

Labors on the Tragic Stage¹

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Abstract

This article explores how Attic tragedy employs the theme of heroic labors (ἄθλοι) and how it adapts it to fit the specifications of the genre and the ideology of the *polis*. With reference to Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and focusing on Theseus, I suggest that an Attic tragedy recounts a heroic labor performed by the main character. Signified by a set of terms, which underline the common culture between mythical heroic labors, sports and war, the labor is incorporated in the tragic narrative as a potential benefit to the *polis*. This typology of tragic labors, which takes into consideration both the poetics and the politics of Attic tragedy, explains how pre-democratic myth is reconciled with the democratic context of the genre and it can be applicable to other tragic characters and plays.

Keywords

Attic tragedy, Euripides, *Suppliant Women*, heroic labor, sport, war, ideology of the *polis*.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to argue that at the core of each Attic tragedy there is a labor performed by the central character. By *labor* (ἄθλος), I mean a dangerous or difficult exploit, one which demands outstanding courage and/or physical or mental effort. The characters often undertake the labors of their own free will or because the labors have been imposed on

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them by a god/goddess or some other authority in order that a crisis threatening the well-being of the entire community may be resolved. The labor may be enacted, i.e., performed by actors, or related by an internal narrator; more often than not, a combination of the two is employed. The labor may or may not be successfully brought to completion. It may be followed by, and culminate in, the performance and/or the establishment of a religious or civic ritual. All these parameters are conditioned by the ideology of the democratic *polis*.² In what follows, I will explore how Attic tragedy employs the theme of labors and adapts it to fit the specifications of the genre and the ideology of the *polis*. I will test my hypothesis based on Euripides' *Suppliant Women*³ (ca 425 BCE). It is my contention that the typology of heroic labors which will be presented below is applicable to other tragic characters and plays as well. However, in order to draw overall conclusions on the genre, an in-depth study of the entire tragic corpus (including the fragments) is needed.

Words for labors

The most famous labors in Greek myth were performed by Heracles and Theseus. Depictions of the labors of these two great heroes adorned such iconic edifices of the Greek world as the Treasury of the Athenians in Delphi, the temple of Zeus in Olympia,⁴ and the Hephaisteion in the Athenian agora. In the following passage from *Ἐλένης ἐγκώμιον* (*Encomium of Helen*) Isocrates compares and contrasts the two heroes:⁵

² Whether or not and to what extent tragedy articulates a political discourse has been hotly debated in scholarship. I subscribe to the view that tragedy does indeed bear the marks of democratic ideology and in turn raises issues pertaining to the *polis*. See Karakantza 2011:21–22n1 for a selective bibliography on the debate, to which can be added Rehm 2003:87–118; Boedeker and Raablauf 2005; Rabinowitz 2008:33–59; and Carter 2011.

³ Henceforth: *Suppliant Women*; the text is quoted from Diggle 1981 and all translations are quoted from Kovacs 1998 unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ Paus. 5.10.8–10.

⁵ See also Storey 2008:42–43.

μόνοι γὰρ οὗτοι τῶν προγεγενημένων ὑπὲρ τοῦ βίου τοῦ τῶν ἀνθρώπων
ἀθληταὶ κατέστησαν. συνέβη δὲ τὸν μὲν [Heracles] ὀνομαστοτέρους καὶ μείζους,
τὸν δ' [Theseus] ὠφελιμωτέρους καὶ τοῖς Ἑλλησιν οἰκειοτέρους ποιήσασθαι
τοὺς κινδύνους. τῷ μὲν γὰρ Εὐρυσθεὺς προσέτατε τὰς τε βοῦς τὰς ἐκ τῆς
Ἐρυθείας ἀγαγεῖν καὶ τὰ μῆλα τὰ τῶν Ἑσπερίδων ἐνεγκεῖν καὶ τὸν Κέρβερον
ἀναγαγεῖν καὶ τοιούτους ἄλλους πόνους, ἐξ ὧν ἤμελλεν οὐ τοὺς ἄλλους
ὠφελήσειν ἀλλ' αὐτὸς κινδυνεύσειν. ὁ δ' αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ κύριος ὧν τούτους
προηρεῖτο τῶν ἀγῶνων ἐξ ὧν ἤμελλεν ἢ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἢ τῆς αὐτοῦ πατρίδος
εὐεργέτης γενήσεσθαι (my emphasis).

for they alone of all who have lived before our time made themselves
champions of human life. It came to pass that Heracles undertook perilous
labours more celebrated and more severe, Theseus those more useful, and to the
Greeks of more vital importance. For example, Heracles was ordered by
Eurystheus to bring the cattle from Erytheia and to obtain the apples of the
Hesperides and to fetch Cerberus up from Hades and to perform other labours
of that kind, labours which would bring no benefit to mankind, but only danger
to himself; Theseus, however, being his own master, gave preference to those
struggles which would make him a benefactor of either the Greeks at large or of
his native land.

Isocrates, *Helen* 23–25⁶

In the quoted extract, a variety of terms is used to denote these labors:⁷ ἄθλοι (derived from
ἀθληταί),⁸ πόνοι, κίνδυνοι,⁹ and ἀγῶνες.¹⁰ These terms, especially πόνος, and their cognates

⁶ Text and translation quoted from Van Hook 1945.

also occur in fifth-century tragedy with reference to the labors of Heracles and Theseus—occasionally in combination, as in *Suppliant Women*: συδὸς μὲν ἀγρίου / ἀγῶνος ἤψω φαῦλον ἀθλήσας πόνον (you [Theseus] struggled against a wild boar, a trivial labor, 316–317); and in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*: ἤθλησα κινδυνεύματ’ ἐν τῶμῳ κάρῃ (I struggled against such dangers to my life, 564).¹¹ The word πόνος is often replaced in tragedy by μόχθος, a near-synonym. Both words express the heroes’ painful and extraordinary efforts.¹² I am arguing that, when used in tragedy, these words and their cognates refer to and signal a labor.

Theseus against Thebes

In *Suppliant Women*, the labor recounted is Theseus’ successful military expedition against Thebes in response to the supplication of Adrastus and the Argive mothers. Theseus’ aim is to recover and bury the bodies of the dead Argives (νεκρῶν κομιστήν ... / γενέσθαι καὶ τάφου μεταίτιον),¹³ whose recovery Thebes does not allow. The recovery (ἀναίρεσις) of the dead was a standard procedure in archaic and classical warfare. By preventing it, the Thebans break an (unwritten) military law.¹⁴ Moreover, by not allowing burial, they openly defy human and divine laws (νόμους βροτῶν, 378; νόμιμα θεῶν, 19)¹⁵ which ordain that the dead be buried and

⁷ Limitations of space do not allow me to discuss the semantic nuances and connotations of these terms in detail; I refer the reader to Loraux 1982 (= an earlier version of Loraux 1995); Scanlon 1983; Jourdain-Annequin 1989:426–439; and Nagy 1990:136–145.

⁸ In the entire Euripidean corpus (including the fragments), ἄθλος is used only twice to refer to Heracles’ labors (*HF* 827 and *Temenidae* fr. 740.3 Kannicht); and once figuratively, meaning ‘toil, suffering, pain’ (in unattributed fr. 912.10 Kannicht).

⁹ See Pritchard 2013:177–178.

¹⁰ See Larmour 1999:26–28; Pritchard 2013:165–166; Nagy 2020:494–495.

¹¹ Text and translation quoted from Lloyd-Jones 1994; see Jebb 1885:97 *ad loc.*

¹² Most frequently in Eur. *HF* (Loraux 1982:185n70 = Loraux 1995:270n74; Jourdain-Annequin 1989:430–431).

¹³ Cf. *Supp.* 60–62, 126, 168, 273, 282–285, 308–311.

¹⁴ Pritchett 1985:97–100; Krentz 2002:32–33; Pritchard 2013:168; Kucewicz 2021: *passim*.

¹⁵ The gods’ ordinances (Kovacs); νόμιμα is also rendered as ‘customs’ (by Waterfield) and ‘laws’ (by Morwood; and

which all Greece holds lawful (νόμιμα ... πάσης ... Ἑλλάδος, 311)¹⁶. Despite his initial refusal to grant the suppliants' request, Theseus is eventually persuaded by Aethra, his mother, to help them. The recovery of the dead, effected by means of war, is followed by an honorific, public burial of the leaders (the famous Seven against Thebes) at Eleusis.

This labor was in all probability a fifth-century invention by Athenian dramatists and thus a late addition to the hero's saga.¹⁷ It was first dramatized by Aeschylus in his *Eleusinians*, about which Plutarch is our main source of information.¹⁸ In *Suppliant Women*, this labor is regarded as one performed jointly by Theseus and Athens: κοινὸν τόδ' ἔργον προστιθεὶς ἐμῶι τέκνωι / πόλει τ' Ἀθηνῶν (laying this task in common upon my son and the city of Athens, 27–28).¹⁹ That explains why it later featured so prominently in the catalog of historical and mythical Athenian exploits included in funeral orations and other public speeches—even if Theseus was not usually mentioned.²⁰ The first word used in *Suppliant Women* to refer to Theseus' recovery and burial of the dead is ἔργον 'task' (27)²¹ and the last is μόχθημα 'labor' (1187)²² but the one used most frequently and by most characters is πόνος (and, once, its cognate ἐκπονῆσαι, 319). Adrastus says that he “lay[s] this task (πόνον)” (185) to Athens because it is the only city “that could undertake this labor (πόνον)” (189), which the chorus calls “a pious toil (εὐσεβῆς πόνος)” (373)—note the variety of renderings of the word in English, which highlights the semantic

Warren and Scully); cf. τὰ τῶν θεῶν, 301; νόμος παλαιὸς δαιμόνων, 563.

¹⁶ Cf. *Supp.* 526, 538, 671.

¹⁷ Gantz 1993:295–297.

¹⁸ Plut. *Thes.* 29.4–5.

¹⁹ Cf. also *Supp.* 394.

²⁰ Hdt. 9.27.3; Lys. 2.7–10; Isoc., *Paneg.* 54–58 and *Panath.* 168–174; Dem. 40.8.

²¹ See Jourdain-Annequin 1989:435–436.

²² Cf. προμεμοχθήκασι, 1234.

nuances of the Greek word. Theseus and Aethra use the same term, too (319, 345). Peter Burian is right to note the “strong political flavor” that the term *πόνος* has in this play.²³

What persuades Theseus to undertake this labor despite his initial refusal is the example he has set with his previous labors; he acknowledges that “by many glorious deeds (*πολλὰ γὰρ δράσας καλά*)” he has shown the Greeks that his “custom (*ἔθος*)” is to punish “the wicked”; as a result he “cannot refuse hard tasks (*πόνους*)” (338–342). Theseus’ memory of past labors, reactivated by Aethra, makes him face “the demands of political responsibility.”²⁴ Thus he enters an *agōn* against an ideal, which is his past self (314–319). That past self of his undertook “other hard tasks (*πόνους*) many and various” (573), like his slaying the sow of Krommyon, “a trivial labor (*φαῦλον πόνον*)” (317), according to Aethra, compared to what he is now confronted with. Likewise, the *polis* “gladly and willingly took up this task (*πόνον*) when they heard that [Theseus] wished them to do so” (393–394)²⁵ because, for one, the Athenians were viewed as “the ‘moral policemen’ of Greece,”²⁶ who “honor[ed] justice, paying no honor to injustice, and always rescue[d] all that [was] unfortunate” (379–380);²⁷ also, because they were famous in the Greek world for their *πολυπραγμοσύνη*, their ‘busibodiness’ or ‘meddlesome spirit’ (576).²⁸ Besides, it was by being a performer of labors in her own right (*ἐν γὰρ τοῖς πόνοισιν*, 323; *πονοῦσα πολλά*, 577) that Athens “flourishe[d]” (*αὔξεται*, 323) and “prosper[ed]” (*πόλλ’ εὐδαιμονεῖ*, 577).²⁹

²³ Burian 1985:136.

²⁴ Burian 1985:136.

²⁵ Καὶ μὴν ἐκοῦσά γ’ ἀσμένη τ’ ἐδέξατο / πόλις πόνον τόνδ’ ὡς θέλοντά μ’ ἦισθετο.

²⁶ Hall 2001:xxvii.

²⁷ Σέβεις δίκαν, τὸ δ’ ἦσσαν ἀδικία νέμεις / δυστυχή τ’ ἀεὶ πάντα ρύηι.

²⁸ Cf. Thuc. 1.70.8. On Athenian *πολυπραγμοσύνη*, see the bibliographical references in Morwood 2007:188 *ad* 576.

²⁹ Mendelsohn 2002:172–174; note that the same vocabulary appears in Pericles’ funeral oration (Thuc. 2.35–46).

In *Suppliant Women*, the labor performed by Theseus and the Athenian army was military in nature; it was represented, however, not only as such but also as an athletic event.³⁰ That was in accordance with classical Athenians' conception of sports and war as sharing a common culture. Athletic competitions and battles were both seen as ἀγῶνες, that is ritualized contests regulated by a mutually agreed set of rules.³¹ They both involved πόννοι 'toils' and κίνδυνοι 'dangers' and therefore "tested the physical capacities and morality of their participants." Victory in either was ascribed to the ἀρετή 'merit' or courage of the participants and was a source of κλέος 'glory' and pride. Defeat, on the contrary, was often thought to be due to cowardice and a source of shame. Finally, both were celebrated in similar ways.³² Besides, and most importantly, in ancient Greek thought, as Gregory Nagy remarks, "the ritual ordeal of a human who fights in a real war" and "the ritual ordeal of a human who competes in a real athletic contest" were indistinguishable from "the mythical ordeals of heroes fighting in mythical wars."³³ As a consequence, Theseus is a hero, a warrior and an athlete at the same time.

The Theater of War

Theseus and the Athenian army's actual πόννος (i.e. military combat) is described in detail by the messenger, who had "stationed [him]self to watch (θεατής) at the Electran gate on a tower commanding a good view (πύργον εὐαγῆ)" (651–652).³⁴ War has always been a kind of spectacle

³⁰ On battle accounts in tragedy, see de Romilly 2012:66–70.

³¹ The word ἀγών and its cognates occur quite a few times in *Suppliant Women* (665, 685, 706, 754).

³² Pritchard 2013:164–191 (quotation from 164) and Pritchard 2019:180–205.

³³ Nagy 2013:271.

³⁴ The messenger is conscious of his authority as an eyewitness: λεύσσω δὲ ταῦτα κοῦ κλύων (I saw the action firsthand; I didn't have to be told about it, 684; trans. Waterfield); see Barrett 2002:74–76; cf. Soph. *Tr.* 20–23.

and the phrase ‘theater of war’ is a very eloquent expression of the claim.³⁵ Xerxes in Aeschylus’ *Persians* “was seated in plain sight (ἔδραν ... εἶχε ... εὐαγῆ) of the whole army, on a high cliff close to the area [Salamis straits]” (466–467), watching the sea battle as it unfolded. The chorus of suppliant mothers equally wished they could “go to the land of fair towers” so that they could witness “how [their] friends are faring” (618–623).³⁶

Irene de Jong and James Morwood detect a metatheatrical element in the word θεατής used by the messenger;³⁷ it is as if he is looking “at an off-stage drama.”³⁸ Although the semantic range of the word ἀγών does include dramatic and musical contests,³⁹ I think that the messenger’s (as well as other characters’) language, similar scenes from other plays, and visual representations in art point towards other kinds of spectacle: an athletic and equestrian competition, on the one hand, and a hero’s performance of a labor, on the other.

Let us start with the messenger’s language. First, for his expedition to Thebes, Theseus has assembled (ἀθροίσας, 356) the choicest young men of Athens. As Nagy points out, “the notion of ‘assemble’ is intrinsic to the general sense of *agōn*,” which “conveys not only the social setting for an activity, namely an assembly of people, but also the activity itself, namely, a contest.”⁴⁰ Second, the Theban army is described as a δεινὸς παλαιστής, ‘a formidable adversary’, one ‘hard to wrestle against’ (704)—for which reason “the battle was evenly balanced” (ἦν δ’ ἀγών ἰσόρροπος, 706). Third, there is a prize to be won, an ἔπαθλον. Ἐπαθλον

³⁵ See Bakogianni and Hope 2015; Létoublon 2018:15–16.

³⁶ — τὰ καλλίπυργα πεδία πῶς ἰκοίμεθ’ ἄν, / Καλλίχορον θεᾶς ὕδωρ λιποῦσαι; / — ποτανὰν εἴ σέ τις θεῶν κτίσαι, / διπόταμον ἵνα πόλιν μόλοις, / εἰδείης ἄν φίλων / εἰδείης ἄν τύχας.

³⁷ De Jong 1991:10 (with n. 21); Morwood 2007:194 *ad* 652.

³⁸ De Jong 1991:10.

³⁹ Larmour 1999:26–55; see also Pritchard 2013:165n4 for an extensive list of passages illustrating the wide range of contests described by the word ἀγών.

⁴⁰ Nagy 1990:136; cf. Eur. *Phoen.* 466.

literally means “that which is in compensation for the labor (ἄθλος).”⁴¹ The prize for this labor is no other than the corpses of the Argives themselves, which is equally the object of the fight (νεκρούς ..., ὧν ἔκειτ’ ἀγών, 665).⁴² This prize is accompanied by honor (τιμὴν, 306) for Theseus himself and “a crown of glory (στέφανον εὐκλείας)” for Athens (315). The word στέφανον is used figuratively in this context to denote glory or honor won as a prize or a reward. But the word στέφανος, a Pindaric word, also alludes to the material crown of victory awarded at the public games.⁴³

In general, watching a hero perform his labor was not unusual in Greek literature. In the prologue of Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, Deianeira admits that she is unable to relate the battle (ἀγῶνα ... μάχης, 20; cf. ἄεθλ’ ἀγώνων, 506) between Heracles and Achelous, her two suitors, because she was “struck numb with fear” (24) at the thought of what would become of herself, “the object of their strife” (ἀμφινεΐκητον, 527). She assumes, however, that there were other spectators present and that “whoever was sitting there not terrified by the sight (ἀταρβῆς τῆς θέας), he could tell you” (Soph. *Tr.* 22–23). Indeed, in the first *stasimon* of the play (497–530), the chorus describes the battle in detail as if they had actually watched the duel—which suggests, if realism is sought, that someone had related it to them.⁴⁴ The messenger (according

⁴¹ Based on Nagy’s definition of ἐπινίκιον (epinician) in Nagy 1990:142.

⁴² Cf. Eur. *Alc.* 1025–1033: Alcestis was said to be the prize (νικητήρια) for the winner of the boxing and wrestling contests in which Heracles took part. In Hom. *Il.* 22.157–166 too, Achilles is chasing Hector around Troy. The prize for the ‘foot race’ between the two men is none other than Hector’s very life (ψυχὴ, 161); see Stocking 2020:297.

⁴³ LSJ s.v. στέφανος II.3; cf. Eur. *HF* 355: στεφάνωμα μόχθων, ‘as a coronal to his labors’ with Bond 1981:153 *ad* 355–358.

⁴⁴ Text and translation quoted from Lloyd-Jones 1994. Easterling accepts Zieliński’s emendation of line 526: ἐγὼ δὲ θατῆρ μὲν οἶα φράζω (I speak as a spectator would); see Easterling 1982 *ad loc.* She also underlines the “strong flavor of the epinician ode” in the lyric as well as the “agonistic language” used in the description of the duel (Easterling 1982:133–134).

to the prevailing attribution of the lines) in a fragment possibly from Euripides' *Theseus* also becomes the spectator (θεατής) of Theseus' struggle with the Minotaur (fr. 386b.4 Kannicht).⁴⁵

Similar representations are frequent in visual arts as well. The two scenes mentioned above are paired on an early-6th-century Corinthian cup (LIMC Acheloos 246) and on a late-6th-century Attic black-figure *hydria* (LIMC Acheloos 248). On the former, Herakles wrestles with a centaur-like Acheloos, watched by two figures, possibly Deianeira and her father. On the shoulder of the latter, Theseus is slaying the Minotaur with beardless male and female figures (probably Athenian youths and maidens) on either side witnessing the duel. On the body of this *hydria*, Heracles is fighting with Achelous while gods (Athena and Hermes) and mortals (Deianeira, her father Oineus and Iolaos) are watching.⁴⁶ In the west pediment of the temple of Zeus in Olympia, Lapith women in the corners of the pediment anxiously watch the fight between the unruly Centaurs and the Lapiths, which takes place at Peirithoos' wedding feast; Theseus is there helping the Lapith king.⁴⁷

In the passage from Isocrates' *Encomium to Helen* quoted earlier, it is admitted that the performance of labors brought fame to the heroes and benefited humankind (τοὺς ἄλλους), the Greeks (τῶν Ἑλλήνων) or the hero's native land (τῆς αὐτοῦ πατρίδος). With the performance of this labor, Theseus and Athens do not only help the Argive suppliants, as Adrastus had hoped (ὡς ὀναίμην, 256; cf. προσωφελίσων, 327; ὀνήσας, 370); they have also built "a structure of civilized order" by "reaffirm[ing] key religious values."⁴⁸ The accomplishment of the labor is eventually 'celebrated' by means of a ritual, namely an honorific public burial, which restores the challenged order and reassures the citizens that the

⁴⁵ Mills 1997:241–242.

⁴⁶ See also LIMC Acheloos 214, 215, 218, and 249.

⁴⁷ See Barringer 2005:232–236.

⁴⁸ Morwood 2007:4.

polis will duly recognize their service to her, thus encouraging the continued performance of the civic and military ἦθος exemplified by Theseus.

Thus the play actually narrates an *aition* that establishes the recovery and honorific burial of war dead. According to Philochorus (FGrH 328 F 112) “this was the first truce ever made for recovering the bodies of those slain in battle” (Plut. *Thes.* 29.4–5). The crisis brought about by the disruption of ritual order (due to the Thebans’ refusal to allow the recovery and burial of the war dead) is resolved by Athens, who appropriates the establishment of the ritual (namely the honorific public burial) for herself and shows how it is to be performed.⁴⁹

Prequels and Sequels

In the last section of this article, I will discuss two other expeditions against Thebes mentioned in the play, one preceding and one to follow that of Theseus. The first is the “disastrous expedition” (116) of the famous seven against Thebes, who were led (ἡγαγ’) by Adrastus, “when he tried to secure for his son-in-law, the exiled Polynices, his portion of the heritage of Oedipus” (13–16).⁵⁰ This expedition too is an ἀγών (635–637; note the verb ἡγωνίσαντο, 637) and the warriors proved with their bold deeds (τολμήμαθ’, 845; cf. τολμήσαι θανεῖν, 910) to be “superior to other men in bravery” (διαπρεπεῖς εὐψυχίαι, 841). Consequently, they deserved to be called ἄριστοι (1167).

The second expedition is that of the Epigonoι (i.e., the sons of the Seven) against Thebes, which Athena foretells in the *Exodos* of the play (1213–1226). Although none of the signal words is used to describe this expedition, it can equally be considered a labor. Not only is it a military expedition against Thebes like the previous ones but it is also, in a way, imposed by the

⁴⁹ Cf. Steinbock 2013:173n84; Kucewicz 2021:51.

⁵⁰ οὓς ποτ’ Ἀργείων ἄναξ / Ἄδραστος ἡγαγ’, Οἰδίπου παγκληρίας / μέρος κατασχεῖν φυγάδι Πολυνείκει θέλων / γαμβρῶι.

goddess. The purpose of this labor is manifold. The explicit one is to “exact vengeance for the blood of [their] fathers slain” (1215).⁵¹ However, with their sack of Thebes the sons of the Seven will also attempt to restore the reputation of their “disreputable” fathers,⁵² an endeavor which had already been undertaken by Adrastus with his funeral oration (857–917).⁵³ Moreover, Athena foretells that “throughout Greece you will be called (κληθέντες) the Epigonoι and will make themes for song (ᾠιδάς) for generations to come” (1224–1225). In that way, a new narrative will be forged, which may assuage the Argives’ trauma of the original failure.

Κλέος is an apt word to designate both the glory of the (epic) heroes and the very song that conveys their glory.⁵⁴ Here, Athena is referring to the *Epigoni*, the poem of the epic cycle with which Euripides’ contemporaries were undoubtedly familiar.⁵⁵ Interestingly, the glory of the Epigonoι would permeate their fathers’ labor as well. In fact, the expedition of the Seven was immortalized in the *Thebais*, another, probably earlier, cyclic epic. The Seven themselves had also received their own cult, as the cist graves in Eleusis described by Pausanias suggest (1.39.2).⁵⁶

Conclusion

The different motivations and outcomes of the three expeditions shed light on the political use which the theme of labors was put to in tragedy. This use is conditioned by the ideology of the genre and the *polis*. The eventual success or failure in the accomplishment of the labor

⁵¹ πατέρων θανόντων ἐκδικάζοντες φόνον; cf. lines 1142–1146; also, Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.7.2: τὸν τῶν πατέρων θάνατον τιμωρήσασθαι; Diod. Sic. 4.66.1: τὸν τῶν πατέρων θάνατον ἐπεξιόντες.

⁵² Strauss 1993:79. The restoration of a hero through contests was a recurrent theme in archaic and classical poetry (e.g., Odysseus in the *Odyssey*; Paris in Eur. *Alexandros*); see also Dova 2020:109–140, and Karakantza 2020.

⁵³ Morwood 2020:194 (with n. 46).

⁵⁴ See Nagy 2020:25.

⁵⁵ Cingano 2015:246. See also Davies 1989:29–31 and Davies 2015:107–114 (esp. pp. 109–110).

⁵⁶ Steinbock 2013:160.

undertaken generally depends on whether the *polis* and the common good are served or not; and it is decided by the ἦθος ‘moral character’ of the hero performing it.

Although the first expedition was undertaken in defense of Polyneices’ rightful claim to the throne of Thebes (152–154), the irreverence shown by Adrastus and the warriors towards the oracles and the gods (155–160, 495–499) led the Argive army to disaster.⁵⁷ The objective of the second labor, on the other hand, the respect shown towards both civic and religious proceedings and Theseus’ moral excellence (723–730) precluded any chance of failure. Theseus could not allow the Thebans to violate “what all Greece holds lawful” (νόμιμα πάσης Ἑλλάδος) because such laws and customs “[hold] together (συνέχον) all human communities (πόλεις)” (311–313)—and he persuaded the citizen assembly of the necessity of this expedition. Thus, he helped the Argives and thereby benefitted the entire Greek world as well.

The case of the Epigonoι is the most troubling of the three. Theirs is a military expedition which seeks revenge and reopens a cycle of inter-*polis* violence. Moreover, it is divinely ordained (therefore approved of) and will be celebrated in epic poetry, a genre connected with aristocratic self-validation.⁵⁸ The ‘imposed’ success of this expedition can best be understood if historic Athens’ hostility towards Thebes in the fifth century BCE is considered—especially if *Suppliant Women* was indeed produced after the battle of Delium (424/3 BCE),⁵⁹ considered by some scholars the play’s historical antecedent.⁶⁰ In that case, Theseus’ victory may not have been enough; Thebes’ razing to the ground was what would cure the wounded pride of Athens and the Athenians.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Cf. *Il.* 4.409: κείνοι δέ [the Seven] σφετέρησιν ἀτασθαλίησιν ὄλοντο (but they perished through their own blind folly, trans. Murray, rev. Wyatt).

⁵⁸ Latacz 1996:48–52.

⁵⁹ Thuc. 4.89–101.

⁶⁰ Rehm 1994:129; Bowie 1997.

⁶¹ Cf. Parmentier and Grégoire 1950:148n1.

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