



## The Athletic Hero in Greek Tragedy: Exploring the Representation of Sports in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides Rihab Arif Abdulsahib

University of Thi-Qar - College of Arts

[rihabarif@utq.edu.iq](mailto:rihabarif@utq.edu.iq)

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### Abstract

This athlete of Greek tragedy begun by Aeschylus continued if ever so tentatively by Sophocles and Euripides and this figure sort of draws us back and this is an athlete there was always the possibility of a porous zigzag border between sport and theatre out there between us and Greece where the concept of you know arete aspiring toward moral and physical excellence that is that for where we really kind of get our ideals of virtue or at least identity pre we did in the ancient Greeks an identity politics. For each tragedian, the concept of the agon employed as a metaphorical experience for ethical or psychological struggles both in literary and theoretical narrative is investigated. The old Greek code, which underlies bodily force, becomes for Aeschylus a moral alternative before his characters, and, as he writes them, his demigods are the moral embodiments of the divine purpose. Sucked in by the human ideal Sophocles this world where men at war with their own hearts cry to be told where they themselves transcend themselves. But Euripides assails and dismantles this ideal, pointing to its childishness and to humanity's own fragility. Drawing on performance theory and the methods of literary history, this study argues that Greek tragedy is a renegotiation of the problems posed by the athletic contest as a metaphor for existence in experience itself, human well-being depends not on material success but ethical self-knowledge. And in this regard, the rise of the athlete-hero was a part of a wider philosophical trajectory within Greek thought from hero-figures who were defined by myth to humanity that was determined through philosophy.

Keywords: Greek tragedy, athletic hero, arete, agon, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, heroism





## 1. Introduction

Sport was not only part of the Greek education and religious festivals, the rhythms of life including sport as captured by Golden (1998) in the broader idea of art or 'the excellence that seeks to excel in mind and body. Sports were more than competition, then: They were a means of completing the composite hero. Such an achievement would be recognized in the Olympic and Panhellenic games as a divine attribute worshipped, even if before receiving it from a hero, Heracles or Achilles (Kyle 2015).

Greek tragedy in the 5th century B.C. absorbed such an athletic ethos and situated it in a dramatic context." Playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides worked with the agonistic spirit of the agon a contest that towered above both athletics and tragedy. In their drama the stage acted both as a symbolic space with which to wage moral, political and physical battles and a site where athletic ideals tangled with human suffering (Winnington-Ingram, 1980).

The centrality of athleticism remains one of the hallmarks of Greek culture, and yet it is almost paradoxical that while sport and athletes are ever present in Greek tragedy little has been said about their representation from literary and performance perspectives. Most studies of Greek drama focus on political, religious or moral aspects and not on how sporting imagery and competition shapes tragic characterisation and plot development (Scanlon 2002). This study begins to address this gap in scholarship by exploring how the three major dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides mould their portraits of the literary "athletic hero" and how athletic metaphors together with values they encapsulate can shed fresh light on constructs of heroic glory, selfhood and destiny.

My purpose in what follows is to investigate the image and role of the athletic hero in selected plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Specifically, it seeks to:



Describe how athletic types and motifs are presented in the selected tragedies.

Discuss the use of athletic images in which the playwrights express their moral and existential dilemmas.

The following questions are answered:

To what extent do Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides represent in their tragedies athletic ideals, and the concept of an athletic hero?

How far does the agon spirit shape form and content in Greek tragic drama?

This book contributes to an inter-disciplinary dialogue between classics, literary history and performance theories by highlighting a sphere that has remained in the shadows of sports history that of athletics and tragedy. In a study of what it meant to achieve Olympian greatness, it offers new perspectives on the place of athletics in Hellenic culture and the role with which competitive athletics played among societies throughout the ancient world. It also broadens our notions of performance arts' pedagogy by excavating competitive and performative values inherited from classical Greek theatre.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Ancient Greek Athletics and Heroic Ideals**

In ancient Greece, sport was more than a social or recreational activity; sports served as the background to moral philosophy and religious observation. The games meant something to the Greeks, it wasn't just a game; it was about displaying human prowess and of arête of how we live the commitment to excellence in body mind and soul. "The athletic body was not merely a fount of physical wellbeing, the counterpart of spiritual health; it was embodiment of the moral ideal in which being physically beautiful meant being morally good" (Reid 2011).

The origin of this heroicism sports rests on Homeric literature, for it is in the agons, not only in battle as warriors but also in that of competition as athletes did heroes appear.

The funeral games of the Iliad: A microcosm of Greek competition values, where status



and glory can be won by competing and by being brave. These are predecessors of the epic heroes in a tradition where an athlete-hero is one whose actions on the field were morally right and divinely blessed (Scanlon, 2002).

These values were further disseminated during athletic competitions (e.g. the Olympic Games, Pythian Games, Nemean Games) that took place in Greek cities. Athletes didn't compete for Olympic gold (or even silver or bronze). Instead, they competed for themselves and their city-states symbolized by things like olive wreaths. The successful athletes were immortalised in verse, stone and civic memorial; a line being drawn between athletic success and heroic legend. Athletic victory represented divine reconciliation and human ideal, boundaries essential for Greek ethics and aesthetic (Kyle 2015).

## 2.2. The Heroic Ideal in Greek Tragedy

In the plays of Aeschylus, his heroes from Prometheus to Agamemnon are superhuman in every way except their inability to escape making a tragic mess of things whenever they reach for greatness. Aeschylus changes the competition of the athlete into a moral agon, in which antithesis between human will and divine justice is expressed. The hero is therefore symbolized as the figure of moral strength and persistence, whose suffering confirms the limits of all that can be accomplished by mortal beings its greatness lies in nothing more than resistance (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 1988).

Sophocles, however, shades the heroic truth through individual honor and honesty. After all, figures like Oedipus or Antigone are images of the internalization of that heroic code that will manifestly whether they like it or not compell them to act courageously and with certainty and no matter how misguided their action might prove to be. It is not just action that makes the Doaidos "warriors", but heightened vision of what it means to die. Their nobility lies in the determination to stay real and conscious in the grim face of doom. The hero does not sink through frailty, but he demonstrates the moral and human



state of a being who is hung between his fates delivered by heaven and his honor chosen by himself (Winnington-Ingram 1980).

Then Euripides gives us a reverse type a psychological demoralized hero. His tragic plays frequently show a dismantling of traditional heroism, revealing its inconsistencies and costs. Characters such as Heracles, Hippolytus and Pentheus warn audiences of what occurs if a being becomes too obsessed with themselves or nature pleasures. Euripidean heroes are at risk because of their very greatness, as the chorus elsewhere reflects in that when it comes to a hero on the tightrope (sophrosyne), excessive pride may be tied up with fault. In his complicated portrayal of him, Euripides diminishes the distance separating mythic hero from human mind toward the horizon of modern existentialist theory about tragedy (Segal 1992).

The Greek heroic in tragedy thus becomes, not a public fest to excellence, but instead an enquiry into one's own moral character. For the tragic stage becomes a battle place of psychological and ethical contest, no less fiercely contested than any great arena of sport, fate and moral truth its stakes. The struggle of the hero is a resurrection of sorts, in line with the Greek view that mourning is not valid unless it goes with something great. Greatness and pain belong to each other these are beliefs of men who possess courage sportsmen as well as soldiers or those who take up moral warfare ( Nagy, 1990).

### **2.3. Previous Studies on Athletics in Literature**

It has, indeed, a corpora of some of the most basic literature on ancient athletics (everything long published), and it views ancient sports as a social, religious and political phenomenon. Golden offers a comprehensive analysis that sets sport in the context of civic life and morality with a focus on how arete, agon and ritual were enmeshed in festivals and panhellenic games (Golden 1998). Miller provided an agency-based reconstruction of the general gym institutions, their practices, training styles and material culture that were circulating when these were producing forms of social



memory and public commemoration (2004). Kyle marshalls archeological, literary and iconographic evidence to concentrate our gaze on spectacle and group meaning: sport itself was public theatre (2015). There are the kinds of cultural references that literary critics must have in order to interpret representations of athleticism in texts.

A second installment of scholarship reflects about the way Homeric and Pindaric texts write values in athletics onto an heroic register. Analyses of the funeral games of the Iliad illustrate how competitive ritual is identified with kleos and social organization. Pindar and victory odes are translated as a rhetoric which skilfully unites divine favour, victorious athletes and praise from poets (Nagy 1990). The sexual, social and competitive dimensions of Scanlons project exemplify how erotic and athletic metaphors intertwine to mark ideal masculinity (Scanlon 2002). These were the types of on-paper precedents for the god-like athlete in a Greek culture.

But still fewer have made tragedy in particular, as one of the favored sites for athletic metaphor, a special object of interest; and speaking more broadly, dramatic reading in general has tended toward political or theological or ethical matters. Taplin's productionist approach (re-staging and public function, for example) can contribute to reinscribing the dichotomy of theatre action, while re-emphasizing performance as something agonistic in and of itself which in turn frees up athletic metaphor within drama as a legitimate discursive tool (Taplin 1978). Scholars like Winnington-Ingram and Knox read tragic figures through the lens of virtues such as noble character and moral psychology which are in turn also naturally aligned with athletic norms, among other ideals of athleticism (Winnington-Ingram 1980; Knox 1961).

Recent interdisciplinary readings between anthropology, performance studies and reception theory have taken issue with such a trajectory of thought that treats athletic images as peripheral, rather than central for tragic signification. These essays show how the structure of a play (agon scene, choric contests and competitive rhetoric) lattices





with athletic forms and shapes; they also display how the tragic hero may be seen as an athlete in fate or conscience. But much of this is indirect and sustained analysis that maps such imagery across an entire Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides remains scanty so as to furnish a typology of the 'athletic hero' (Revermann, 2006).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1. The Agonistic Theory of Greek Culture**

Nagy (1990) The competition culture of agon in Homeric society. Among other have proposed that the "informal principal relationships among Greeks was conceived in the agon a struggle for possession or maintenance. This agon action in literature and drama is a battle between individuals, humans gods or morality. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988) have claimed that tragedy "interiorized" the social contest, turning the somatic agon between men in the field into the moral struggle of drama.

This research reads alongside the tragic hero as a runner in a moral and existential race, which resonates that of the athlete's race for honour, using agonistic theory as an optic. The stage becomes a "theatre," in which that spiritual and moral superiority reveal themselves through the suffering, choice, persistence. Ibid] Just as such is the nature of its tragic conflict between chorus and actor, so too does Pindar's poetic structure mirror that of the athletic contest, the discipline, the confrontation, and aspiration to aretê in the context of divine or human contestation (Revermann 2006.)

#### **3.2. The Concept of Arete and the Heroic Ethos**

The key to both the athletic and tragic hero is the Greek word arete (or arête), which we translate into English, unhelpfully, as "excellence" or "virtue." Aristotle conceives of arete as the realization of one's nature in reason and measure, and this in the sense that ethical virtue stands in conjunction with human flourishing. Sport arete was the pursuit of victory and physical prowess, while for the tragedy it was moral strength, intellectual insight and endurance through suffering. In the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles arete



becomes a struggle between divine will and man's own desires which puts him on his head, dead in the dust, or by hand, destroyed. Defines the Sophoclean hero as a man with integrity, who has a purpose and goal in life even though he is doomed to ruin against his will, turning the athletic definition of power into moral stamina (Segal 1992).

### **3.3. Performance and Theatrical Theory**

Unlike athletics, tragedy was in large part a performative and communal experience. Performance theory also helps to narrow the divide between sport and theatre with its focus on ritual, spectacle, and embodied practice. Tragic theatre “stages a civic ritual in which actor, citizen-chorus were paired; they tested, competed in terms of moral solidarity and affect before the community of the polis” (Revermann, 2006).

Adapting Goff and Goldhill (1990), however, this model also considered tragedy to be an agonistic performative place a cultural theatre in which acts of physical and moral valour might be performed, vividly assessed and remembered. These tragic, chorist and characteristic athletic metaphors read therefore through performance theory as part and parcels of Greek stereotyped contests.

### **3.4. Modern Perspectives on Heroism and Identity**

Theories from modern literature and psychology that relate to heroism also lend ideas to this framework. Campbell (2004) identifies the archetypal cycles of ordeal, and triumph which are echoed through any athletic tournament in the framework of the hero's journey. Similarly, Girard's theory of mimesis brings to mind all those athletes and tragic heroes who act as ash-marks or reminders of our shared longing for the same things – including, but not limited to, death.

This study connects these perspectives to suggest that the athletic hero of Greek tragedy reflects not only an ideal cultural type but serves as a figure through whom fundamental human dilemmas striving, limitation, hubris and transcendence are pedagogically dramatized. “The sports hero as athlete-philosopher performs an artifact whose action



stands for the eternal struggle of meaning that must come in-to-being in fate” (Reid, 2011).

#### **4. Analysis and Discussion**

##### **4.1. Aeschylus: Athletic Imagery and Moral Struggle**

In brief, as the “father of tragedy,” Aeschylus translates into the moral and spiritual logic which decide over his tragic heroes an athletic ethos from a distant Greece. His plays refashion the agon, or contest, of athletic festival into an allegory of struggle in pursuit of cosmic justice, virtue and divine recognition. The virile, trained enthusiasm of the Greek athlete is turned to moral effort by Aeschylus and moral opposition. To this fusion of physical and spiritual combat, his heroes stand as the representatives in man’s broil to which the justice of heaven and conscience lend perspective. For Aeschylus, too he might not always use an athletic metaphor this describes even a relationship of such intimacy as that between power and endurance with the obedience to divine will. In fact, in the very heart of the Prometheus Bound this prophetic defiance of fate is incarnate in Prometheus as a sort of superhuman athlete, as a being impervious to wear and tear. Danny's limb problem finds an eurythmic counterpart in the physical horror of being chained to the rock as Zeus has enjoined an athlete with a sabotaged body whom he shapes through training into its super supple instrument. Aeschylus has transformed a contest of the physical into one of the moral: Prometheus' defiance is not just rebellion, but a fallen morality, the struggle of divine cruelty and human empathy. In this possibility it is the Olympic ideal itself an Olympian form, not a form striving for victory but an Olympian form, striving to endure his pattern of rivalry with Zeus (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1990).

Athletics and morals, in doing and not doing the best, Aeschylus does of action. We can think of Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigenia, an anti-trope, real epic making aret making the hubris the very source of hubris and inverting that. The temptations of graceless



glory lead the champion to a fall from grace, making the king, whose every last fumble we first see through the eyes of a true and disciplined hero, a moral failure and the hero a fallen athlete lacking the virtue to square victory with virtue. And individual voices often driven toward an agonistic view of nature are underscored by choruses that weigh in on human existence as eternal war rages against fate/the divine in Aeschylus. In the Oresteia, it is a vendetta that is turned into a “moral race” to purification and justice (Taplin 1978). It is as repetitive as the incantatory I have been to the mountaintop that repetition calls back into service, an image of epic struggle and survival against insurmountable odds, linking moral uplift with physical exercise. Miller (2004) states, "Aeschylus's tragic process is thus ritual, as in all audience participation as at the stadium".

#### **4.2. Sophocles: The Tragic Athlete and Moral Discipline**

Arete are Sofocles as an example recognizes this notion that greek excellence is a moral and intellectual education that can be implemented not the peak of physicality. But his downfall was also a reflection on the danger of not caring too much how much winning and losing seep into the way we look. His machismo meant tragic isolation, pride in his body separated ebulliently from any commonsense reality. From the fact that he can't win the battle for Achilles' armor is driven a kind of athletic pride remorseful and desperate. His suicide is, he will later say, a flipped athletic stunt, one last “contest” in which he takes charge of his own destiny by pure force of discipline and courage. It is for this reason that Sophocles makes the athlete-hero a tragic athlete whose moral strength is his physical strength (Knox 1961).

Oedipus, is tragic athlete of the mind. Apollo had explained that when he understood this, Oedipus would be the gainer the irony by which O principles and sets in motion his own disaster is here figured, or rather out figured; he would have asked for what he wants, it is true a good asset sport- but still on his part an execrable race. Stewart's is



the persistence of an athlete, and a fundamentally defeatist one at that, because his conceit in intellectual acumen trumps his humility in moral confrontation. Oedipus is a heroically mulish creature, courage and stubbornness in equal parts, the latter fortified by his valour into a poison mixture that amounts to virtue's own self-ruin. But his anagnorisis is also a moral one: it is the panted revenge of amazement, as at that moment gymnastic (Knox 1961).

### 4.3. Euripides: Critique of Athletic Ideals

In *Hippolytus*, he zeroes in on the psychological harm that comes from denying that desire. A life dedicated to Artemis may be one of physical and psychological discipline for Hippolytus; his rejection of the first wife universe thus becomes a kind of obstinacy and social death. And again, Euripides suggests that doing too much without proper limits can be nearly as bad of a thing. The morose, the austere, and the phanatic, a type of self-made man, the body an alibi for an affective illiteracy and a spiritual creeping hautainete: the impression is not at all sere. In this way, Euripides works a sort of metafictional terrorization of Hellenistic/Roman culture for its prized boasting of bodily strength as a sort of currency in competitive games (Segal, 1986). Manna way of life that nobody knew of him, But as minimum of his announcements roaring. The farmer of *Electra* opposes the modesty of a proletarian ethic to the brazenness of athletic pride, and derides society for its bottle-fed reverence for physical behavior that is bristling false (Miller 2004).

The perfect athletic male collapses under self-reflection, irony and pity. Sports figures as tragic heroes, that is. Euripides doesn't deify the athlete; he certainly does not do to them what some action films do to other categories you can sub in here football coaches, wrestlers, avatars with really high midichlorians counts. His heroes stand as examples of what happens when the pursuit of physical or moral perfection gets out of hand and leads to loneliness and annihilation. The Greeks race in search of past glory, only in





Euripides's theatrical imagination for them to turn into a metaphor for human struggle against an inscrutable cosmos passion, fate and human self-delusion (Hall 2010).

## 5. Comparative Discussion

Aeschylus' canonic metaphor in tragedy is first and the most reverential one. His heroes are perfect distillations of divine justice, and the power that sustains moral order is nothing more than a sort of disciplined athlete's strength. The agon can be read as a bodily and moral struggle which signifies sports arena appealing to a horizon of divine/cosmic battle for right concern and against injustice, hubris. Aeschylus's tragedy deifies the athlete as a holy warrior, his labor representing the moral contests of gods and men. Aeschylus' Agamemnon and his Prometheus Bound gave even endurance and torture one heroic athleticism; the hero's anguish was a trial not of nerves but of sinews, as it were, no less podium than physiological. Aeschylus, turned into a spiritual symbol of divine justice and human unconquerability this way athlete. The athlete is an idealized portrayal of a hierarchized adjectival virtue banded in proper living that represents a common belief of the great way within the polis (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1988).

Sophocles appropriates the Aeschylean concept of the agon but subordinates it within his own person. His battle is no longer cabalistic or physical but psychological and ethical. His heroes Ajax, Antigone Oedipus and Philoctetes or Heracles make the athletic ideal an inner drama of self-discipline, moral reflection. The characters in Sophocles are "moral athletes" engaged in contests of conscience, victories in which have nothing to do with outer triumph which one imagines tend always toward hollowness and everything to do with the soul training itself. The suicide of Ajax announces the noisy wreckage of an athlete's dignity, Philoctetes' marathon on Lemnos transmogrifies pain into a moral asceticism. In Antigone, the heroism is turned inward, as the heroine's battle with Creon becomes a spiritual agon: it is for the maintenance of moral truth against political and social sanction. "Thus Sophocles's athletics is the emblem of moral



temperance which rules the body, and just as much the soul?". His heroic ideal is already a mingling of the athletic and philosophic; he anticipates that moral reflection which was to form so great a part in later Greek speculation (Knox, 1961).

It is whimsical how Euripides contrasts himself with those alpha poets before him. Where Aeschylus ennobles and Sophocles moralizes the athlete, Euripides queries and subverts the athletic ideal. He demonstrates in his works the perils of over-discipline, arrogance and rivalry. In *Heracles* and *Hippolytus*, as signs of physical (and moral) purity the former when manifested in utmost power, the latter even more so than innocence contrasted against lust's depletion of identity they're forces that reverse themselves. To Euripides, heroes were merely tragic figures of the consequences of their own strength. The naked physical strength of *Heracles* becomes soul-destroying when it is cut off from reason; the chastity of *Hippolytus*, represented as a species of moral athletics, mingles with insolence and isolation. The athletic ideal, so Euripides suggests is a rejected morality; for it has no beauty to manage emotional and social ethics of the fifth century Attic life. is an example of his best self as a student of Athens, one in which physical glory is surpassed by moral penetration as the highest form of value. Classicism Similarly, the figure of the classic hero the pride and joy of Greek polis in antiquity emerges as a tragic emblem of how muscular strength is indistinctly related to brain (Hall 2010).

## 6. Conclusion

The study of athletic models in Greek tragedy tells us that the tragic stage was a site of competitive as much as those ancient boxing- or foot-race rings were. In the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, however, the agon might be observed also to function as a force which combines athletic with moral or existential contest. Every playwright is revisiting the athletic ethos of *arete* and *sophrosyne* in a flowering definition of heroism in classical Greek philosophic thought. Aeschylus lets moral





strenuousness grow out of this athletic endurance, and his heroes gain their culture by making a fight for it with suffering and patience. To him the athlete hero symbolizes Olympian justice and humanistic courage. The battle takes place in the mind of here tensed fight an internal struggle, with grace and discipline with honor. It is the self-knowledge and the morality which he infuses whom he loves with most in his tragedies. Euripides subverts such predicates, by showing the model of virtuous 'athletics' is itself vulnerable. In his relentless portraits of men like Heracles and Hippolytus, pride, inhibition and the over-allied with physical or moral wholeness emerge as tragic deformations of humanity. If you place all these dramatists one after another, they do outline a philosophy which knows the physical heroism to go through moral thought into psychological argument. The tragedy of the Greek man from Aeschylean hero to Euripidean weakling is but one aspect of a greater tragedy of Greek consciousness: its aspiration god arising into its actuality man. And in this its noble struggle, it is not even a match when one in their head being bashed in with a trash bin becomes a chance for two opponents to become strangers, and a search for body, soul, flesh and bone to provide meaning to pain.

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