

The Fall of the Tragic Hero: A Critique of the “Hubristic Principle”

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Abstract

The idea of attaching moral depravity to the fall of the tragic heroes (according to Aristotle, those men who enjoy prosperity and high reputation like Oedipus and Thyestes etc.) did not start with the three tragic poets, namely; Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, but rather it dates back even to Homer. This idea is, of course, influenced by the old Greek tradition of Koros, Hubris, Nemesis and Ate. The totality of this traditional view and its application is equated to the phrase ‘hubristic principle’, in the scheme of this work. The hubristic principle makes specific that the fall of the hero is as a result of a sin or wrong that he committed. The commission of this wrong must not go unpunished. In effect, the hand of Justice, what they call nemesis, no matter how delayed must fall on the hero. The problem is how then do you reconcile situations where the fall of the hero is not his making? In other words, where do you place undeserved misfortune that befalls the hero? Apparently, it is this inadequacy of the hubristic syndrome that Aristotle proposes hamartia (Greek, for error) as the appropriate means in accounting for the fall of the tragic hero. This paper discusses first, the hubristic principle and its application and second, assesses the reliability of the theory in accounting for the fall of the tragic hero.

Introduction

The idea of attaching moral depravity to the fall of the tragic heroes did not start with the three tragic poets, namely; Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, but rather it dates back even to Homer. This idea is, of course, influenced by the old Greek tradition of *Koros*, *Hubris*, *Nemesis* and *Ate*. The totality of this traditional view and its application is equated to the phrase ‘hubristic principle’, in the scheme of this work. It is therefore, appropriate to first explain the concepts and to secondly, expatiate on their usage by writers such as Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, Thucydides and especially the three Greek tragic poets, as earlier mentioned.

Koros

The word *Koros* is the Anglicised form of the Greek *κόρος*, which is variously explicated as satiety, surfeit, and insolence, as cause or corollary of hubris. (H.G. Liddell & R.Scott). It refers to the quality or state of being fed or gratified to, or beyond, capacity. In other words, it is an expression of overabundant supply, in effect, excess.

Hubris

The word *Hubris* is the Anglicised form of the Greek *ὑβρις* which means “wanton violence, arising from the pride of strength or from passion, insolence,” (Liddell & Scott). Hubris, intentionally dishonouring behaviour, was a powerful term of moral condemnation in ancient Greece, and in Athens, and perhaps elsewhere; it was also treated as a serious crime. The common use of hubris in English to suggest pride, over-confidence, or any behaviour which may offend divine powers rests, it is now generally held, on a misunderstanding of ancient texts, and concomitant and over-simplified views of the Greek attitudes to the gods which

have lent support to many doubtful and often over-Christianising, interpretations, above all of Greek tragedy.

The best ancient discussion of hubris is found in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: his definition is that hubris is:

Doing and saying things at which the victim incurs shame, not in order that one may achieve anything other than what is done, but simply to get pleasure from it. For those who act in return for something do not commit hubris, they avenge themselves. The cause of the pleasure for those committing hubris is that by harming people, they think themselves superior; that is why the young and the rich are hubristic, as they think themselves superior when they commit hubris. (*Rhetoric*: 1378^b 23-30).

This account, locating hubris within a framework of ideas concerned with the honour and shame of the individual, which took a central place in the value-systems of the ancient Greeks, fits very well the vast majority of texts exploiting the notion, from Homer till well after Aristotle's own time. While it primarily denotes gratuitous dishonouring by those who are, or think they are, powerful and superior, it can also at times denote the insolence of accepted 'inferior' persons, such as women, children, or slaves who disobey or claim independence; or it may be used to emphasise the degree of humiliation actually inflicted on a victim, regardless of the agent's intention; some cases, especially applied to verbal insults, may be humorously exaggerated; and revenge, taken to excessive or brutal lengths can be condemned as constituting fresh hubris. (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2003:732). It must therefore, be understood that the exposition and the clarification above underpins the varying

interpretations of hubris regarding the situation and the context.

Adding his bit to the varying interpretations of the word, D.M MacDowell explains that they call it hubris (arrogant violence arising from passion) and this can *mutatis mutandis* be considered as the ‘big bang’ of the concept-formation of crime as we know it today. For the Greek, manifestations of such a deliberately criminal behaviour are found in the misconduct of a young man full of energy as well as of men who abuse their wealth and political power. Other characteristic manifestations are, further, eating and drinking, sexual activity, larking about, hitting and killing, taking other people’s property and privileges, jeering at people and disobeying authority both human and divine. A person shows hubris (arrogance) by deliberately indulging in conduct which is bad, immoral, or at best useless, because it is what he wants to do, having no regard for the lives or rights of other people. (MacDowell 1976: 14-31).

Besides, M.W. Dickie’s position on hubris, which is captured in the article of D.L. Cairns (1993:1), explains among other things that hubris is essentially a disposition of over-confidence or presumption, as a result of which one fails to realize or recognize one’s limitations and precariousness of one’s human condition.

Cairns goes further to analyse the dispositional aspect of the meaning and the application of the word, which he admits was not the main interest of Aristotle. In this regard, Cairns writes:

True, Aristotle does define hybris in terms of acts, but even though hybris is, for him, always a particular way of treating another person, it is not the nature of the act or the effect on the honour of the patient which makes an act

hubristic, but the motive; and that motive is a *prohairesis*, a particular choice of a developed character. (Cairns, 1993:6-7).

In effect, Cairns tries to equate hubris to ‘thinking big’. In this regard he comments:

Terms such as *mega phronein* are, ... ways of referring to the subjective, dispositional aspect of hubris, and thus, since hubris-words can be used in purely dispositional senses, hubris and ‘thinking big’ can amount to the same thing. (Cairns, 1993:11)

Supporting his argument for the dispositional aspect of the interpretation of hubris, Cairns cites Plato’s treatment of the subject:

The extreme over-valuation of the self that is hybris is, for Plato, a failure to control disruptive forces within the personality, a refusal to accept one’s place within a rational system, and an exaltation of the merely human (or less than human) at the expense of the divine. (Cairns, 1993:31).

He further argues that Plato’s recognition of the associations of hybris with exuberance, vigour, disease, and madness is, because it forms such an obvious point of contact between his view and some of the earliest poetic applications, valuable evidence of the dispositional basis of hybris. (Cairns, 1993:31). David Cohen also notes that in surveying all the usages of the words hubris, *hubrizein*, *hubristes*, and *hubrisma*, in the principal 5th and 4th century Athenian prose

authors, he discovers that more than fifty per cent of all occurrences refer in a general way to some unspecified kind of wrongful, insulting, insolent, or excessive behaviour.(Cohen, 1991:172).

Nemesis

Nemesis, could be interpreted as distribution of what is due, but in common usage it means retribution, especially righteous anger aroused by injustice; later, of the wrath of the gods; indignation at undeserved good fortune. It is also associated with the impersonation of divine retribution, coupled with *aidos* (Liddell & Scott). Nemesis also refers to both goddess and an abstract concept from *véμειν* (to deal or distribute); often a personified moral agent ('Retribution') like Lachesis and Praxis. Nemesis was daughter of Night, born after the Moirai and Keres as an affliction to mortal men. (Hornblower & Spawforth, 2003:1034). Hesiod gives us a detailed account of this picture in his *Theogony* when he explains thus:

Also she bare the Destinies and ruthless avenging Fates, Clotho and Lachesis and Atropos, who give men at their birth both evil and good to have, and they pursue the transgressions of men and of gods: and these goddesses never cease from their dread anger until they punish the sinner with a sore penalty. Also deadly Night bare Nemesis (Indignation) to afflict mortal men, and after her, Deceit and Friendship and hateful Age and hard-hearted Strife. (*Theogony*: 216-225).

Ate

Ate is normally referred to as a mental aberration, or perhaps abnormality; infatuation causing irrational behaviour which leads to disaster. A hero's *ate* is brought about through psychic intervention by a divine agency, usually Zeus, but can also be physically inflicted. *Ate* is also sometimes personified as the daughter of Zeus who is expelled from Olympus to bring harm to men. Agamemnon remarks:

Ate, the eldest Daughter of Zeus, who blinds us all, accursed spirit that she is, never touching the ground with those insubstantial feet of hers, but flitting through men's heads, corrupting them, and bringing this one or the other down. (*Iliad*, XIX: 91-94).

We need to state here that the Greeks considered the application of *koros-hubris-nemesis-ate* as the ideal means of placing value or moral judgment on the actions of both the citizenry and foreigners. Consequently, a detailed account of the application of all the preceding concepts follows suit, starting off with Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, Thucydides and the three Greek tragedians, namely: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In effect, the following discusses the hubristic principle and its application by these authors earlier mentioned.

Homer and the Hubristic Principle

The traditional view of *koros-hubris-nemesis* and *ate* is aptly demonstrated by Agamemnon in Homer's *Iliad*. When the feud between Agamemnon and Achilles is ended, the former demonstrates this idea of *koros* when he explains his readiness to compensate the latter by showering innumerable gifts on him. Agamemnon boasts:

As for the gifts, here am I, ready to produce all that my lord Odysseus promised when he went to you yesterday in your hut... my servants shall fetch the presents for you from my ship, so that you may assure yourself of their excellence. (*Iliad*: XIX: 140-144).

It is important to understand that the availability of abundant wealth and the enormous power that Agamemnon wields, perhaps, influences his hubristic act of coveting the mistress of Achilles (Briseis), as compensation for the loss of Chryseis. In the event Agamemnon heaped verbal insult and abuse on Achilles. The climax of this verbal abuse occurs when Agamemnon taunts Achilles thus:

I am going to pay a visit to your hut and take away the beautiful Briseis, your prize, Achilles, to let you know that I am more powerful than you, and to teach others not to bandy words with me and openly defy their king. (*Iliad*, I: 217-221).

The action of Agamemnon fits very well, it must be said, in Aristotle's definition of hubris, where he makes clear that the cause of the pleasure for those committing hubris is that by harming people they think themselves superior.

Moreover, on the moral plane Agamemnon's behaviour constitutes an injustice and as such a sin against Achilles and his honour (*moira*). Invariably, Nemesis must intervene to set aright the wrong committed. This wrong of course, must lead to eventual destruction, that is, *ate*. Thus, the cycle of Nemesis begins when Zeus acquiesces in the request of Thetis (*Iliad*, I: 600-609). To this, Zeus nods in

assent to the request. The punishment that follows this agreement between Zeus and Thetis manifests itself in incalculable death suffered at the hands of the Trojans from Book II of *The Iliad* until Book XVIII when the feud ends.

But, before the feud ends in Book XVIII, Agamemnon, in consultation with other important members of the Council decides to make amends by compensating Achilles in full after the former had admitted his folly in that shameful act. Agamemnon seems to blame *ate* for his mental aberration resulting in that irrational behaviour. He accepts his folly fully when he answers Nestor thus:

Blinded I was – I do not deny it myself. The man, whom Zeus has taken to his heart and honours as he does Achilles, to the point of crushing the Achaeans for his sake, is worth an army. (*Iliad*, IX: 138-142).

Again, in response to Achilles' renunciation of his feud with him, Agamemnon, apart from accepting personal responsibility for his actions, also blames Zeus, Fate and the Fury for his blindness leading to that irrational act. (*Iliad*, XIX: 86-108). Thus Agamemnon rejoins:

It was Zeus and Fate and the Fury who walks in the dark that blinded my judgement, that day at the meeting when on my own authority I confiscated Achilles' prize. What could I do? At such moments there is a power that takes complete command, Ate, the eldest Daughter of Zeus, who blinds us all, ...flitting through men's heads, corrupting them, and bringing this one or the other down. (*Iliad*, XIX: 86-94).

Agamemnon is not alone in recognising the role of *ate* in his irrational behaviour when he re-affirms his commitment to restore the honour of Achilles by compensating him with abundant gifts. (*Iliad*, XIX: 140-144). It is worthy of note that Achilles also recognizes the power of *ate* in contributing to the irrational behaviour of men. Thus, when the sacrifices directed towards appeasing the heart of Achilles and hence a renunciation of the feud has been completed, the narrator attributes this statement to Achilles, which lends support to the assertion earlier made. He states thus:

‘How utterly’, he said ‘a man can be blinded by Father Zeus! I cannot think that my lord Agamemnon would have stirred me to such lasting bitterness or been so unconscionable as forcibly to take my girl, if Zeus had not been planning an Achaean massacre.’ (*Iliad*, XIX: 270-274).

Ate plays a significant role in Homer’s second epic the *Odyssey* as well. For instance, we are presented with a picture of the Suitors regularly feasting to their heart’s content. When Athena descends from Olympus and takes the form of Mentis she finds the insolent suitors sitting in front of the door on hides of oxen they themselves have slaughtered; some blending wine and water in the mixing-bowls, and others carving meat in lavish portions and wiping down the tables with sponges before they set them ready. (I: 106-112). In addition, Telemachus gives us a vivid picture of the wanton conduct of the Suitors in the following words: “They slaughter our oxen, our sheep, our fatted goats; they feast themselves and drink our sparkling wine – with never a thought for all the wealth that is being wasted.” (II: 55-58).

He further comments that the destruction of his house is an injustice. (II: 76-79).

It is therefore important to understand that such a hubristic act could not go unpunished, and Homer puts certain speeches in the mouth of his characters, which are indicative of the imminent destruction of the Suitors. Telemachus, for instance, angrily replies to the Suitors thus: "From you who court my mother this is sheer insolence." (I: 368f.). In the debate in Ithaca, Telemachus cautions the Suitors in the following words: "You should shrink from the wrath of the gods. Have you no fear that they may be outraged at your wickedness and turn on you?" (II: 66-67). Also, in response to the insolent submission of Antinous, Telemachus rejoins:

But if you think it a sounder scheme to destroy one man's estate and not make restitution, then eat your fill, while I pray that Zeus will bring a day of reckoning, when in this house I will destroy you – and not make restitution. (*Odyssey*, II: 141-145).

More so, Eurymachus' reproach of Halitherses (II: 178-182), constitutes hubris. Eurymachus' response, it must be said, is reminiscent of the dispositional view of hubris offered by Plato and Cairns, who describe it as 'thinking big', as earlier noted. Interestingly, Eurymachus does not spare Telemachus this verbal abuse. Consequently, he directs these words at him: "Telemachus must see his wealth ruthlessly consumed without hope of restitution, so long as Penelope keeps us kicking our heels in this matter of her marriage." (II: 203-205).

In all, one must understand that the moral innuendoes in the aforesaid speeches tend to justify the severe act of

Odysseus when he destroys the Suitors in Book XXII. Thus Odysseus in a typical Homeric fashion represents justice, hence nemesis. Homer makes the action of Odysseus justified in the minds of his audience. One must also understand that the conduct of the Suitors is a contravention of the convention of *xenia* (the obligation to entertain strangers), and their aim is to get their hands on the wealth and power of Odysseus. Thus, the Suitors' wanton and conscious destruction of Odysseus' household and reckless disregard of the protocol of *xenia* as P.V. Jones notes are enough to justify their destruction. (Jones,1991: XXVI). Homer, therefore, climaxes the immoral conduct of the Suitors when he makes Zeus say this of mortals when he was addressing a gathering of the immortals with reference to the fate of Aegisthus: "What a lamentable thing it is that men should blame the gods and regard *us* as the source of their troubles, when it is their transgressions which bring them suffering that was not their destiny." (*Odyssey* I: 32-34).

Hesiod and the Hubristic Principle

It is also quite important to state that the traditional notion of *Koros* – *hubris-nemesis* and *ate*, that is, the hubristic principle was not lost on Hesiod, a younger contemporary of Homer. While the *Works and Days* (*Op.* for short) contains ethical maxims and practical instructions derived from his own experience and adapted to the life of a peasant, the '*Theogony*' (*Theo.* For short) also recounts the mythological history and genealogy of the gods. (Harvey, 1990: 208, 451& 426).

Unlike Homer, Hesiod does not present to us a situation of *koros* or for that matter satiety; a condition perhaps influenced by his background. Rather he concentrates on issues of justice, in relation to *hubris*, *nemesis* and *ate*. Hesiod sees hubris as wanton violence and

therefore, entreats his brother Perses, to choose the path of justice. He writes:

But you Perses listen to right and do not foster violence; for violence is bad for a poor man. Even the prosperous cannot easily bear its burden, but is weighed down under it when he has fallen into delusion. (*Op.* 210-215).

He further uses the analogy of the Hawk and the Nightingale to explain issues bordering on hubris. When the hawk holds the nightingale in his claws the latter cries pitifully but the former snaps angrily thus:

Miserable thing, why do you cry out? One far stronger than you now holds you fast, and you must go wherever I take you, songstress as you are. And if I please I will make my meal of you, or let you go. He is a fool who tries to withstand the stronger, for he does not get the mastery and suffers pain besides shame. (*Op.* 200-210).

Besides, when it comes to *Nemesis*, Hesiod focuses on as earlier noted its origin and its moral element where he juxtaposes *Nemesis* to *Aidos*, that feeling of reverence or shame which restrains men from wrong:

And then *Aidos* and *Nemesis*, with their sweet forms wrapped in white robes, will go from the wide-patched earth and forsake mankind to join the company of the deathless gods: and bitter sorrows will be left for mortal men, and there will be no help against evil. (*Op.* 200f.)

Regarding *ate*; Hesiod presents not only its origin but also its moralistic underpinnings. (*Theo*: 226-230). Besides, Hesiod also uses *Ate* impersonally in the sense of punishment for hubris. This idea is made more explicit in the *Works and Days* than in the *Theogony*.

The better path is to go by on the other side towards justice; for Justice beats Outrage when she comes at length to the end of the race. But only when he has suffered does the fool learn this. (*Op*.214ff).

Other passages found in (*Op*. 220f & *Theo*.205ff) further explain the application of this principle.

In sum, Hesiod, like his elder contemporary does not stray from the moralistic view of the hubristic principle. As if by design or coincidence, they both held the view that *Nemesis* and *Ate* always come to set wrongs aright. Thus sinners whose act constitutes injustice do not go unpunished.

Herodotus and the Hubristic Principle

The historian of the Persian Wars in which Aeschylus fought was Herodotus, a Greek from Asia Minor. (Flaceliere, 1964: 156ff.). He sets out the aim of his work thus:

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, his Researches are here set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples; and more particularly to show how they came into conflict. (Herodotus, I: 1).

Like his precursor Homer, Herodotus presents to us concrete passages, which tend to elaborate and explain his view of the hubristic principle. This he does by drawing the character traits of Croesus, King of Lydia; Polycrates, a well-known tyrant and Xerxes, the Persian King.

The first scenario that Herodotus uses to present his view and the use of the hubristic principle is the dialogue he creates between Solon, an Athenian Statesman, and Croesus, the Lydian King. Presumably, it all starts with the King assuming that he was the happiest man on earth (I: 34). Herodotus presents the *Koros* situation of Croesus when he makes Solon say this of the latter:

You are very rich, and you rule a numerous people ... Great wealth can make a man no happier than moderate means, unless he has the luck to continue in prosperity to the end. (I: 33).
I know god is envious of human prosperity. (I: 31).

Herodotus betrays his real philosophy behind the usage of this hubristic principle when he further attributes these words to Solon: “All these details about the happiness of Tellus, Solon doubtless intended as a moral lesson for the King.” (I: 31). The thinking of Croesus in the opinion of the Greeks and for that matter Herodotus is hubristic, a dispositional state of course, and must therefore, not go unpunished. Consequently, we see this happening in the following passage where Herodotus makes this assertion clear:

After Solon’s departure nemesis fell upon Croesus, presumably because God was angry with him for supposing himself the happiest of men. It began with a dream he had about a

disaster to one of his sons: a dream which came true. (Herodotus, I: 34)

Another evidence is the case of Polycrates. Polycrates enjoys uninterrupted success as sole ruler of Samos. It was not long before the rapid increase of his power became the talk of Ionia and the rest of Greece. All his campaigns were victorious, his every venture a success. (III: 39).

As always, with the hubristic principle behind the thinking and philosophy of Herodotus, he prepares the mind of his audience for the imminent downfall of Polycrates. This he does when he makes Amasis, the friend of Polycrates and King of Egypt say this of Polycrates in a letter:

It is a pleasure to hear of a friend and ally doing well, but, as I know that the gods are jealous of success, I cannot rejoice at your excessive prosperity. My own wish, both for myself and for those I care for, would be to do well in some things and badly in others, passing through life with alternative success and failure; for I have never yet heard of a man who after an unbroken run of luck was not finally brought to complete ruin. (III: 39)

When nemesis caught up with Polycrates and the period for his demise was due (*ate*), he defied many attempts by his friends and professional soothsayers who advised him not to visit Oroetes as that could spell his doom. Forsaking the advice, he sailed for Magnesia, where he met his end in dreadful contrast with his personal distinction and high ambition. (III: 123). Flaceliere writes this of Polycrates:

Too successful in everything he undertook, Polycrates sought to appease Nemesis by the sacrifice of a valuable jewel that he was particularly fond of: he threw it into the sea, but the ring was found by a fisherman in the belly of a fish and returned to him – Nemesis had refused his offering and Polycrates died on the crucifix. (Flaceliere, 1964:164).

Like Croesus and Polycrates, Xerxes is a man of enormous wealth and power epitomized by the mass and extent of his dominion and the sheer size of his army. In the traditional view of the Greeks, a man with such enormous wealth and power and uninterrupted success has the natural tendency to commit hubris. Accordingly, in a simple but hubristic fashion, Xerxes outlines his intentions and his motives in VII: 8, and it is indubitably clear that the pursuit of honour is rated high among his priorities – he does not wish to be left behind in honour vis-à-vis his precursors, and therefore, sees the expedition as a means of obtaining reputation and winning back time lost as a result of the burning of Sardis and the failure of the previous expedition (VII. 8a ff.). This concern for honour, it must be stated, too, is presented in extravagant terms – Xerxes intends to yoke the Hellespont, and cherishes an image of the Persian empire, after the conquest of Greece, encircling or encompassing all the lands on which the sun shines, equalling ‘Zeus’ heaven’ in extent. Cairns thus rightly notes:

Xerxes is also a typical *hybristes* in believing that his good fortune and that of his nation can only continue – god is guiding Persian destiny for the best, and the Persians themselves have merely to follow. (Cairns, 1993:13).

Once again, Herodotus' moralistic view of the fall of his heroes comes into play when he creates a dialogue between Xerxes and Artabanus who appears more rational and averse to excess than his haughty nephew. He therefore, offers a general, theological warning against over-confidence. (VII.9c). Thus spoke Artabanus:

You know, my lord, that amongst living creatures it is the great ones that God smites with his thunder, out of envy of their pride. The little ones do not vex him... It is God's way to bring the lofty low. Often a great army is destroyed by a little one, when God in his envy puts fear into the men's hearts, or sends a thunderstorm, and they are cut to pieces in a way they do not deserve. For God tolerates pride in none but Himself. (VII: 10).

This view is supported by Cairns, when he equates hubris to 'thinking big'. (Cairns, 1993:13)

In effect, Herodotus prepares the mind of his audience for the imminent disaster which is about to befall Xerxes. Perhaps, the acme of Xerxes' hubris is the irrational act he performs when he arrives at Abydos: he gives orders that the Hellespont should receive three hundred lashes and have a pair of fetters thrown into it (VII.36). Following this, he dishonourably mistreats Pythius and further instructs the killing of his eldest son, the one he loves most (VII.41). Not too long after Xerxes begins to experience a reversal in fortune commences with the disaster, which befalls his fleet at Sepias, (VII.195ff) and the decisive battle at Salamis where the Persians suffer more casualties (VIII.85ff) resulting in this retreat (VIII.116).

Thus far, Herodotus could not escape from the hubristic tendencies which influence the drawing of his characters or heroes as they fall from good fortune to bad fortune; a characteristic view of his forerunners, which Thucydides does not seem to have.

Thucydides and the Hubristic Principle

Thucydides, the historian, 460-400 B.C., wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War. He was like Euripides, a disciple of the Sophists; like him, too, he was a free-thinker and a stylist. Where Herodotus had been, like Homer, primarily concerned to celebrate notable deeds, Thucydides, in the manner of modern historians, sought to extract from epic poetry the kernel of truth contained in it. (Flaceliere, 1964:219-220). It is, therefore, no wonder that Thucydides appears different from his predecessor, Herodotus, in his philosophical outlook to certain issues. He never attempts to explain the course of history in terms of divine retribution or *Nemesis*. For him, events are determined in the main by men's will (*gnome*) and, for the rest, by chance (*tychê*). (Flaceliere, 1964: 228). Consequently, he uses dramatic juxtaposition to espouse his views on the practicability of the hubristic principle. In this instance we shall consider the import of Pericles' Funeral Oration and the after-events, and the result of the Sicilian expedition after the Melian debate.

To start with, looking at the traditional Greek sense of decorum and moderation, one could surmise that what Thucydides ascribes to Pericles in the Funeral Oration (II.34ff) amounts to hubris (for he places Athens above all other Greek cities) and therefore, artistically follows this event with the plague (II. 47ff), which serves to reduce the fortunes of Athens. Besides, the very man who had said those words succumbs to the plague and dies of it.

The next important event Thucydides uses in this dramatic juxtaposition style, which adds more impetus to the workings of the hubristic principle, is the Melian debate and the consequent Sicilian Expedition. Thucydides, according to Flaceliere, never adopts a moral attitude towards human behaviour but he includes amongst the signs of social corruption, diminished respect for the gods, and considers the general lack of piety to be disquieting. (Flaceliere, 1964: 228). Excerpts of the dialogue read thus:

Melians: So you would not agree to our being neutral, friends instead of enemies, but allies of neither side?

Athenians: No, because it is not so much your hostility that injures us; it is rather the case that, if we were on friendly terms with you, our subjects would regard that as a sign of weakness in us, whereas your hatred is evidence of our power...

Melians: Then surely, if such hazards are taken by you to keep your empire and by your subjects to escape from it, we who are still free would show ourselves great cowards and weaklings if we failed to face everything that comes rather than submit to slavery.

Athenians: No, not if you are sensible. This is no fair fight, with honour on one side and shame on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you... Our aims and our actions are perfectly consistent with the belief men hold about the gods and with the principles which

govern their own conduct. Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. (V: 94-105).

Flaceliere, says this of the conclusion of the Melian debate: “Never has the will to power been asserted with such utter lack of scruple, with such cynicism, and yet with such an easy conscience.” (Flaceliere, 1964:228-229). In the end, the Melians surrendered and the Athenians massacred all the Melians that were old enough to bear arms, and sold the women and children into slavery (V: 116).

Typical of Thucydides, he artistically juxtaposes the event discussed above with the Sicilian antiquities, which serve as the change, (the *peripeteia*) of Athens from good to bad. (VI: 1ff).

In sum, Thucydides’ use of the dramatic juxtaposition does not entirely exonerate him from the hubristic principle or syndrome, although he does not explicitly attach moral responsibility to the action and fall of the hero or states; but as Flaceliere puts it: “For him, events are determined in the main by men’s will and, for the rest, by chance.” (Flaceliere, 1964:228). However, we need to add that there is in the literature the view that the dramatic juxtapositions are in fact a representation of his principle that the evil of overweening pride will *not* go unpunished, although he does not attribute it to divine dispensation. For him, it is an inflexible law of nature.

The Greek Tragedians and the Hubristic Principle

It has now been established that epic writers such as Homer and Hesiod, and historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides

applied the hubristic syndrome in their judgement when they attach moral responsibility to the hero. In like manner, the three tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides) follow this trend of thinking, which are aptly demonstrated in their extant plays.

Aeschylus

Aeschylus' plays are permeated with the religious spirit; he accepts the traditional mythology without criticising it in the manner of Euripides but tries to reconcile it with morality. Among the ideas prominent in his plays are those of destiny or fatality, working through the divine will and human passion; of the heredity of crime, both in the sense that crime provokes vengeance in the next generation and in the sense of the inheritance of a criminal taint; and of the vengeance of the gods on overweening pride (hubris). (Harvey, 1990:11)

Besides, what Aeschylus taught was the lesson of the ultimate justice of Providence, in whose designs the rival claims, whether of men or of supernatural powers, were at last reconciled and contending wills brought to work together within the universal schemes of ordered government and goodwill towards men, which is what the name of Zeus signifies to him, and in which there is room for both Apollo and the Eumenides. Thus far is the moral precept of the *Oresteian* and the *Promethean* trilogies. Moreover, unless everything that is of the nature of hubris has become incurable, it must be trimmed of its egocentricity and its excess. Typical of this is Danaids' rejection of Aphrodite, the irreconcilability of Prometheus, the savagery of the age of the Titans and the Furies. Zeus himself has had to grow in wisdom and learn the spirit of good government. The current ideas of inherited evil, of the curse upon a house and the fatality of great prosperity, he takes over but purifies. He further postulates that the curse will not fall on a man unless

he calls it out, by his own wrongdoing and therefore, gives the demon in the house the chance. Besides, wealth, perilous though it is, will not harm its possessor if he keeps himself free from hubris. The stroke of Justice, however long delayed, will never fail to fall where it is deserved. For instance, the failure of Persia was unmistakably the result of hubris, and as for Athens, the salvation of the State lay in freedom and righteousness and in the reconciliation, through moderation on either side, of rival claims. (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary* 1970:19).

Furthermore, Aeschylus like all tragic writers is well aware of, and vividly presents, the terrible suffering, often hard to justify in human terms, of which life is full; nevertheless he also believes strongly in the ultimate justice of the gods, as earlier noted. In his extant works (apart from *Prometheus*), all human suffering is clearly traceable, directly or indirectly, to an origin in some evil or foolish action. Instances are Xerxes' ill-advised decision to attempt the conquest of Greece; Laius' defiance of an oracular warning to remain childless; the attempt by the sons of Aegyptus to force the Danaids to be their wives; the adultery of Thyestes with Atreus' wife; the abduction of Helen by Paris. The consequences of these actions, nevertheless, while always bringing disaster to the actors, never end with them, but spread to involve their descendants and ultimately a whole community; some of these indirect victims have incurred more or less guilt on their account, but many are completely innocent. (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2003: 28).

In effect, Aeschylus could at best be described as one who was not too different from the epic writers who were his forebears in terms of the philosophy or judgement that divine *phthonos* is always involved to punish the guilty, and hence ensure justice – *nemesis*.

Sophocles

Sophocles (496-406 B.C.) was the second of the three great Attic tragedians whom Aristotle credits with the introduction of a third actor, scene-painting (*Poetics*, 1449a 18) and also the increase of the number of the chorus from twelve to fifteen is attributed to him. (Harvey,1990:401). P.E. Easterling and B.M.W. Knox also add:

He has often seemed to symbolize all that is attic and classical: dignity, formal perfection, idealism... It is hard to find any trace of the 'unevenness' criticised by Plutarch; but beyond this, there is no critical consensus: now serene, pious, and conventional, and passionately humanist or despairingly pessimistic. (Easterling & Knox, 1993:43-44).

The focus of Sophocles' Plays is not on ideas, but on the doing and suffering of men and women, and although he shows his characters facing the fundamental problems of life, the plays never offer unambiguous solutions. Fundamental to all the plays is the same two-sided view of man, in which his heroic splendour is matched by his utter vulnerability to circumstance. This, as already mentioned had traditionally been the way the Greeks looked at the human condition, from Homer down to the poets, but Sophocles gives it new expression in dramatic form. He notes that alongside man's potentiality for greatness are set his helplessness and mortality. He may indeed be 'godlike' in his endowments or his achievements, but the hero is normally caught in the infinite web of circumstances outside his control, limited by time, by ignorance of past, present and future, by his passions which impede his judgement or undermine his will, always liable to destroy himself and others through failure – or

unwillingness to understand (Easterling and Knox, 1993: 47ff); a situation, perhaps influenced by his hubristic tendencies leading, as already noted to his fall.

Harvey further adds that the course of Sophocles' dramas is determined by the characters of the protagonists, the influences they undergo, the penalties they suffer, not by external incidents. Sophocles accepts the conventional religion without criticism, and his principal characters, though subject to human defects, are in a general way heroic and actuated by lofty motives. (Harvey, 1990: 401). To buttress this, the fall of Ajax is aptly described by Easterling & Knox as an edifying example of the punishment of arrogance, in other words, *hubris*. (Easterling & Knox, 1993:48)

To wind up, one could safely surmise that Sophocles is not too different from his senior contemporary, Aeschylus, but it is important to state that unlike the latter, the former limits the level of divine influence and interventions in the actions and inactions of his protagonists and rather lays greater emphasis on the power of their will which makes them commit *hubris* and hence the fall. This idea is supported by Flaceliere who states:

The tragedies of Sophocles differ from those of Aeschylus in that the catastrophes that overwhelm his heroes are of their own making, not ordained by the gods. And their suffering is all the greater in that they are almost always struck down at the very moment when they believe themselves to have escaped the menace of fate: it is so with Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*, with Clytemnestra in *Electra*, with Creon in *Antigone*. (Flaceliere, 1964: 192ff).

Euripides

Euripides, an Athenian tragic playwright, the third of the three great Attic tragedians chose for his tragedies, as a rule, situations of violent stress, showing men and women in the grip of passion or torn by conflicting impulses; showing also the play of natural affection. He approached nearer to ordinary life than did Aeschylus and Sophocles. Moreover, he did not accept wholesale the traditional religion and morality, but demonstrated independent thought, frequently scandalising public opinion. (Harvey, 1990:171). Euripides carved an image of the realist, and in consequence, Aristophanes portrays him in his *Frogs* as an intellectual iconoclast who insisted on confronting the darker and more disturbing aspects of everyday reality. (*Frogs*: 959). This is further bolstered by Aristotle who says this of Euripides when comparing his character portrayal to that of his senior contemporary, Sophocles: “Sophocles presented men ‘as they ought to be’, while Euripides presented them ‘as they are’” (*Poetics*, 1460^b, 33ff). Flaceliere (1964:221) also adds his view to Euripidean characterisation.

In addition, his plays are marked by much variety of mood. The occasional bitterness of his reflections on the human lot is mingled with admiration for heroism and love of the beautiful things of nature. He gave great prominence to female characters and has, invariably, left us a wonderful gallery of portraits of women, heroines of virtue or crime (Harvey, 1990:171), and the latter (crime) borders on Euripides’ use of the hubristic principle in the judgement of his heroes. This notion is further supported by Easterling and Knox who say this of Euripides, concerning the portrayal of the following characters in his various plays:

The merciless Dionysus of *Bacchae* is cast in the same mould as the vindictive Aphrodite of *Hippolytus* and the revengeful Athena of *Troades*: all three gods wreak havoc to punish human disrespect for their divinity. (Easterling & Knox, 1993:66).

The insulting behaviour of the heroes could at best be described as hubris, as noted in our definitions, and hence a fall is imminent. This is to ensure the justification of divine nemesis, a trend which follows the hubristic syndrome.

In sum, like his senior contemporary, Sophocles, Euripides minimizes the influence and interventions of the gods and highlights the will of his characters; but, since the great majority of Athenians remained believers, Euripides was anxious to satisfy them and so introduced the gods at the beginning and end of his plays, in that artificial manner. Moreover, like his forerunners we cannot exonerate him from the use of the hubristic principle.

In all, inasmuch as the epic writers, the historians and the three Attic tragedians in particular, request of their heroes a moral responsibility for their actions, there was always imprinted on the minds of their audience the principle that sin never goes unpunished. Can we begrudge the tragedians the taking of this stance? To a large extent no; after all it was in vogue and early literature, as already discussed, made adequate use of this syndrome. This notion, as already elucidated, guides the tragedians in their writings notwithstanding the simple reason that their works are intended to excite pity and fear, as Aristotle explains to be the *end* of tragedy. The tragedians manage to achieve this by bringing the haughty, the arrogant, the wrongdoer, the villain or the sinner down from grace to grass. Invariably, we

witness this trend, in almost all the works of the tragedians. This is exemplified by Aeschylus' *Persians* where Xerxes is portrayed as attempting to chain the Hellespont; an act which does not only leave a scar on divine *time* but also arouses divine *phthonos* and therefore, demands divine nemesis to curtail a mortal's abuse of power: an issue which borders on hubris. Others include Agamemnon's sin of committing infanticide, Orestes; matricide, Sophocles' Oedipus of killing his father and marrying his mother; Antigone – the madness of standing against State authority, Creon – excessive use of power as against reasonable judgement of the situation; Euripides' Pentheus - his madness of defying the divine authority of Dionysus, and Medea's madness of murdering her own children as punishment to Jason, who had deserted her. In effect what they are trying to tell their audience is that the fall of these heroes are justified.

Finally, we are not here suggesting that the tragedians were not unaware of situations where heroes suffer undeserved misfortune. Thus, in spite of the general agreement with the traditional view that nemesis follows hubris, as we have demonstrated so far, it is obvious that the dramatic poets produced their most effective tragedies in terms of the emotional impact where the principle of justice, implied by nemesis seems to be inadequate or insufficient to explain the fall of the hero. This is the case regarding Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Heracles*, Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, and *Orestes*, which is common to the three tragic writers. It is perhaps based upon this insufficiency in the hubristic principle that Aristotle introduces his notion of the *hamartia*, which seeks to dispense with the moral responsibility, what he calls depravity, as an effective cause of pity and fear, but ascribes the reason as an error. We must therefore understand the introduction of the notion of *hamartia* as a rebuttal of the

position of the epic writers, the historians and particularly the three Greek tragedians. Thus, for Aristotle, proper tragedy demands the rousing of pity and fear, and pity is not incited by the punishment of the guilty person, as the hubristic principle outlines, but rather the undeserved misfortune that befalls one, caused, of course, by irrationality (one's inability to reason appropriately at a particular point in time).

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