play, to his daughter, Achilles, his brother, and his wife. Menelaus is angry and impulsive to a fault in the play, but not a liar. Agamemnon also says nothing to deny his brother's accusations, showing us that ambition is a major factor in the choices that he makes throughout the play.

Agamemnon also cites his fear of looking like a coward in front of the "...whole assembled forces of the Greek army..."<sup>34</sup> as a reason he chooses to take his daughter's life. Agamemnon's relenting to the pressure of his army is the ultimate display of placing the socially accepted principle of honor above that of a relationship that he has with his daughter. Agamemnon's fear of his army can be attributed to the principle of honor, it can also be attributed to the idea that he desires to "...control my own affairs."<sup>35</sup> This idea related back to the principles that Agamemnon expresses when he speaks about being pressured by the Greek army.

Prior to his final choice being made, we can still see Agamemnon continually place his daughter's life second. Agamemnon tells his brother that "...nights and days will wear me away in

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<sup>33</sup> Euripides, 337-47.

<sup>34</sup> Euripides, 514.

<sup>35</sup> Euripides, 402.

tears for acting against custom and right toward the children I fathered.”<sup>36</sup> Much like Antigone’s lack of emotion when asking her sister for help, Agamemnon does not evoke a love of his daughter or the connection that he feels to her. Instead, Agamemnon evokes the principles and societal expectations of the time, that he would be acting against custom. It is this rationale coupled with Menealus’ accusation of Agamemnon’s ambition<sup>37</sup> that lead readers to the conclusion that, while Agamemnon clearly cares for his daughter and is distressed about the situation (unlike Aeschylus’ much more cynical account in his *Oresteia*) ultimately, there is little Agamemnon puts above the principle of honor, including his daughter’s life because even as Menealus changes his mind, and is ready to disband the army and leave Aulis, Agamemnon still decided to “...carry out the bloody murder of my daughter.”<sup>38</sup>

Now looking at Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*, one might argue that he too acts from a principled place and that his devotion to honor is what causes the events of the *Iliad* to transpire, however looking closer, one can see that that time Achilles acts from a principled place, times when personal motivators are secondary to him, end in personal disaster.

However, contrary to popular belief, Achilles’ initial refusal to fight is not an example of this. Of course his wounded pride plays a role, he states this explicitly, but more than a broad concept of honor, Achilles feels spited by a general that he feels is cowardly and wrong. Achilles accuses Agamemnon of “...bleeding your people dry...”<sup>39</sup> The use of a collective term here proves that Caroline Alexander’s assertion that Achilles is speaking words that “...less charismatic men had long thought...”<sup>40</sup> is correct. More than correct though, Alexander’s claims prove that

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<sup>36</sup> Euripides, 400.

<sup>37</sup> Euripides, 385.

<sup>38</sup> Euripides, 512.

<sup>39</sup> Homer, 1.243.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander, 21.



Achilles' advocacy for his men and rest of the Achaean army show that he is acting from a personal place of caring about his comrades and peers.

While Achilles' initial standing up to Agamemnon might not be for the sole sake of honor, he is clear when he speaks to his mother that honor is more than a motivating factor, it is his driving one and through this conversation Achilles goes as far to ask her to assure the Trojans' victory until he returns to the fray. Achilles tells his mother that he wants other soldiers to "...Appreciate Agamemnon for what he is/And...what a fool he's been because he did not honor/The best of all the fighting Acheans."<sup>41</sup> Achilles here operates from the solely principled place that Antigone and Agamemnon do where honor reigns paramount. The result of these misguided motivations is the death of people close to him as well as a devastating amount of his fellow soldiers. For much like Antigone causes the death of her fiance and mother in law and Agamemnon causes the presumed death of his daughter, Achilles' stubborn and vengeful request to his mother causes the death of hundreds of men and his closest comrade.

Despite these mistakes, it is still Achilles' ability to form and value relationships over principles that set him apart from a tragic character, though. This is evident when one looks at the Embassy to Achilles in contrast with Agamemnon's response to Menelaus' request and Antigone's appeals to Ismene. During Book Nine, Ajax, Odysseus, and Phoenix come to ask Achilles to fight. All three men make speeches to Achilles but their arguments all share one thing in common. They appeal to Achilles' sense of justice, not a personal connection. Odysseus, master rhetorician and first to speak tells Achilles to "...Think of yourself. Of the regret you will feel/From harm that will prove irreparable./This is the last chance to save your countrymen."<sup>42</sup> His tutor, Phoenix tells him

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<sup>41</sup> Homer, 1.427-31.

<sup>42</sup> Homer, 9.251-54.

“...If a son of Atreus were no offering gifts/And promising more, if he were still raging mad/I would not ask you to shrug off your grudge/And help the Greeks...Don’t scorn their words or thair mission here...”. He also tells Achilles that if he were to return to battle the Greeks would “...honor you as if you were a god...”<sup>43</sup>. All of these appeals made are to either what is the right thing to do or to a value system composed of glory and gifts, which Achilles has already proven by his proclamation to sail home, that he no longer cares about.

Ajax’s speech is a little different, as most scholars who read it argue that Ajax makes a personal appeal to friendship<sup>44</sup>. Ajax’s appeal do not come from a personal place, they come from the idea that you should be kind to your friends and just to your peers, principles. Ajax argues that Achilles “...has no regard/for the love that his friends honor him with.”<sup>45</sup> Ajax’s argument here has less to do with his relationship with Achilles than it does with the idea that you should help your friends if you cared about them,<sup>46</sup> as he makes no direct pleas relating to his kinship with Achilles.

Interestingly enough, the speaker Achilles is least convinced by, Odysseus, does make reference to a personal relationship with Achilles, one that we know Achilles cares deeply about. Odysseus talks about Achilles’ father. This is an appeal that is made to Achilles several times through the *Iliad*. Odysseus reminds him of his father’s words before he left for Troy that “...Greeks young and old will honor you...”<sup>47</sup> Patroclus makes a similar speech to Achilles when asking him to fight as well, at first begging him not to be “...vengeful...”<sup>48</sup> and berating him; “...they are dying out there... You and your damned honor! What good will it do for future

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<sup>43</sup> Homer, 9.251-54.

<sup>44</sup> G.K Zanker, 52.

<sup>45</sup> Homer, 9.530-620.

<sup>46</sup> Homer, 9.650-60.

<sup>47</sup> Homer, 9.242.

<sup>48</sup> Homer, 16. 23

generations...” During this speech, Patroclus makes explicit reference to Achilles’ parentage saying that “Peleus was never your father./Or Thetis your mother. No, the gray sea spat you out/Onto crags in the surf with an icy scab for a soul.”<sup>49</sup> We also see this when Achilles kills Hector. Before he dies Hector says:

I beg of you, Achilles, but your own soul/And by your parents,  
do not/Allow the dogs to mutilate my body/By the Greek ships. Accept  
the gold and bronze/Ransom my father and mother will give you<sup>50</sup>

Patroclus, Odysseus, and Hector’s appeals here share more than the evocation to his parentage; they are both pleas for Achilles to do what is right, moral, or just and Achilles refuses all of these requests. Contrasted with Priam’s request of Achilles, driven by love for his son, where he begs Achilles to remember his father and Achilles relents; one can see the difference in responses. Though Priam is his enemy and Odysseus, Ajax, Phoenix, and Patroclus are allies and friends, Achilles is moved by Priam’s pitiful allusion to his father as opposed to the requests for him to do what is just.

Lastly, one can see Achilles motivations change after Patroclus goes to fight in his armor and dies. Before killing Hector, Achilles kills a slave he had once freed. The man begs Achilles for mercy, but Achilles does not grant it to him and as he kills him lectures that “...Patroclus died, and he was far better than you...”<sup>51</sup> Achilles’ lack of mercy towards this man as well as Hector not only stems from grief about Patroclus’ death, but also from principle that good men die all the time.

#### **IV. Personal Relationships**

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<sup>49</sup> Homer, 16.24-38.

<sup>50</sup> Homer, 22.375-80.

<sup>51</sup> Homer. *Iliad*. Hackett Pub. Co, 1997. 21.111-12. .

Having already discussed how principles are secondary to Achilles and his true drive is connections he forms and how these connections are secondary to Antigone and Agamemnon. Through this section I intend to look at some of these connections and the stresses that are placed on them.

Agamemnon's relationship with his daughter, as I have already commented comes secondary to the ideals he holds of honor and respect. After Agamemnon chooses to kill Iphigenia, he starts to distance himself from her. We see this evident in the way he starts to refer to her. He starts to call her "...the child..."<sup>52</sup> and even more interesting, when speaking to his wife Clytemnestra, he calls her "...your daughter..."<sup>53</sup> Clearly through doing this he attempts to distance himself from his family and the relationship he had with them. By the end of the play, Agamemnon has given into his pride, desire to sack Troy and not "...let those worthless barbarians laugh at us."<sup>54</sup> All this at the expense of his family.

Christina Sorum writes in her article that throughout the play "...human decisions seem truly devalued..."<sup>55</sup> Agamemnon's choice to sacrifice his daughter and adhere to principled notions of honor leads to his downfall. While Agamemnon's story might not end in death, like Antigone's, Agamemnon is still destroyed beyond repair by the end of the play. He starts the play, changing his mind and deciding to call off the messenger, he proclaims that he "...would never have the heart to kill my daughter."<sup>56</sup> After speaking with his brother, however, Agamemnon agrees to her ritual sacrifice and the readers can truly see the consequences of choosing ideals over

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<sup>52</sup> Euripides, 540.

<sup>53</sup> Euripides, 710.

<sup>54</sup> Euripides, 299.

<sup>55</sup> Christina Sorum, *Myth, Choice, and Meaning in Euripides' Iphigenia at Aulis*, (*The American Journal of Philology*), 533.

<sup>56</sup> Euripides, 96.

a close relationship, through the degradation of Agamemnon's character. Agamemnon describes how he has been "...plotting against those nearest and dearest to me..."<sup>57</sup> and he accuses his wife of having a "...suspicious mind."<sup>58</sup> Agamemnon also deliberately hides his actions from his wife and tells his brother to "...go through the army and see that his wife does/ Not find out about this until I take the child and dispatch her to Hades..."<sup>59</sup> Clearly the adoption of this idea of honor has caused Agamemnon to do things that even he would deem morally reprehensible, but blinded by ambition he puts his family second and agrees to kill his daughter.

While readers do see Agamemnon struggle with this choice at the start of the play, one can also look at lines that are said to him about his prior actions as clues for his true feelings towards his choice. We learn that before the start of the play Agamemnon was "...delighted/And gladly undertook to sacrifice the child. Of your own free will/Not by force..."<sup>60</sup> This is interesting given what we know about Agamemnon at the start of the play. As readers learn more about Agamemnon we are shown a much less conflicted character and a version of Agamemnon who's honor has always, even prior to the start of the play, been held above his daughter's life and questions it only when prompted by a rare stirring of guilt.

This information can also be looked at in conjunction with Clytemnestra's speech to him after she finds out his plan to kill their daughter. Agamemnon's wife is outraged and devastated and reminds him about Euripides' account of their meeting. She reminds Agamemnon that "...against my will you married me—took me by force/After killing Tantalus, my former husband, and tearing my infant son from my breast/You smashed him on the ground with violent hands."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Euripides, 745.

<sup>58</sup> Euripides, 1132.

<sup>59</sup> Euripides, 538-41.

<sup>60</sup> Euripides, 359-61.

<sup>61</sup> Euripides, 1152.

Bringing this story up is an incredibly interesting choice on Euripides' part, as before this he attempted to create a sympathetic portrayal of Agamemnon. This is a lesser known story and without a doubt the least charitable version of how Agamemnon and Clytemnestra come to be married. However, more importantly, it shows that this is not the first time that Agamemnon has committed a grave sin against a relationship (raping his would-be wife and killing her child) for the means to an end, presumably, in this case the same desire for ambition, power, and status that is so evident in this play.

Looking at Antigone's situation one can see a similar devotion to the idea of honor that Agamemnon has, strange for a woman in her time. Helene Foley writes that "...honour, a principled responsibility to gods and family, and personal pain are given equal weight in her self-defence."<sup>62</sup> Foley's observations can specifically be noted through Antigone's conversation with her sister.

When Ismene begs Antigone not to leave her alone in the world and she attempts to appeal to Antigone's emotions begging her not to "...die outside the law..."<sup>63</sup> and responds to Antigone's claims of not having a choice in her actions, telling her "...I gave you reason not to make that choice."<sup>64</sup> as a reference to the relationship the two sisters held. One should look at Ismene's speech alongside Antigone's final justification for her actions. She claims that she "...would not do it for a child, were I a mother/Nor for a husband either." She even goes further and proclaims she would "Let them die, putrefied, dead./I would not defy the city at such a cost for their sake."<sup>65</sup>. Antigone's reasoning falls apart when one looks at her interactions with her sister. Similar to her

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<sup>62</sup> Foley, 52.

<sup>63</sup> Sophocles, 62.

<sup>64</sup> Sophocles, 556. .

<sup>65</sup> Sophocles, 905-7.

brother in that she can not replace him, but Antigone doesn't treat this connection the same way she treats her relationship with her brother, in fact when Ismene tearfully pleads with Antigone not to leave her alone, Antigone tells her to "Go to hell. Nothing could happen to me/That's half as bad as dying a coward's death."<sup>66</sup> This sharp response to her sister and blatant hypocrisy in her logic proves that Antigone's love for her brother comes second to her principle of loyalty and while the two might seem intertwined Antigone clearly puts the impersonal idea of loyalty over any real and emotional connection she had with her brother and sister.

One can also see this portrayed through her response to Ismene's desire to die with Antigone. Antigone's refusal to allow her sister to share in credit for her crime is another example of this. Antigone "No, you may not die along with me. Don't say you did it!/ You wouldn't even touch it. Now leave me death alone!"<sup>67</sup> Antigone's response here does not show an emotional connection to her sister and a desire to keep her safe, rather a pointed proclamation of her disgust at Ismene's cowardice and a reiteration of the suicidally reckless desire to die a martyr that she expressed in earlier scenes.

Antigone, much like Agamemnon, has a choice too. People throughout the play bring up options to Agamemnon rather than kill his daughter because he stands convinced that there is only one way to resolve the conflict, by taking her life. Antigone is similar in this regard. She is told by her sister to do it but keep it a secret, to which she refuses and says "For god's sake speak out. You'll be more the enemy to me/If you are silent. Proclaim it to the world!"<sup>68</sup> Antigone's choice

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<sup>66</sup> Sophocles, 96-97.

<sup>67</sup> Sophocles, 547-48.

<sup>68</sup> Sophocles. "Antigone." Hackett Publishing Company. 2004. Ln.86-88.

to very vocally and aggressively confront Creon shows that more than familial duty, Antigone's gripe is with the law and the way it was enforced.

Although Antigone's ultimate decision is to martyr herself for principle, Each of Achilles's significant choices is made solely for the benefit of a personal relationship. Patroclus appeals to Achilles' emotions two major times in the *Iliad*. In the first instance, early in the epic, he tearfully begs Achilles to fight, for the sake of the Greeks. Achilles is unmoved in his resolve and refuses to relinquish the sort of control he has over the Greek army. In this situation, Patroclus appeals to Achilles about something that has nothing to do with their relationship or him personally. He appeals to Achilles on a moral ground and a principle of what the right thing to do is. Achilles is unmoved and he refuses Patroclus's request.

Later in the epic, however, Patroclus appears after his death and begs Achilles to burn his body, saying "...never again/Will I come back from Hades' house, once you burn me/In my share of fire."<sup>69</sup> Achilles complies with this wish, without question. He agrees readily saying "Why have you come to me, here, dear heart/With all these instructions? I promise you/I will do everything just as you ask..."<sup>70</sup> Giving up Patroclus' body is a sacrifice for Achilles, yet he does so, not because of any principles that he may hold, but because of his emotional attachment to Patroclus. His decision to adhere to Patroclus's wishes in regard to Patroclus' death is different from his refusal to agree to take up arms earlier in the story. Although both requests were made to Achilles by Patroclus, the final request is of an intimate nature, while the earlier request concerned the affairs of the Greek army and was in no way related to the intensely personal relationship that the two men shared.

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<sup>69</sup> Homer. *Iliad*. Hackett Pub. Co, 1997. 23.82-84.

<sup>70</sup> Homer, 23.101-3.



Achilles cares little for the principles that are touted in Greek tragedy. Even before the death of Patroclus, Achilles cared little for ideals. Before sending Patroclus out into battle he says:

Oh Patroclus, I wish to father Zeus/And to Athena and Apollo/That  
all of them, Greeks and Trojans alike/Every last man on Troy's dusty  
plain/Were dead, and only you and I were left/to rip Ilium down, stone by  
sacred stone. <sup>71</sup>

Exemplified here is Achilles' lack of alliance to the Greek army and to the principle of loyalty, as opposed to holding that sacred, Achilles holds a single connection sacred, above the idea of loyalty to an army, a vast body of people, driven by ideals. Marta Gonzalez also points this out and claims that "Achilles is not shown to be particularly interested in the image others have of him..." <sup>72</sup> We can also see this shown through Achilles' interactions with Priam, where his priorities lie with a man that he has every reason to hate.

Upon entering the tent, Priam "...kissed the dread and murderous hands/That had killed so many of his sons." <sup>73</sup> and begs the shocked Achilles to release the body of his son and let him take it back to Troy. Priam, much like Odysseus and Patroclus and Hector earlier begs Achilles to "Think of your own father, and pity me..." <sup>74</sup>. This request is of a much more emotional nature than the others made to him, as it has nothing to do with what is right or socially expected of him, Priam is appealing to a personal relationship and one that he clearly cares deeply about. After Priam's request "...sorrow for his own father/Welled up in Achilles...And Achilles cried for his father and/For Patroclus..." <sup>75</sup>. Achilles' is moved by Priam's speech, appealing to his emotions.

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<sup>71</sup> Homer, 16.102-7.

<sup>72</sup> González, 44.

<sup>73</sup> Homer. 24.509-10.

<sup>74</sup> Homer, 24.540.

<sup>75</sup> Homer. 545-551.

Priam's speech does not appeal to what is right or what is just, Priam mentions nothing about the horrendous acts against Hector, he only appeals to Achilles' sense of pity. Priam wishes to respectfully and lovingly lay his son to rest, in much the same way that Patroclus wishes to be respectfully laid to rest by his closest friend.

G.K Zanker and Marta Gonzalez both write about the end scene of the *Iliad* between Priam and Achilles. Zanker comments that "...Achilles seems to respond to Priam's supplication not only because of Priam's gifts, though these are a necessary part of the transaction, but because of what seems like a sense of fellow suffering..."<sup>76</sup> and Zanker also notes the tender way in which Achilles no treats Hector's corpse<sup>77</sup>, much like the tender way in which he treats Patroclus' corpse during his funeral, except giving up Hector's body is even more of a sacrifice for Achilles than giving up Patroclus because after Patroclus dies and Achilles burns him, Hector's body is the final connection that Achilles has to his departed friend and giving up Hector's body to Priam mirrors the sacrifice that Achilles makes when he burns Patroclus' body on the pyre and the connection he makes with Priam there is the same kind of human connection he had with Patroclus, allowing Achilles to "...reconcile himself to the human condition..."<sup>78</sup> as well as "...rediscovery of the need for pity and respect for the disadvantaged..."<sup>79</sup>. This reconciliation with Priam is the final closure that Achilles needs to resolve his turmoil and continue with his life.

## V. Conclusion

Marta Gonzalez writes that "...human nature cannot have undergone substantial changes since the time of the ancient Greeks..."<sup>80</sup> and analyzing works in the classical tradition one sees

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<sup>76</sup> Zanker, 4

<sup>77</sup> Zanker, 121.

<sup>78</sup> González, 78.

<sup>79</sup> G.K Zanker, 115.

<sup>80</sup> González, 33.

how true her statement is. These are patterns that have carried through to the modern day and influenced the Western canon, with an invaluable amount of influence looking at epic from Dante to Milton and one can even see these patterns emerge in the modern day novel.

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