DOI: 10.14232/suc.2024.5.97-117

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# Two Modes of Dying in Attic Tragedy: Suicide and Self-Sacrifice as an Act of Heroism or Cowardice

*This paper deals with the surviving plays of Greek tragedy, in which suicide and self-sacrifice take place during the plot:* Ajax, Antigone, Oedipus Rex, Trachiniae, Phoenissae, Hippolytus, The Suppliants Eur., Hecuba, Heracleidae. *It primarily focuses on the motivations of the heroes and heroines and the way they choose to end their lives. It also examines the way that suicide is presented to the audience (visually or aurally), the vocabulary used in each case and its meaning and the portrayal of the dead bodies on stage. Through the analysis of the heroes' and heroines' inner conflicts, societal pressures, and the cultural backdrop against which these actions occur, this paper aims to elucidate the complex interplay of heroism and cowardice within the framework of ancient Greek tragedy.*

**Keywords:** suicide, self-sacrifice, heroism, cowardice, Sophocles, Euripides, extant plays

The issue of suicide, as a social phenomenon,[1] concerned the ancient Greek society and inspired the ancient Greek art. Taking into account that passion is a sort of a leitmotif in Attic tragedy, death by suicide features prominently, because it intensifies the tragic plot.[2] As Garrison notes, "the tragedians use the suicide motif in almost every conceiv-

[1] s. E. Durkheim, *Suicide: a Study in sociology*; translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simson. London 1966. About different attitudes towards suicide from antiquity to 19th-century Germany, s. also R. Hirtzel *Der Selbstmord*. Leipzig 1908.
[2] According to Hoof (1990: 78), suicide in antiquity was "deliberate, direct and solute".

able way to portray the complicated and painful nature of human existence".[3]

The theme of self-destruction is not handled alike by the three tragic poets. In Aeschylean drama, heroes and heroines do not go further than the point of threatening to end their lives (*The Suppliants*)[4] or pleading for an end to their lives to escape their suffering (*Prometheus Bound, The Persians*).[5] Many of Sophocles' heroes and heroines find in suicide an ideal end to the despair and the impasse of their experience (Ajax, Antigone, Haemon, Eurydice, Jocasta, Deianeira). In Euripides, some heroes take their own lives (Phaedra, Jocasta, Evadne), but in most cases suicide either emerges as self-sacrifice (Menoeceus, Polyxena, Macaria) or is eventually overturned or avoided (Alcestis, Iphigeneia, Heracles).[6]

The term "suicide" is applied to any death that occurs as a direct or indirect result of an act, whether positive or negative, that the victim performs on his or her own self.[7] Self-sacrifice is related to the military, patriotic or religious duty of each hero or heroine to his or her city or family, often fulfilling a prophecy. In Attic tragedy, self-sacrifice often takes on suicidal dimensions as the heroes and heroines defend their intention to sacrifice themselves to such an extent that it seems as if they

[3] Garrison (1995: 179).

[4] *Sup.* 465: *ἐκ τῶνδ᾽ ὅπως τάχιστ᾽ ἀπάγξασθαι θεῶν.*

[5] *P.B.* 151–153: *εἰ γάρ μ᾽ ὑπὸ γῆν νέρθεν θ᾽ Αἵδου / τοῦ νεκροδέγμονος εἰς ἀπέραντον / Τάρταρον ἥκεν*, 580–583: *οἰστρηλάτῳ δὲ δείματι δειλαίαν / παράκοπον ὧδε τείρεις; πυρί ‹με› φλέξον, ἢ χθονὶ κάλυψον, ἢ / ποντίοις δάκεσι δὸς βοράν*; *Pers.* 915–917: *εἴθ᾽ ὄφελεν, Ζεῦ, κἀμὲ μετ᾽ ἀνδρῶν / τῶν οἰχομένων / θανάτου κατὰ μοῖρα καλύψαι.*

[6] *Alc.* 1123–1126*: ὦ θεοί, τί λέξω —θαῦμ᾽ ἀνέλπιστον τόδε— / γυναῖκα λεύσσων τήνδ᾽; — ἐμὴν ἐτητύμως; / ἢ κέρτομός με θεοῦ τις ἐκπλήσσει χαρά;*/ Her: *οὐκ ἔστιν, ἀλλὰ τήνδ᾽ ὁρᾷς δάμαρτα σήν*; *IA* 1581–1589: *θαῦμα δ᾽ ἦν αἴφνης ὁρᾶν. / πληγῆς κτύπον γὰρ πᾶς τις ᾔσθετ᾽ ἂν σαφῶς, / τὴν παρθένον δ᾽ οὐκ οἶδεν οὗ γῆς εἰσέδυ. […] ἔλαφος γὰρ ἀσπαίρουσ᾽ ἔκειτ᾽ ἐπὶ χθονὶ / ἰδεῖν μεγίστη διαπρεπής τε τὴν θέαν, / ἧς αἵματι βωμὸς ἐραίνετ᾽ ἄρδην τῆς θεοῦ.*; *HF* 1347–1352: *ἐσκεψάμην δὲ καίπερ ἐν κακοῖσιν ὢν / μὴ δειλίαν ὄφλω τιν᾽ ἐκλιπὼν φάος·*

*τᾳ̃ς συμφορᾳ̃ς γὰρ ὅστις οὐχ ὑφίσταται / οὐδ᾽ ἀνδρὸς ἂν δύναιθ᾽ ὑποστῆναι βέλος. / ἐγκαρτερήσω βίοτον· εἶμι δ᾽ ἐς πόλιν / τὴν σήν, χάριν τε μυρίαν δώρων ἔχω.*

[7] Cooper (1999: 516); cf. Durkheim (1966: 42).

themselves seek to do so.[8] This may be why the philosophers of antiquity, in their attempt to address the issue of suicide, included self-sacrifice in the broader group of intentional self-killings.[9] Both Plato and Aristotle, based on legal principles, reject suicide.[10] Plato only recognizes some exceptions, which are related to unavoidable misfortune and irreversible disgrace. In *Phaedo* 873c7, he characterizes suicide under any other circumstances as cowardice.[11] Accordingly, Aristotle considers suicide an offense against oneself and against the city, perceiving it as an act of abdication of responsibility (Arist. *Nic. Eth.* 5, 11). It seems, therefore, that the ancient Greeks, in the context of the rightness or wrongness of suicide, distinguished between honorable and dishonorable suicide, depending on the motives of the suicide, both personal and societal.[12]

Consequently, the question arises as to whether suicide in Attic tragedy can be described as an act of heroism or cowardice or it involves both, depending on the way one approaches it. This is the question this paper will seek to answer, including the cases of self-sacrifice. We will examine surviving plays in which suicide and self-sacrifice take place during the plot: *Ajax, Antigone, Oedipus Rex, Trachiniae, Phoenissae, Hippolytus, The Suppliants* Eur.*, Hecuba, Heracleidae*.[13]

Through the study of the motivations and the way of death, it will be attempted to determine whether such an act can be considered hero-

[8] Garrison (1995: 121) considers self-sacrifices a type of suicide that she calls "noble suicide" because of the "altruistic tendencies" and their "social motivations." Cf. Loraux (1981: 31-40) who argues that the difference between suicide and self-sacrifice is that sacrificial victims merely accept their death rather than seeking it.

[9] Cooper (1999: 516); cf. Loraux (1987: 31–42) on the distinction between suicide and self-sacrifice.

[10] As Cooper (1999: 531) observes, their approach is related to the treatments of the law in Greek city-states.

[11] s. also Pl. *Laws* 9.873 c-d.

[12] s. Garrison (1995: 23–31).

[13] For Sophocles' text I follow Pearson ed. (1975); for Euripides' text I follow Murray ed. (1902) and Murray ed. (1913).

ic, a sign of cowardice or both. Furthermore, we will examine the way in which suicide is presented to the audience (visually or aurally),[14] the vocabulary used in each case and its meaning and the presentation of the dead bodies on stage. What is particularly interesting is that both self-sacrificers and suicides of Attic dramas are portrayed in a manner that rather evokes sympathy from the audience, despite living in a society where suicide was condemnable;[15] this, at least, could be indicative of the understanding and justification of such an act.[16]

## A. MOTIVATION

### I. Suicide

With respect to the motives that drive heroes and heroines to suicide, they can be classified into two broad categories, which relate to the context of ancient society and its values of self-sacrifice: when a dignified life cannot be ensured, the person seeks death—preferably a glorious death. The first category relates to avoiding the notoriety that comes with continuing to live.[17] The second category relates to the pain the he-

[14] In this context, depictions of suicide scenes in ancient art, which probably relate to these plays, could also be considered. However, this could not be a reliable criterion, for two reasons. Firstly, "the stage never becomes a regular resource of any painter", as Osborne (2008: 409) notes. Secondly, in classical art, as Hoof (1990: 176) observes, the moment before the decisive act is chosen. In addition, any depictions of suicide scenes relate to the influence that Sophocles and Euripides had on the artists of the period. It is widely known that Euripidean tragedies inspired vase painters in lower Italy and Sicily. So, scenes from Sophocles' dramas are rarely depicted, unlike those of Euripides. In particular, none of the suicide scenes quoted by Sophocles are depicted on any vase. Rather, vases with the suicide of Jocasta over her dead children in *Phoenissae*, Phaedra contemplating her suicide, and the sacrifice of Polyxena are attributed by some researchers to scenes inspired by the corresponding Euripidean tragedies. About Jocasta, s. Krauskopf (1990: 685–686); about Phaedra, s. Linant de Bellefonds (1994: 358–359); about Polyxena, s. Touchepheu-Meynier (1994: 433–434).

[15] Cooper (1999: 531) notes that "The Greek city-states had laws against suicide".

[16] s. also Garrison (1995: 33), who argues that "Suicide is a social phenomenon, steeped in ethical ramifications, for the dramatists of the 5th century and their audiences, then and now".

[17] This view is expressed either by minor characters in Attic tragedy, such as the cho-

roes feel after the loss of a loved one. It is love which intensifies the pain and this unbearable pain leads to suicide.[18]

Those who commit suicide to avoid a life of disgrace for themselves and their descendants were usually involved in an act that has led to disaster or trouble. Helpless, therefore, to cope with the reality that has been shaped by their actions, overwhelmed by shame, they see suicide as a salvation from a dishonorable life. Past experiences drive them to take their own lives, and as a sort of *catharsis*, their death is the inevitable result of their deeds.[19] In fact, most of the heroes and heroines who commit suicide argue in favor of their act and bid farewell to their loved ones and the earthly world. For example, Ajax is a hero who, after wiping out a flock of sheep instead of the Achaean army (*Aj*. 42–45), cannot bear the *laughter* (*γέλωτα*)[20]; after bidding farewell to his loved ones, he ends his life. His act has isolated him from society.[21] Consequently, his suicide aligns with his belief that a man of noble lineage benefits from living and dying in a noble way (*Aj*. 477–480), and the play never portrays the suicide as cowardly or deserving of punishment, as Ajax is ultimately given a proper burial.[22]

Furthermore, when Deianeira realizes that she has harmed her husband instead of winning him back, blinded by her love for him, she ad-

rus, in the form of a gnomic (*O.R*. 1368: *κρείσσων γὰρ ἦσθα μηκέτ᾽ ὢν ἢ ζῶν τυφλός*), or by the suicides themselves (*Hip*. 687–688: *τοιγὰρ οὐκέτ᾽ εὐκλεεῖς / θανούμεθ᾽*; *Trach.* 721: *ζῆν γὰρ κακῶς κλύουσαν οὐκ ἀνασχετόν*; *Aj*. 479–480: *ἀλλ᾽ ἢ καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς τεθνηκέναι/ τὸν εὐγενῆ χρή*); cf. Eur. *Sup*. 1006–1007: *ἥδιστος γάρ τοι θάνατος/ συνθνήσκειν θνήσκουσι φίλοις*, 1015–1017: *εὐκλεΐας χάριν ἔνθεν όρ-/ μάσω τᾶσδ᾽ ἀπὸ πέτρας πη-/ δήσασα πυρὸς ἔσω*.

[18] Κατσούρης (1975: 211).

[19] Asomatou et al. (2016: 74) relates suicide to past events and self-sacrifice to the avoidance of future catastrophe.

[20] *Aj*. 367, 369–382, 416–417, 426–427, 440, 466, 690–692.

[21] Garrison (1995: 47), Sicherl (1977: 67–98).

[22] Garrison (1995: 53). Cf. Plato's position about acceptable suicide and burial of suicide victims (Pl. *Laws* 9.873c-d).

mits that she has no choice but to die (*Trach*. 719–721) and silently leaves the scene (*Trach*. 813).[23] According to Hoof, it is her guilt over her act rather than the shame that it entails that drives her to commit suicide, since she takes her own life after her son accuses her of the harm that she has caused.[24]

Phaedra, who has previously announced her suicide (*Hip*. 723), also leaves the scene in silence; she has no choice since her husband's son, whom she loves, has rejected her (*Hip*. 599–600). Her reputation can only be salvaged through her suicide. Even her suicide note is due to her dread of disgrace rather than a sense of revenge against Hippolytus. Phaedra's attention has shifted from her personal desires to societal concerns.[25]

Even in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Jocasta silently exits upon learning of her incestuous affair with her son (*O.T.* 1073–1075). She kills herself with haste and determination. It is the shame, the disgrace that such a relationship entails that drives her to suicide. From a societal perspective, Jocasta's suicide makes sense in light of her personal tragedy and is not implied to be a substitute for that of Oedipus'.[26]

Antigone commits suicide since, after the punishment imposed on her by Creon, she sees her confinement in the underground chamber as the end of her life. An end that she herself will put as a final manifestation of her unconventional character. Excluded from the city because of her decision to bury her brother and devoted to her familial bounds, death is the only way to return to her family.[27] Suicide ends her pain from what she suffered after the death of her brothers, and at the same time enhances her glory.[28]

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[23] s. Garrison (1995: 63) who connects Deianeira's "secretive nature" to her suicide.
[24] Hoof (1990: 115–116); cf. Garrison (1995: 55, 65) who discusses Deianeira's "disintegrated role" as Heracles' wife and her suicide as an act to be restored in society.
[25] Garrison (1995: 70).
[26] Garrison (1995: 112–113).
[27] Garrison (1995: 132–133).
[28] For the importance of Antigone's glory through her suicide, s. Loraux (1987: 47–48).

In the same play, two more characters take their own lives. Haemon, at the sight of his dead beloved, turns against his father and, failing to kill him, ends his own life (*Ant*. 1231–1240).[29] Then his mother, Eurydice, hearing about her son's suicide, silently leaves the scene (*Ant*. 1244–1245) to end her life. These two suicides are impulsive, and stem from the hero's and heroine's powerlessness to cope with the loss of their loved ones. This is the main reason why Jocasta ends her life in Euripides' *Phoenissae*. Unlike Jocasta in Sophocles, what she cannot bear as a mother is the loss of her sons who killed each other; as a result, she stabs herself over their corpses (*Phoen*. 1455–1459). Both mothers commit suicide to reconcile with their children.[30]

In Euripides' *Suppliants,* Evadne's suicide, which takes the dimension of a self-sacrifice and a glorious death,[31] is linked to the unbearable pain of losing a beloved husband.[32] This heroine, unwilling to live without her husband (*Sup*. 1002–1005, 1040),[33] falls into his funeral pyre despite her father's pleas (*Sup*. 1034–1071). A life without her husband is tantamount to death, a sweet (*Sup*. 1006–1008) and glorious (*Sup*. 1015–

[29] It is also anger that drives Haemon to suicide. Anger against his father, whom he fails to murder. Garrison (1995: 115) observes that a suicide only because of anger is considered cowardly by Aristoteles, but the messenger's speech (*Ant*. 1242–1243) "articulates the effect Haemon's suicide has" introducing the "intellectual process" as "worse *kakon* than anger."

[30] Cf. Garrison (1995: 115) who discusses Eurydice's and Antigone's suicide as an act to reintegrate with their families' members.

[31] The scene of her husband's funeral pyre and her fall into it suggests a sacrificial ritual. Also, her decision to die together with her husband as a sign of a good and loyal wife relates to the concept of her good reputation which in turn is associated with cases of self-sacrifice. However, because death is her own decision and not a decision made by an oracle or another hero in the play which she willingly accepts and defends, it is difficult to categorize it as a self-sacrifice.

[32] McLure (2017: 155) notes that she is dressed as a bride (*Sup*. 1048) before her death leap.

[33] After all, Evadne's last word before she dies is "husband", as Storey (2008: 76) notes.

1021) death,[34] like that of her warrior husband.[35] The most interesting element about Evadne is that the chorus does not seem to understand the necessity of her death and consequently her suicide is not commendable for her "social group".[36] However, the lamentation of her father after her death (*Sup*.1094-1103) comes to justify her suicide among the internal and external audience.[37]

II. Self-sacrifice

All cases of self-sacrifice belong to the same category of motives: that of heroes and heroines defending their choice to sacrifice themselves either for the sake of the prosperity of their country or family, i.e. for the common good, or to avoid a dishonorable life, i.e. for the individual maintenance of their nobility.

Thus, Menoeceus in *Phoenissae* and Macaria in *Heracleidae* justify their decision to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of their country.[38] Both have to fulfil the oracle to save their country and family. Menoeceus' motives are "pure and noble"[39] and stem from his love for his country (*Phoen*. 1013–1014). Even his dignity through his sacrifice is due to his patriotism.[40]

Macaria defends her sacrifice motivated both by personal and societal concerns.[41] Life is meaningless when there are dead relatives (*Her*.

[34] s. Garrison (1995: 125) about Evadne's false belief about reality and glory that moves her actions.
[35] Dee (2015: 266).
[36] Garrison (1995: 123); cf. Dee (2015: 267) about Evadne's heroic status among ancient Greek society and the audience.
[37] Dee (2015: 273–277).
[38] According to Loraux (1987: 46), self-sacrifice takes the dimension of suicide because of the hero's or heroine's willingness and persistence to be sacrificed.
[39] Garrison (1995: 139) characterizes Menoeceus' sacrifice as "institutional suicide", too. Cf. Loraux (1987: 31–42) who argues that suicide cannot be an altruistic and heroic act and classifies Menoeceus under "virgin sacrifice."
[40] Garrison (1995: 144).
[41] s. Garrison (1995: 131, 145, 147).

520-1), especially if she is to fall into the enemy's hands (*Her*. 512–514). Consequently, she claims that her death (i.e. her sacrifice) is fortunate for her and gives her glory (*Her*. 525–526: *οὔκουν θανεῖν ἄμεινον ἢ τούτων τυχεῖν/ἀναξίαν;* 534: κάλλιστον ηὕρηκ᾽, εὐκλεῶς λιπεῖν βίον.).

Polyxena, in *Hecuba*, willingly accepts the decision for her sacrifice and refuses not to be sacrificed, since what awaits her is a life of servitude. The happiness of death in the face of a disgraced life is expressed by Polyxena in *Hecuba* (v. 213–215, 377–378: *θανὼν δ᾽ ἂν εἴη μᾶλλον εὐτυχέστερος/ ἢ ζῶν· τὸ γὰρ ζῆν μὴ καλῶς μέγας πόνος*). Her motives are basically personal; there is no mention to a greater good for the community.[42]

In all cases, voluntary sacrifice is associated with a glorious death and aims at posthumous good reputation, which in turn is linked to the concept of heroism. The phrases in v. 554–555 (*τόλμηι τε τόλμαν*) and v. 569 (*τῆς τε σῆς εὐψυχίας*) in *Heracleidae* about the courage of the sacrificed exemplify this association. On the contrary, refusal to sacrifice oneself is either an act of cowardice and implies a life of dishonor for oneself and their descendants, as mentioned above. The words of Menoeceus in *Phoenissae* (v. 993–994, 998–1005)[43] and those of Polyxena in *Hecuba* (v. 347-348: *εἰ δὲ μὴ βουλήσομαι, / κακὴ φανοῦμαι καὶ φιλόψυχος γυνή*) reveal that the denial of self-sacrifice is a sign of cowardice.

As far as motives are concerned, one may conclude that suicide is presented as a heroic act or at least a justified one, both at the individual and the societal level, for those who want to avoid a life of notoriety and social outcry.[44] Yet, such behavior could be considered cowardice and re-

[42] Garrison (1995: 159) classifies Polyxena's death to "noble suicides" because of her "fatalistic" motives and the absence of an oracle.

[43] These verses show that even Menoeceus' decision is not just driven by altruism; rather, it is based on upholding his personal honor.

[44] Cf. Evadne's speech (Eur. *Sup*. 1067) about her death. She wants all the Argives to know that she will fall into the fire with her husband, because she believes that in this way, she will be a proper wife in their eyes.

lated to the heroes' and heroines' failure to break the social rules according to which one should live in a society where they would be integrated. Thus, heroes and heroines commit suicide, unable to live in a society where they are disintegrated and even their descendants would suffer from it.[45] This applies to Ajax, Phaedra, Deianeira, Sophocles' Jocasta, but also to heroes and heroines who willingly accept to be sacrificed, since the refusal of sacrifice is tantamount to dishonor. At this point, it should be noted that among ancient Greeks "suicide out of shame or guilt or fear for dishonor is commendable."[46] On the other hand, there is not a distinct sign of heroism in those who commit suicide because they cannot bear the death of their loved ones. However, it can be argued that a hero's or heroine's refusal to live after the loss of a loved one, choosing instead to end their own life, is more heroic. It can be seen as a heroic self-sacrifice, as a sacrifice on the altar of love for the deceased. After all, Evadne falls onto the funeral pyre[47] and Eurydice commits suicide on the altar. Furthermore, all of them (Haemon, Eurydice, Jocasta in *Phoenissae*) kill themselves with knife or sword, weapons associated with heroic warriors. In addition, the loss of their loved ones made their social position unsustainable[48] and thus their suicide might be a way to acknowledge and validate their desire for the lost individual.

[45] Cf. Garrison (1995: 32), who argues that the commitment of suicide does not question but rather confirms the social rules.

[46] Garrison (1995: 3); s. also Aristotle's position in *Nichomachean Ethics* 5, 11.

[47] Evadne's loyalty and marital fidelity, which drive her to suicide, are valid aspects of heroism.

[48] According to Garrison (1995: 103), they commit suicide because they cannot "reintegrate themselves into their cultures."

## B. COMMON WAYS OF DYING

In terms of the way heroes and heroines choose to end their lives, things are concrete with respect to motivation. In cases of self-sacrifice, a ritual of sacrifice is followed. Sometimes it is described in detail and sometimes it is implied. Thus, Menoeceus cuts his throat with a sword at the top of the turret (*Phoen.* 1091–1092). The fact that Menoeceus is both the sacrificer and the victim in combination with his insistence to die for his country modulates his sacrifice into suicide, according to some researchers.[49] Polyxena stands bravely at Achilles' tomb, thrusts out her chest and lets her throat be cut with a golden sword (*Hec.* 563–567, 543). Although the sacrifice of Macaria is not recounted by a messenger, it can be inferred from other references in the text that it was carried out in a similar manner (*Her*. 583, 601, 821–822).[50]

In cases of suicide, women who end their lives because they cannot bear the shame and social outcry retire silently and commit suicide by hanging. In *Oedipus,* Jocasta hangs herself by a rope on the bridal bed (*O.T.* 1241–1243, 1263–1264), while Phaedra enters the palace and is found with the rope around her neck (*Hip*. 777).

The exception is Deianeira, who is wounded in the ribs with a sword on the bridal bed (*Trach.* 913, 924–926, 930–931). The chorus represents the sword as *hybris* (*Trach.* 888) while referring to Deianeira's weapon, implying that it is unconventional and therefore against social norms for a woman to use a weapon against herself.[51] Of course, in this particular case her motives include the pain of Heracles' death, which she has caused.

As mentioned above, those who commit suicide because of the

[49] Garrison (1995: 143–144).
[50] Garrison (1995: 147, n. 45) refers to an Apulian volute-crater that depicts a maiden being carried from an altar with a wound and blood on her neck. Cf. Garrison (1995: 147, n. 45) who argues that Macaria may have killed herself because she "dies among women (*Her*. 566) who do not usually perform blood sacrifices".
[51] Garrison (1995: 63).

pain of losing a loved one stab themselves next to their beloved. So does Haemon (*Ant*. 1236, 1240) and Jocasta in Euripides (*Phoen*. 1458–1459). Eurydice stabs herself on an altar (*Ant*. 1301). The altar may not have sacrificial dimensions, but it is preferred to intensify Eurydice's curse on Creon.[52] It depends on the needs of the plot.

Evadne chooses an unusual way to take her life as she combines the act of leaping from a height and self-immolation (Eur. *Sup*. 1070). While jumping from a height was a desperate act, especially for women,[53] self-immolation was an extremely rare way of suicide and it was considered barbaric.[54] However, Evadne predominately jumps into the funeral pyre to join her deceased husband.

A special case is Antigone, who, although she acts against her feminine nature throughout the play, hangs herself by her apron in her cell (*Ant*. 1221–1223), as the conventions of her gender dictate.[55] If one even considers that hanging, as a way of death, is linked to newly married women (*nymphē*), then she becomes a woman through her suicide.[56] In any case, the motif of *Bride of Hades* pervades the play, gradually connecting marriage to death and to suicide.[57] Besides, it would be absurd for Antigone to carry a sword with her in the cell.

Ajax may be an exception to the whole extant Attic tragedy. As a rule, in tragedy, men do not commit suicide,[58] and the way Sophocles chooses to present the suicide of a man emphasizes this "deviation".[59] He probably falls in front of the audience on the sword he has placed on

[52] Garrison (1995: 120) also adds that the vocabulary does not refer to sacrificial ritual.
[53] Hoof (1990: 73).
[54] Dee (2015: 270–272).
[55] Loraux (1987: 31) characterizes Antigone's death as a "mixture of a female suicide and something like sacrifice outside the norm".
[56] Loraux (1987: 15, 32).
[57] Garrison (1995: 136–138).
[58] Haemon commits suicide after the loss of his loved one (Antigone) and Menoeceus sacrifices himself for his country.
[59] Loraux (1987: 20).

the ground. It happens in the countryside, perhaps beyond his hut. Ajax himself talks to his sword and describes his future death (*Aj*. 815–841) and the chorus calls out to pay attention to the sound of Ajax falling on the sword (*Aj*. 870–871: *ἰδοὺ ἰδού, / δοῦπον αὖ κλύω τινά*). Scholars have expressed many different opinions about the way this particular suicide was played out.[60] This is because, apart from other practical issues such a presentation on stage entails, there is also the issue of replacing the actor playing Ajax with a dummy after his death.[61] The dead Ajax remains on stage as the second part of the tragedy unfolds, which focuses on the process of his burial.[62]

It is also worth mentioning that, when committing suicide with a sword, a vocabulary associated with sacrifice, such as the word *σφαγή* (=slaughter) and its derivatives, is often used,[63] reinforcing the heroic nature of the act. This linguistic choice is particularly evident in the case of Ajax,[64] as well as in the cases of Deianeira,[65] Eurydice[66] and Jocasta in *Phoenissae*.[67]

Consequently, based only on the way the suicides choose to die, and taking into account that death by sword is considered heroic, as opposed to hanging, one can characterize the act of each hero or heroine

[60] Opinions are divided regarding the need for a change of scene and especially on the possibility of a visible suicide on stage. Liapis (2013: 140–153) argues that both the sword was visible and the suicide was performed in front of the audience through an elevated stage, ensuring that the chorus could not witness Ajax's suicide. In contrast, Finglass (2013: 193–210), arguing based on earlier pottery and discussing the views of other scholars, concludes that the sword need not be visible and suicide is not enacted in front of the spectators. Battezzato (2013: 238–243) and Most (2013: 291–292) discuss partial visibility, while Zannetto (2013: 276–277) accepts that the sword is visible, but suicide is not.

[61] *Aj*. 915: The dead body has to be covered.

[62] About dead Ajax on stage s. Sommerstein (2013: 245–246), Battezzato (2013: 227–234).

[63] Loraux (1987: 13–14).

[64] *Aj*. 815: *σφαγεὺς*, 841: *αὐτοσφαγῆ πίπτοντα· τὼς αὐτοσφαγεῖς*.

[65] *Trach.* 1130: *τέθνηκεν ἀρτίως νεοσφαγής*.

[66] *Ant*. 1291: *σφάγιον ἐπ᾽ ὀλέθρῳ*.

[67] Cf. *Phoen*. 1431: *ἰδοῦσα καιρίους σφαγὰς*.

as heroic or cowardly.

C. DEAD BODIES ON STAGE

In Attic tragedy, scenes of violence and death are not played out on stage. They are usually either conveyed by a messenger or heard through the heroes' cries. But the result of such a scene, usually dead heroes or dying heroes, was often presented before the spectators with the help of a wheeled platform, called "eccyclema".

Not all suicides are shown on stage after their deaths. Antigone's corpse never appears, unlike those of Haemon's and Eurydice's. Creon holds his dead son and at the same time faces his dead wife (*Ant*. 1298–1299). But it is only in this way that Creon's tragic figure is emphasized at the end of the play. The dead Jocasta in *Oedipus* and the dead Deianeira in the *Trachiniae* also remain in obscurity. But in *Phoenissae,* Jocasta appears on stage with the corpses of her dead sons (*Phoen*. 1502–1503).

As for Phaedra's corpse, it appears on stage and, in conjunction with her letter, intensifies Theseus' anger towards his son Hippolytus. After all, Phaedra causes more harm with her death than when she was alive.

Menoeceus, of course, who is sacrificed for his country in the same play, remains in obscurity. The same is true of the other two sacrificial victims, Polyxena and Macaria. However, in the case of Menoeceus and Polyxena, their relatives mourn them.[68] Evadne alone seems to disappear from the scene in a way that resembles her falling into the funeral pyre[69] and then follows her father's lament.

The dead Ajax, as mentioned above, remains on the stage. Ajax falls on his sword and his corpse needs to be covered. Despite the horrific

[68] In *Phoenissae*, both Jocasta (v. 1205–1207) and Creon (v. 1310–1321) mourn the dead Menoeceus. Also, Hecuba mourns Polyxena (*Hec*. 585–603).

[69] Morwood (2007: 219) notes "Evadne will, thus, be able to perform her Tosca-like leap off the back of the roof onto a pile of soft materials, becoming invisible to the audience at once"; cf. Storey (2008: 117) that the pyre "not have to have been visible to the spectators".

spectacle, this also happens for the actor to be replaced by a dummy.[70] Then it is unveiled (*Aj*. 1003) and its presence on stage is undeniable. Both Tecmessa's lament[71] and the discussion of his burial revolve around his corpse. The corpse could not have been moved, most likely until v. 1409, and the sword was still attached to his body.[72] Sommerstein highlights a few novelties involving Ajax's corpse, including its use as the focal point of a suppliant tableau, its ability to bleed like a living body (*Aj*.918–919), and its unwavering hostility against former foes, even after they have demonstrated that they are now true friends.[73] Certainly, the corpse of Ajax on stage is a unique case, since the entire second part of the play is performed around it.

The presence of dead bodies on the stage does not seem to follow a rule. It's only in the case of self-sacrifice that they do not appear, but some of them are mourned by their relatives. In other cases, the corpses appear and remain on stage, depending on the needs dictated by the plot of each play.

## D. CONCLUSION

To sum up, most of the self-slayers in Greek tragedy look upon suicide rather as a choice of glorious death in the face of a life in dishonor and social outcry.[74] Glorious death is also a key motivation of those who sacrifice themselves for the homeland. Beyond the final social decrial, tragic heroes and heroines experience a series of events which lead them to an impasse. Because of these *peripeteies*, they experience intense feelings of mourning and sadness, especially after the loss of a relative (Antigone,

[70] Liapis (2013: 147–149).
[71] Finglass (2013: 207) cites various scholars' views on the purpose of covering the dead body and links unveiling to a standard pattern in tragedy before mourning the dead.
[72] Battezzato (2013: 229–232).
[73] Sommerstein (2013: 252).
[74] s. Κατσούρης (1975: 206, 208–209), who refers to "δύσκλεια" and the "γέλως" as reasons for suicide.

Evadne, Jocasta in *Phoenissae*). Moreover, *αἰδώς*, in the sense of shame, that women often feel either after the revelation of an incestuous relationship (Jocasta), the murder of a husband (Deianeira) or because of an unfulfilled love (Phaedra) drives them to suicide.[75] In addition, *αἰδώς*, in the sense of honor, is also associated with social outcry (Ajax). It should be noted that madness or mental disorder, although considered a basic cause of suicide according to psychiatry,[76] in Greek Drama is the result of great sadness, pain and despair and is not a basic motivation.[77] As Ruffel notes, "we should see in Greek tragedy an interplay between emotional engagement and social, ideological and/or ethical reflection".[78]

Moreover, the way in which heroes and heroines commit suicide, as well as the part of the body that is hurt, varies and characterizes the quality of the act. Women hurt their throat either when they are sacrificed or when they are hanged.[79] Even when they kill themselves with a sword, they often hurt their throats.[80] And it is the neck and the throat which are mainly mentioned as a sign of feminine beauty and sensitivity.[81] However, Eurydice wounds her liver (*Ant*. 1315: *παίσασ᾽ ὑφ᾽ ἧπαρ*) and Deianeira sticks the sword into her left side (*Trach.* 926: *πλευρὰν ἅπασαν*).[82] They seem to commit suicide like most of the male characters. Men always stick the sword on the right side of their body (Haemon and Ajax),[83] as a warrior would have done. The exception is Men-

[75] Laios et al. (2014: 202).
[76] Laios et al. (2014: 200).
[77] Hoof (1990: 99, 145) also mentions the case of God-given madness.
[78] Ruffel (2008: 45); cf. Garrison (1995:178) who argues that one's status in society has a direct impact on suicide rates.
[79] *Her*. 821–822*: ἔσφαζον…λαιμῶν*; *Hec*. 549: *παρέξω γὰρ δέρην*; *Ant*. 221: *κρεμαστὴν αὐχένος*; *Hip*. 781: *λύσομεν δέρης*.
[80] *Phoen*. 1457.
[81] Loraux (1987: 50–52).
[82] s. Loraux (1987: 54–55) who mentions that Deianeira deviates from the norm that heroes follow, as she wounds her left side.
[83] *Ant*. 1236*: ἤρεισε πλευραῖς μέσσον ἔγχος*; *Aj*. 834: *πλευρὰν διαρρήξαντα τῷδε φασγάνῳ*.

oeceus, who, precisely because he is being sacrificed, sticks the sword in his neck (*Phoen*. 1092: *λαιμῶν διῆκε*). In addition, a death by sword or blade and immolation as a kind of sacrifice (Heracles) is admirable, while hanging is chosen always by a desperate heroine and is often characterized as dishonor or *miasma*.[84]

In principle, suicides do not take place "on stage", in front of the eyes of the audience (perhaps *Ajax* is an exception). For that reason, the focus is on the way they are conveyed to the viewer: either by a messenger's speech[85] (Jocasta in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and in *Phoenissae*, Phaedra, Antigone, Haemon, Eurydice, Deianeira, Macaria, Polyxena, Menoeceus), by the cries of the chorus (Ajax) or by the suicide himself/herself (Ajax, Evadne).[86] The range of words and phrases used to denote the act of suicide—words that often refer to sacrificial ritual—[87]and the way in which some future suicides leave the scene before the act, lead to a different perception of the act for the viewer.[88]

In conclusion, self-sacrifice can be considered a heroic act in terms of the values that governed ancient Greek society. This is confirmed by the motives and the way it is done, but it is also confirmed by the fact that scenes of self-sacrifice in Attic tragedy appear in ancient art (s. the sacrifice of Polyxena).[89] In Attic tragedy the majority of suicides is committed

[84] Loraux (1987: 70, n. 8).

[85] Such a speech can be uttered either by a messenger or by a secondary hero of the play such as the nurse. Cf. Κατσούρης (1975: 220) who correlates the messenger's speech with the announcement of her suicide to the previous silent departure of the heroines (Jocasta in *O.R.*, Deianeira, Eurydice, Phaedra).

[86] Evadne announces her fall into the fire (*Sup*. 1070). Similarly, Ajax describes his fall onto his sword (*Aj*. 841) and then the chorus confirms it with the phrase in v. 870–871.

[87] Loraux (1987: 14).

[88] s Κατσούρης (1975: 210–211) for the silent departure from the stage as a sign of suicide. This connection underscores how the anticipation and foreshadowing of the impending suicide are built up through the actions and emotions of the characters before the actual event is narrated by the messenger.

[89] Touchepheu-Meynier (1994: 433–434). Apart from self-sacrifice, according to Krauskopf (1990: 685–686), Jocasta's suicide with a sword is depicted, too. It reinforces

by women; it could be argued that the women are the most "powerless" when dealing with dead-end situations, at least in ancient Greek society, and, therefore, they choose a "timid" suicide.[90] However, suicide is a heroic act for the person who commits it, because it takes courage to decide and carry out such an act; always provided that it is done consciously and not on the impulse and desperation of the moment.[91] Consequently, suicide can be characterized as heroic or cowardly depending on the way one chooses to view it. Even if some women's suicides seem to belong to the realm of cowardice, either because they stem from their inability to face reality or because they choose to hang themselves (Phaedra, Jocasta in *O.T.*), this is not the norm. There are heroines whose motives seem heroic but whose way of committing suicide is cowardly, such as Antigone. There are also heroines who escape an embarrassing life through suicide, but they do so using a heroic weapon, such as Deianeira. Ajax, is also helpless to face the reality that has arisen, but the way he commits suicide and the motives he puts forward place him in the realm of heroism. In the same realm we should include Haemon, Evadne, Eurydice and the Euripidean Jocasta, who die after the loss of their loved ones in a heroic way. In any case, it is never implied in the plays that the suicides act cowardly. It is due to the fact that Greek tragedy gives Athenians a glimpse into the suffering of those who choose suicide, by focusing not on the act of self-destruction itself but rather on the inner world, thoughts, and mental state of such individuals.

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the heroic element of her act.

[90] s. Hoof (1990: 21) according to whom, the woman who commits suicide confirms the values that pervade her life, while the life of the man is "less problematic". That explains why there aren't as many male suicides in the myth. Cf. Κατσούρης (1975: 205–234) who considers suicide to be a solution for desperate heroines but not a heroic act.

[91] Cf. Cooper (1999: 532–537) about Stoics' and Epicourians' attitude to suicide. They recognize the supreme value of the human person, whose freedom is based on the ability to decide his or her own life and death. According to this view, life is worth only if it is in harmony with human dignity, if it brings more pleasures and less suffering.

## APPENDIX

| **Tragedy** | **Suicide** | **Motivation** | **Way of suicide** | **Place of suicide** | **Dead body on stage** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Ajax*** | Ajax | Αἰδώς in the sense of honor | Sword | Countryside | Yes |
| ***Antigone*** | Antigone | a) Αἰδώς in the sense of honor b) End to her sufferings | Hanging | Cave | No |
| | Haemon | Unbearable pain from the loss of his beloved | Sword | Cave | Yes |
| | Eurydice | Unbearable pain from the loss of her son | Sword | Altar | Yes |
| ***Oedipus Rex*** | Jocasta | Αἰδώς in the sense of shame | Hanging | Bridal bed | No |
| ***Trachiniae*** | Deianeira | Αἰδώς in the sense of shame | Sword | Heracles' bedroom | No |
| ***Hippolytus*** | Phaedra | Αἰδώς in the sense of shame | Hanging | Palace | Yes |
| ***Suppliants Eur.*** | Evadne | a) Αἰδώς in the sense of honor b) Unbearable pain from the loss of her husband | Fall into the fire | Her husband's funeral pyre | No |
| ***Phoenissae*** | Jocasta (suicide) | Unbearable pain from the loss of her sons | Sword | Over her dead sons | Yes |
| | Menoeceus (self-sacrifice) | Αἰδώς in the sense of honor | Slaughter-sacrifice | At the top of the turret | No |
| ***Hecuba*** | Polyxena (self-sacrifice) | Αἰδώς in the sense of honor | Slaughter-sacrifice | Achilleus' tomb | Yes |
| ***Heracleidae*** | Macaria (self-sacrifice) | Αἰδώς in the sense of honor | Slaughter-sacrifice | Altar? (Not mentioned) | No |

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