

ΜΙΝΩΣ Μ. ΚΟΚΟΛΑΚΗ

Τακτικού καθηγητού της 'Αρχαίας 'Ελληνικῆς Φιλολογίας

HOMERIC POETRY AND TRAGEDY

The subject I propose to discuss is the relationship between Homeric poetry and that literary genre which took shape three centuries later, namely Attic tragedy.

In particular, I shall try to explain the Platonic characterization of Homer as "the schoolmaster and guide for all tragic poets" or the "first and most poetical of the tragedians".

Plato in his effort to combat his own poetic idiosyncrasy was forced to oust Homer as well as the playwrights from his ideal and rationalized Republic. All the same his worthy student from Stagira, reversing the master's theory on art, restored the epic and tragic Muses on the grounds of metaphysical knowledge and psychological necessity. The opposing views of the two philosophers testify already quite eloquently not only to the similarity of the two literary forms but also to a powerful and simultaneous influence which both forms exercised on ancient society.

Aristotle in his *Poetics* defines the common characteristics of epics and tragedy as follows.

Both aim at imitating serious actions in human life by means of rhythmic language. With a coherent and causal interrelation of their parts, as if they were living organisms, they arouse their own proper pleasure. Consequently the two forms of art are superior to history—which is taken to mean a chronicle joining together unrelated events on the grounds of synchronism or mechanical sequence.

Furthermore, Aristotle argues that the same types exist in epic poetry as in tragedy. This can at times be qualified¹ either as

a) complex (as opposed to a simple plot),

b) a play of characters (= ethical)

or c) a play of suffering,

depending on the prominence in it of one element or another.

Besides, rules and principles governing individual sections in a tragedy

1. *Poet.* 18 (1455b, 32-34), 24 (1459b, 7-9).

were, in Aristotle's view, already valid in epic creation, par excellence, however, in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

All the same tragedy has its own merits, and these are the accessories (properly ἡδύσματα, a word taken from cookery and meaning *sauce*): the music of the lyrical parts and the visual representation of the plots. On the other hand narrative poetry excels in the easy handling of various episodes at the same time and in the description of miraculous happenings which would certainly cause mistrust or even laughter if they were produced on the stage. Differences between the two forms of literature also refer to metre and length. For example, the 15,693 verses of the *Iliad* or 12,110 of the *Odyssey* almost correspond to no less than ten Attic tragedies. But such dissimilarities, which are on the whole confined to the external morphology of the pieces or the ways of performance, are less important than the common qualities of the two forms, as defined by the Philosopher. In addition, they do not affect their intrinsic substance and the deeper message which both convey.

Of this common substance I have chosen three basic conditions, on which a character in the Homeric poetry becomes a tragic hero.

The first of these is the existence of a dilemma, in the face of which a man is nailed by superior powers. On both sides of this dilemma good and evil are blended together. As a result the choice between the unwelcome alternatives becomes vexing and splits the human soul and intellect in two: *ἡ καρδίη πόρφυρε* (i. e. the heart brooded or surged like a wave), *θυμὸς ἐνὶ στήθεσσι πάτασεν* (i. e. the heart fluttered in the breast) or *ἔδαλζετο* or *διχθὰ* or *διάνδιχα μερμήριζε* (i. e. the soul was divided within)—these are metaphors introduced by Homer to picture man's agony before he takes an irrevocable decision.

In the XIth song of the *Iliad* Odysseus hastens to cover the wounded Diomedes. He pays, however, a price for his altruism: left to himself without a single Argive to support him, now that all are panic-stricken, he faces a heavy attack by the Trojans. The choice between infamy, if he takes to his heels, and the unflinching bravery of a leader, harasses him. The king of Ithaca finally chooses the dangerous path of virtue. What follows next confirms the seriousness of his decision. Indeed he is hit by a spear, which passing through his shield, continues on through the cuirass and it is only by a miracle that he escapes. This miracle was Athena's intervention, who held the point of the hostile spear "not allowing it to penetrate (literally: to be mingled with) Odysseus' bowels"¹.

1. XI (A) 438.

A similar moral concept of life is impersonated by the two protagonists of the Trojan drama: Hector, Priam's bravest offspring, and Achilles. The latter, the only son of Peleus and Thetis, is already aware that joining the battle will give him everlasting glory, at the same time, however, it will destroy his chance of returning home.

Undying fame coupled with premature death hold one end of the dilemma, whereas the other offers a long yet inglorious life on Phthia¹. The son of Peleus chooses the former alternative in full consciousness that by doing so he is irrevocably heading for the dark house of Hades immediately after Hector's killing: "if that is so, my child, you surely have not long to live; for after Hector's death, you are doomed forthwith to die"²—is the last warning signal from his mother.

In the opposite camp Hector's resolution to resist Achilles' vindictive rage is put to a critical test by the weeping parents, who from the walls of the city beseech him to retreat. The feeling of shame amongst his fellow-citizens will turn the scales in favour of valour. After some hectic moments of wavering he takes the ominous course, though he is the person least responsible for this disastrous war.

The theme of a dilemma between glorious self-sacrifice and detested survival is variously renewed in Attic tragedies. It suffices to quote in this connexion a fragment, probably from Euripides' *Heracleidae*, in which the two alternatives are tersely stated:

To die is dreadful, yet it brings fair fame;
Not to die is craven, yet there's pleasure there³.

The two concise lines probably refer to the voluntary sacrifice of Heracles' young daughter Macaria, who like Iphigeneia in Aulis, Menoeceus in the *Phoenissae*, Polyxena in the *Hecuba*, Phrixus, Andromache, and Alcestis in their respective plays compose the rich gallery of young heroes and heroines, who according to the scenic philosopher overpowered the fear of death and the attachment to life to serve high and general aims or conjugal love.

To the cases of tragic dilemmas in Homer I would like to add the episode of Sarpedon from the *Patrocleia* rhapsody in the *Iliad*.

The stalwart commander of the Lycians is about to repulse Patroclus, who is already wearing Achilles' armour. Zeus—whose beloved offspring

1. IX (I) 413.

2. XVIII (Σ) 96.

3. Nauck², fr. 854.

Sarpedon is—watches the coming clash with unfeigned emotion. It has been appropriately written¹ of this scene that “Zeus . . . once almost ceases to be a god and rises to the tragic heights of human sorrow and fortitude”. The ruler of the Universe confesses his situation to Hera. He is in two minds, whether he shall snatch Sarpedon up and set him down alive in the rich land of Lycia, far from the war and all its tears, or whether he shall tolerate his killing by Patroclus. But if he acts with partiality to save Sarpedon this will arouse the anger of other divinities, to whom he will offer the precedent for future violations of the established order in the world. Therefore, he is forced to bend under the yoke of Necessity and abandon his son at death’s door. As a father, however, he will pay the last tribute of tears to Sarpedon: “he did send down a shower of bloody dew-drops to the earth”². After the fight and Sarpedon’s killing Zeus ordered Apollo to “take the corpse out of range, wash it in running water, anoint it with ambrosia, and put it in the hands of Sleep and his twin-brother Death so that it can be carried off to Lycia, where his kinsmen and retainers will give him burial, with a barrow and a monument”.

The correlation of this Zeus, who suppresses his feelings as a father, with Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, who in tears endures his Iphigeneia being gagged³ and slain, adds another proof of the great tragedian’s debt to Homer, from whose “mighty banquets he had taken large cuts” — as he himself declared⁴.

When Hector and Achilles as well as the Father of men and gods himself as an affectionate parent become entangled in the dire trap of Necessity, they resort to desperate solutions, in full consciousness of the consequences awaiting them.

A similar awareness of the impiety of his action characterizes Eteocles before fighting with his brother in Aeschylus’ *Septem*, and Orestes in the *Choephoroe* but also the honest Neoptolemus in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, when in defiance of the army’s orders he redresses his moral personality and takes upon himself the charge of his treason.

A second condition, the reverse of what has been expounded so far,

1. See G. M. Calhoun in A. Wace-Fr. Stubbings, *A Companion to Homer*, London 1962, p. 449.

2. XVI (II) 459.

3. Athen. VIII 347e.

4. Agam. 235-237.

is when the individual unwittingly brings about the opposite to what he has been striving for: a person worrying about his friend's welfare becomes his destroyer and the one pursuing his own interests contrives his own disaster. Such a concept of human drama has been exemplified in various characters of ancient dramaturgy:

In Euripides' *Hippolytus* Phaedra's nurse, in the hope that she is doing good to her mistress, reveals the secret of Phaedra's illicit love to Hippolytos, and by doing so starts the mechanism of misfortune.

Affection for her husband, Heracles, motivates Deianira's behaviour in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, when she sends him a new garment, smeared with Nessus' blood as a potent spell. It does not occur to her that the alleged spell will cause the hero's martyrdom.

Both Amphiarauus, the pious seer in the *Septem*, and Hippolytos in the Euripidean tragedy unknowingly prescribe their doom by taking an oath, which they are later unwilling to break.

Still the traditional symbol of such self-deceit has been Oedipus, the acute interpreter of unsolved riddles. Engaging in the struggle to clean the city from the pollution of Laius' murder, he is unable to imagine that all the curses he pronounces against the unknown murderer are in fact directed against himself.

The best intentions may eventually turn to hateful results.

"Evil may spring from good, whenever a man does not know how to guide the good"—this is a statement from Democritus¹, the atomic philosopher of the fifth century.

A substantial feature of tragedy according to Aristotle is the arousing of pity for the characters appearing on stage. Pity is chiefly caused by the person who does not deserve his ill-fortune. Consequently, mistakes implying ignorance or miscalculation—which Aristotle terms as *ἀμαρτήματα*,² i. e. errors, and which engender harm or death to others despite the noble motives or the author's expectations—are included amongst the factors of the tragic pity and fear. Examples of such errors occur already in the Homeric poetry:

In the very first book of the *Iliad* when the plague sent by Apollo decimates the Achaean army, Achilles summons an assembly without suspecting that his initiative will be presently reversed by a clash with Agamemnon. The outstanding hero, worried about the plight of the allies, is overcome by wrath and withdraws his men from the battlefield. He is idly

1. Diels - Kranz¹², fr. 173.

2. *Rhet. A* (1374 b, 7-8).

brooding in his tent unmoved by the effects of his behaviour—until Fate knocks on his own door when Patroclus falls. In the XVIIIth Book of the poem, crushed by grief, he puts the blame for his friend's loss on himself: "Let me die forthwith, since I have failed to assist my companion whilst being slain. Ah, how I wish that discord could be banished from the world of gods and men, and with it anger . . . that makes the wisest man flare up and spreads like smoke through his whole being" ¹.

Patroclus' action too is governed by the antithesis between apparent and real values of things. In Book XVI (Π) Achilles' personal attendant and friend deploring the turn of the battle in which most of the leaders, such as Diomedes, Odysseus, Agamemnon and Eurypylus were wounded, beseeches his master to lend him his armour and let him lead forth the Myrmidons. Here the poet anticipating the future adds the following, seemingly contradictory, comment: "so Patroclus made his appeal. But how foolish he was! Had he but known it, he was praying for his own doom and evil death" ².

Inefficiency of human intellect or sudden infatuation brought about by Ate lead the Hero to actions incurring ruin for himself or his beloved.

In two words: ἐπίσπαστον κακὸν ³ i. e. "self-inflicted harm or evil" Homer has condensed the tragic element of the involuntary culprit, who belatedly recognizes the meaning of his conduct.

In the course of heavy fighting described in Book V of the Iliad Menelaos runs after the Trojan Phereclus, catches him up and strikes him to death. Phereclus drops on his knees with a scream, and "Death enveloped him" ⁴. This incident would not have been dissimilar to numerous others thronged in the heroic poem, had Homer not emphasized—no doubt intentionally—the identity of the fallen ⁵. A son of a family, in which carpentry is represented as hereditary in three generations, Phereclus is responsible for building for Paris "those trim ships that had started all the trouble and proved a curse to the Trojan people and to himself, since he knew nothing of the oracles". The work of his handicraft is therefore named by the poet νῆες ἀρχέκατοι ⁶ (i. e. ships which began mischief). The end of the carpenter has been an ἐπίσπαστον κακὸν for the primordial error recoiled on the

1. XVIII (Σ) 96 ff.

2. XVI (Π) 46-47.

3. XVIII (σ) 73, XXIV (ω) 462.

4. V (Ε) 68.

5. Ibid. 59-64.

6. Ibid. 62-63.

culprit, no matter if after a decade. Zeus—says Solon in his elegy on Righteousness echoing Hesiod—is not quick to anger, like humans, yet he never forgets; his Justice pursues sometimes the guilty, sometimes their children or else their seed after them.

In the same elegy Solon warns people of the threat of insecurity hanging over human efforts: “nobody knows at the beginning of a matter how it is to end”¹.

The wisdom expressed in the elegiacs of the Athenian law-giver is proved by the passages quoted earlier as well as by the sad experience of Phoenix before he left home to find kind hospitality at Peleus’ house and be made a tutor to the young Achilles. Phoenix’s misadventure, narrated by himself in the ninth (I) book, presents the moral discrepancy between fair intentions and undeserved misery.

Amyntor, the king of thessalian Hellas and Phoenix’s father, having a concubine, dishonoured his wife. Yielding to his mother’s entreaties young Phoenix interposed himself as a lover in order to make the concubine lose Amyntor’s favour. But the old man, finding this out, cursed his son with childlessness. And as time showed—says the poet—this curse was fulfilled by the gods, by Zeus of the Underworld and horrid Persephone².

It was to be expected that such myth, containing the tragic kernel of unmerited retribution in life, should fertilize the dramatic poetry of the fifth cent. B. C. Euripides, in particular, made the penalty imposed upon Phoenix even harder, thus confirming Aristotle’s characterization of him “as the most tragic of the poets”. In his lost *Phoenix* he showed the young hero blinded by the servants of his inexorable father³.

To this category of sufferings springing from noble motives one may add Odysseus’ ill-luck following his departure from Aeolus’ island. After being presented with a leather sack, in which the adverse winds were tied up, the stout-hearted king of Ithaca handles the rudder (or, according to a different interpretation of the phrase *πῶδα νηός*⁴, the sheet) of his ship himself for nine consecutive days and nights in his anxiety to make a quick run home. And, indeed, on the tenth day they are already in sight of their land. But then his self-imposed efforts, and fatigue overwhelm Odysseus, who falls fast asleep. The crew seizes the chance to undo the bag, believing it

1. Sol. Eleg. I 65-6.

2. IX (I) 457.

3. Nauck², fr. 815. Cf. T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides*, London 1967, p. 85.

4. X (κ) 32.

to contain a fortune of gold and silver. No sooner had they opened it than the Winds all rushed out. In an instant the tempest was upon them thrusting the ship out to sea and awakening Odysseus. He nearly came to the ends of despair and self-destruction at this. He steeled himself, however, to bear it, and covering his head with his cloak he lay where he was in the ship¹. Displaying *τλημοσύνην* ("endurance"), which is praised by Archilochus² as a god-sent remedy for irreversible evils, Odysseus will suffer the annihilation of his unsparing toil like a hero in Attic dramas.

The examples just quoted of altruistic aims leading to ruinous results come under the wider concept of the Aristotelian *peripeteia*, which is termed by the Philosopher as "a change of the situation into the opposite"³ (i.e. a reversal or irony of Fate). Such annihilation of man's foresight was, among other things, underlined in the anapaests which traditionally conclude five of Euripides' plays⁴:

"Gods manifest themselves in many forms,
Bring many matters to surprising ends;
The things we thought would happen do not happen.
The unexpected, God makes possible".

Of those three elements (in Aristotelian terms⁵ *peripeteia*, recognition, and calamity) the *Iliad*, as we might expect, is full of calamities, notably killings and woundings. The *Odyssey*, on the other hand, is animated by successive recognitions. Reversals (i.e. *peripeteiai*), however, occur in both epics taking their material and colour from the poetical context. In the *Iliad*, for instance, the *ἄλλοπρόσαλλος*⁶ (i.e. "fickle" or "treacherous") war god unexpectedly strikes to death a warrior who was about to attack his adversary. Again two words alone: *κτανέοντα κατέκτα* (i.e. slays him that would slay) have expressed the reversal of chance on the battlefield.

According to the Xth Book, labelled *Doloneia*, the Trojan scout Dolon has been assured by Hector's oath that his reward for a nocturnal mission to spy on the Achaeans will be Achilles' horses. Full of confidence,

1. X (κ) 53-4.

2. Eleg. VII 5 ff.

3. Poet. 11 (1452 a 22-23).

4. See W. S. Barrett, *Euripides Hippolytos*, Oxford 1964, pp. 417-418.

5. Poet. 11 (1452 b 9-10).

6. V (E) 831.

7. XVII (Σ) 309.

he promises to steal upon Agamemnon's headquarters, where a military council will take place. But when the plan is put into practice the roles are reversed. Dolon is captured by Odysseus and Diomedes while crossing the field and, seized with panic, he reveals the military secrets of his own land in the hope that he will save his life. All the same, and despite the promises given to him, he is murdered by his persecutors, who in turn steal through the Thracian camp, slay the sleeping king together with his bodyguards and carry off Rhesus' magnificent horses, which were "whiter than snow and as fast as the winds" in Dolon's own description. Thus Hector's impious oath has been broken or Hector swore falsely (ἐπίορκον ἐπόμοσε¹ says the poet anticipating later events) i. e. in the sense that he took a bootless oath, an oath he meant to fulfil, but fate gave a twist he could not expect.

Not only Dolon but Hector himself was to lose his life by Achilles' spear, before setting fire to the Achaean fleet, as he planned.

Lycaon, the son of Priam and Laothoe, is the hero of a similar tragic *peripeteia*. He was taken captive by Achilles in a night sortie while he was in his father's vineyard, and sold as a slave in the island of Lemnos. From Lemnos he was ransomed, sent to Troad across the sea and, finally, managing to slip away from his protectors came home to Troy. For no less than eleven days he celebrated² his escape from Lemnos among his friends. Ironically, his departure from the island and his gradual approach to his family meant in fact a retrogressive encounter with fate.

For on the twelfth day Lycaon, joining a rout of the Trojans, was cast once more into the hands of an Achilles furious and cruel now as never before because of the loss of Patroclus.

Lycaon, who the previous day was rejoicing in his rescue, vainly pleads for mercy with Achilles. In the end he has to surrender himself to his killer, who afterwards takes him by the foot and hurls the corpse into the eddies of the river Scamander. Lycaon's self-deception presages the useless forethought of Oedipus, who keeps away from Corinth, allegedly the ill-omened city, to rest assured in the deadly indeed city of Thebes.

From the *Odyssey* I should like to choose two episodes, in which the Aristotelian concept of *peripeteia* is dramatized.

The first refers to a Sidonian woman³, of whom Eumaeus, Odysseus'

1. X (K) 332.

2. XXI (Φ) 45.

3. XV (O) 417 ff.

swineherd, speaks in the XVth Book. The Phoenician woman had been carried off by pirates from her home and sold to Ctesius, the king of the island of Syrie and father of the boy Eumaeus.

One day the island was visited by a party of Phoenician traders who turned the slave-girl's head by swearing to bring her safe and sound to her home. She trusted them and in order to spur their readiness even more she abducted the royal baby together with three precious goblets to be used in payment for her passage. On the seventh day after they had made for the open sea the runaway woman was struck by sudden death and, in the poet's words¹, "she crashed headlong into the hold like a gannet plunging into the sea". The unexpected end turns the scales of the drama. The traders throw her corpse overboard as prey for the seals and fish, whereas little Eumaeus is sold in Ithaca, whereto the winds and currents have driven them, to serve for life as a swineherd to Laertes.

The second episode takes place during the slaughter of the suitors which covers the XXII Book of the *Odyssey*. Antinous, the most impudent of the suitors, nurses the hope that he will win over Penelope by stringing Odysseus' bow and shooting successfully through all the twelve axes. His expectation, however, is reversed, for he will be the first—as the poet says with bitter irony—to "taste" (γεύσεσθαι)² the arrow from the hands of Odysseus, whom he used to scorn mistaking him for a miserable beggar.

The works of the ancient tragic Muse have preserved their effectiveness until today, as they dramatize with boldness and clarity the problems, the deficiencies, but above all the responsibility of man. Oedipus is vexed by the thought that he unwittingly cursed himself; the chorus of Elders in the *Antigone* blame the heroine as well as Creon for their self-inflicted misery, whereas Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* censures the hermit of Lemnus as responsible for his troubles, for which he is not entitled to ask for sympathy.

What happens in Attic tragedies is the natural outcome of men's actions, whether conscious or not. "The part played by the god can always be subtracted without making nonsense of the actions", as Hugh Lloyd-Jones fittingly observes³.

His remark is primarily valid for Homeric poetry, which presents the events viewed from two parallel levels: on earth and in the heavens.

1. XV (O) 479.

2. XXI (Φ) 98.

3. *The Justice of Zeus*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1971, p. 10.



The blinding of Polyphemos and Odysseus' escape from his cave with his men is the inevitable sequel of psychological factors as well as conscious actions. Still it agrees with the meaning of the old prophecy¹, which Polyphemos belatedly recognizes.

Even Odysseus' fictitious adventures on Egyptian soil, narrated to Eumaeus in the XVIth Book², is first presented as a mischievous plan hatched by Zeus³, but soon afterwards explained by the hero's own impulse⁴ to sail for Egypt. Again, the acts of violence and plunder carried out later by his men in defiance of his instruction⁵ account for their subsequent disaster.

This convergence of the two lines upon the final results by no means reduces the independence and the culpability of the Homeric characters; on the contrary, from what has been cited so far, it becomes clear—I hope—that human anxiety in the face of inescapable dilemmas, the choice of one of two distressing solutions by one's own free will, or repentance for unfair or rash deeds, and even feelings of guilt for accidents resulting from total unawareness—are instances which free the Homeric character from the mechanism of divine determinism or the bonds of Fate. It is these latter factors which have been unduly overestimated by modern homerists⁶.

Such identical approach to man's problems accounts for the fact that both forms of literary creation, i. e. epics and tragedy, have been normally considered together and appreciated by the supporters of poetical *mimesis*, such as Aristotle, or both barred together from a proper society as harmful, as in the case of the founder of the ancient Academy and earlier moralists, such as Xenophanes.

1. IX (I) 507

2. *Odyss.* XIV (ξ) 243 ff

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.* 246.

5. *Ibid.* 262.

6. Cf. Denys Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad*, Berkeley Los Angeles 1963, p. 10.