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FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

THE FLAME AND THE LYRE: PROMETHEAN ECHOES IN HOMERIC EPIC

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Abstract: *This article reinterprets Homer's epics through the lens of "political Prometheanism," a theoretical concept grounded in Aeschylean and Protagorean thought, symbolising political participation without placing unlimited trust in the human capacity for moral judgment on the other hand. While Homeric society lacks formal democratic institutions, it incorporates core features of participatory politics, most notably in the presence of synaxes (assemblies of public deliberation). Drawing on Hammer, Feldman, Castoriadis and Arendt, I argue that Homer prefigures the democratic concept of the human being as a political animal (zoon politikon), endowed with the capacity for speech, judgment, and collective responsibility. These traits are symbolically represented by the Promethean gift of fire. Through close readings of The Iliad and The Odyssey, I examine how characters such as Achilles, Thersites and Telemachus dramatise both the potential and the limits of public agency. Particular attention is given to the notions of aidōs, aischynē, and themis (or dike, in Protagoras' terms), which are central to the Promethean emphasis on self-limitation in the wake of the limits of human judgments. Ultimately, this paper presents Homer not merely as a mythmaker but mainly as a political and moral thinker, engaged in an early critique of power and injustice.*

Keywords: *Homeric Epic; Prometheanism; democracy; Participatory Politics; Aidōs and Aischynē; Themis and Justice; Kleos; Hammer; Protagoras; Aeschylus.*

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, the American anthropologist and social theorist Lewis Henry Morgan published his groundbreaking research, discussing the dynamics of social interaction and political decision-making within the ancient Greek world. He concluded that Homer's epic poems emphasise popular participation in the process of political decision-making through public assemblies[1] (or *synaxes*), the so-called *boulephorous*

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[1] L. Morgan, *Ancient Society or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress From Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization,* London, 1877, p. 245.

agoras (*βουληφόρους ἀγοράς*).[2] Following this view, Abraham Feldman identified primitive forms of democracy in the Homeric world, based on unanimous public voting.[3] The distinguished political philosopher, Cornelius Castoriadis, argued that the *political animal* – a term he uses to suggest a democratic form of existence – is present in Homer's epic.[4] Dean Hammer identifies in Homer's mythological narratives "embryonic" elements of a *polis* organisation.[5] Homer's poems, he claimed, "provide an opportunity to explore the operation of politics in its elementally human, rather than its institutional, form."[6] In short, the people do not vote in public assemblies, as is evident in the context of the Athenian *polis*. However, they are not "compliant, inert, absent, or silenced."[7] We see, in many instances, decisions taken collectively in the *synaxes*. The enactments of such decisions take a variety of forms: "consultation with the people before a decision is made, the appeal by a leader for approval of a decision, and even debates between [charismatic] leaders before the people."[8] Thus, the *demos*, *laos* or *plethos*, the members of a political community, in other words, *piphauskētai* (πιφαύσκεται) – stand up – and *agorevein* (*ἀγορεύειν*) – speak/argue.[9]

This study builds on Morgan, Feldman and, more particularly, on Hammer, who approached Homer "as a political thinker" and understood the *Iliad* "as a work of political thought".[10] It begins with the concept of Prometheanism, which I introduced in previous research. In brief, political Prometheanism suggests that power should be distributed among the *demos*. The idea is rooted in interpretations of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Plato's *Protagoras*. Section One further discusses Aeschylus' and Protagoras's versions of the myth, shedding light on the way Homer's epics vividly picture the so-called "Promethean human." In this way, I challenge the view that in Homer's world, political debates were the exclusive prerogative of men of aristocratic origin.[11] Furthermore, political

[2] C. Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary: From Homer to Heraclitus,* Translation: X. Giatanas, Athens 2007 (in modern Greek), p. 139.

[3] A. Feldman, "Homer and Democracy", *The Classical Journal,* 47, no.8, 1952, p.338, pp.341-2.

[4] C. Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, p. 140.

[5] D. Hammer, "Homer and Political Thought", *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Political Thought,* Cambridge, 2009, pp. 15-19.

[6] Ibid., p. 21.

[7] D. Hammer, "Homer, tyranny, and Democracy", *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies,* 39, no. 4, 1998, p. 337.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 2, 31-2; cf. Hammer, *Homer, Tyranny, and Democracy,* p.337; p. 339.

[10] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* Oklahoma, 2002, p. 5.

[11] W. Gladstone, *Studies on Homer*, Oxford, 1858, p. 129, pp. 141-1.

Prometheanism (as I explained) is not solely tied to democratic politics (modelled after the example of the Athenian *polis*) or to Western traditions in general.[12] Non-democratic societies could also include elements of popular involvement in government. Therefore, Homer's world might not fit the definition of "democratic," if we consider ancient Athens as a model of comparison; but within its "plebiscitarian" (per Hammer) model of political organisation, we can identify elements of political participation. Hence, Homer's epics are integral parts of the broader Promethean universe. In short, Homer described in a quasi-archetypal fashion this Promethean being, long before Aeschylus crafted his influential tragedy to underscore the tension between despotism and democracy.[13]

With this in mind, Section Two focuses on the role of "publicness" in the epics. Put simply, numerous passages underscore the active role of the *laos* in the *synaxes*, suggesting that popular involvement in collective decision-making was meaningful and important. In Section Three, this (Promethean) approach is vividly echoed in Homer's critiques of unjust leadership, best exemplified by the case of Agamemnon.[14] Of utmost significance are the notions of *aidōs* and *aischynē* (both referring to different expressions of shame) as well as that of *themis* (implying justice). These notions are deeply connected to the themes of public duty and civic responsibility; they are also associated with the pursuit of self-limitation, which constitutes an essential prerequisite of all participatory politics. More to the point: collective governance, as Hammer argued, is not immune to the destructive consequences of misguided human judgments; for leaders often capitalise on popular demands and "imperil the good of the community."[15] As I explained elsewhere, political Prometheanism does not place unlimited trust in participatory politics; it suggests an awareness that human participation is not a panacea, as it is constrained by human nature or behaviour. By considering this, the present study elucidates how, in Homer's poems, the concepts of *aidōs*, *aischynē* and *themis* serve as

[12] M. Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy: Prometheus in Political Theory,* Edinburgh, 2025, pp.9-10; cf. M. Theodosiadis and E. Vavouras, "The Pursuit of Cosmic Wisdom and 'Promethean' Leadership in the Pythagorean and Al-Fārābīan Political Philosophy", *Religions,* 15, 2024.

[13] L. Lewis, *The Promethean Politics of Milton, Blake, and Shelley,* Columbia, 1992, p.4.

[14] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* p.25. As S. Stuurman claimed while discussing Agamemnon's "selfish egotism,", the *Iliad* should be "[c]onsidered politically … a story of failed leadership" (The Voice of Thersites: Reflections on the Origins of the Idea of Equality. *Journal of the History of Ideas,* 65, no. 2, 2004, p.174). By the term "failed leadership" the author refers to Agamemnon's disregard for equality and the common good, prioritising instead his own personal gain (see also Sections Three and Four).

[15] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* p.30.

means of self-limitation,[16] counterbalancing the risks of flawed judgments in political participation. To do so, in Section Four, I will focus on the concept of *κλέος ἄφθιτον* (*kleos áphthiton*), implying worldly fame and reputation, attributed to the brave and courageous men in battle.[17] The demand for *kleos* is considered a reflection of the dominant culture of that era, shaped by beliefs and ways of life appropriate for the society of that time.[18] I will turn to Ahrensdorf's approach on *kleos,* while reflecting on the figures of Thersites and Odysseus, to illustrate how the epics dramatise the challenges of participatory politics and the ethical fragility of collective judgment, highlighting the importance of *aidōs, aischynē* and *themis*.

1. The Flame: Homer's "Promethean" Universe (Theoretical Foundations)

In Aeschylus' play, the titan Prometheus is portrayed as the fire-bearer to the mortals («πυρὸς βροτοῖς δοτῆρ»).[19] I have argued that the fire symbolises human agency, initiative and political capacity.[20] In turn, the Greek verb *promethévein* («*προμηθεύειν*») implies "to supply," "diffuse," and "spread" or "disseminate".[21] More precisely, by reflecting on Protagoras' mythological account of Prometheus, I claimed that the divine fire he sought to bestow upon humanity is the fire of political knowledge, which is identical with the virtues of respect and shame (*aidōs*) and justice (*dikē*). *Aidōs* is commonly defined as an internal inhibition, usually created by external pressures;[22] it is an internalised emotion of embarrassment,[23] shaped and determined by how communities understand and evaluate honour, moral respect and abashment.[24] These collective norms and values often become part of a person's belief system and self-regulation mechanisms. Hence, *aidōs* guides behaviour *before* an action by demotivating persons to commit certain deeds. In other words, *aidōs* is a type of shame elicited in the absence of an audience or actual criticism;[25] it is a preemptive moral sensibility. In Homer, this inhibitory type of shame

[16] Concerning *aidōs* as a force that restrains human behaviour, see: N. Yamagata, *Homeric Morality,* New York, 1994, pp.156-173.

[17] I. Tripoula, "The ethics of war leadership as seen through ancient Greek poetry", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy,* 15, 2024, p.126.

[18] A. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values.* Oxford*,* 1960, p.55.

[19] M. Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p.4.

[20] Ibid*,* pp.20-1.

[21] Ibid*,* p.4, pp.111-2.

[22] E. Lowry, *Thersites: A Study in Comic Shame,* New York, 1991, p.64; L.D. Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology of Ethics and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature,* Oxford, 1993, p.2; N. Yamagata, *Homeric Morality,* p. 156.

[23] L.D. Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology of Ethics*, p. 5; p. 12.

[24] Ibid, pp.11-14, p.70.

[25] Ibid, p.17, p.70.

is often indicated by the verb *aideomai*.[26] On the other hand, Aristotle's *aischynē* (αἰσχύνη) is an "*after-the-fact*" emotion; it is "defined as a kind of fear of disrepute, and it has an effect very like that produced by the fear of something horrible,"[27] or – as articulated by Homer – the committing of "shame-causing" (*aischres*) actions that involve disrespect towards communal customs, like (for example) the dishonouring of a warrior's dead body and the refusal to perform proper burial rites.[28] Such actions excite anger or bring divine *nemesis* (retribution).[29] Moreover, the feeling of *aischynē* is not appropriate to every age, Aristotle says; the young "should be properly disposed to feel shame, because they live by feeling and so make many errors."[30] And they are praised when they change mindsets by experiencing *aischynē,* admitting guilt. On the contrary, no one praises "an older person for having a sense of shame, since we think that he should do nothing to feel shame for."[31] In short, moral persons do not do shameful things; they have no need to feel *aischynē*, which arises from the recognition of wrongdoing. They are guided by *aidōs* and, consequently, avoid disgraceful actions. For example, the suitors (in the *Odyssey*) are ignorant of moral shame; "they are not restrained from promoting themselves at the expense of Telemachus. Availing themselves of their natural superiority, they commit deeds which are αἴσχεα for Telemachus."[32] They feel no *aischynē* as they have not learned to act in accordance with internalised *aidōs*. Thus, they are incapable of moral self-restraint. Homer describes them with the word *anaideis* (ἀναἰδεῖς); here, the privative "a" prefix implies "without" and the root aid- (αἰδ-) comes from *aidōs*. Therefore, *aidōs* is "an exhortation to "friends," and a call to social responsibility";[33] it "has a social, or horizontal, dimension" that *aischynē* lacks.[34] For example, "[i]n a competitive encounter of two parties, the inferior suffers [*aischynē*], and the triumph of the superior party can be envisioned as a step up the vertical scale."[35] However, when persons are properly disposed to feel *aischynē* for the deeds they committed towards others and change their attitude, they demonstrate *aidōs*. We could call this

[26] Ibid, p.48. For example, the Achaians "felt *aidōs* to refuse, but feared to accept" (*The Iliad,* Book 7, 93; quoted from L.D. Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology of Ethics*, p.48).

[27] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1128b.

[28] E. Lowry, *Thersites: A Study in Comic Shame,* p.14; pp.36-7. Etymologically speaking, *aischros* and *aischistos* are closely related to *aischynēn*.

[29] E. Lowry, *Thersites: A Study in Comic Shame,* p.33, pp.38-9, pp.42-3.

[30] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1128b.

[31] Ibid.

[32] E. Lowry, *Thersites: A Study in Comic Shame,* p.64.

[33] Loc.cit.

[34] Loc.cit.

[35] Loc.cit.

aischynē active, since it initiates a dynamic process in building new ethical perceptions by prompting self-reflection and re-evaluation. Hence, *aidōs* is closely linked to "what the people say," as Adkins defines it;[36] *aidōs* and active *aischynē* invoke the public as an active agent, to whom the Promethean fire of wisdom has been disseminated. As Protagoras also argued, *dikē* and *aidōs* are common properties; they are distributed to all human beings ("ἐπὶ πάντας"); they are utter obligations for all people,[37] who must shape common standards by relying on their wisdom and agency.

Much like *aischynē*, *dikē* addresses wrongdoing after the act. However, *dikē* is explicitly concerned with active retribution and restoration of justice, rather than with feelings and emotions. Furthermore, since (per Protagoras) *aidōs* and *dikē* are accessible to everyone, they must not be conflated with *technē* (expert knowledge), which are skills acquired only by those who have received appropriate training.[38] *Aidōs* and *dikē* are the foundations of all politics and guarantee well-being and cohesion within the community by ensuring that individuals act with a sense of restraint and justice. We understand again that since *aidōs* and *dikē* are the foundations of all political institutions and originate from shared laws and norms, and if these virtues are properties of everyone, political action – from which such laws arise – rests in the people themselves. Hence, Protagoras' Prometheus supports a theory of inclusive involvement in political life as essential for advancing justice among citizens.[39]

However, associating Homer's poems with participatory politics is contentious. Homer's world, Dobbs claimed, was monarchical and tribal.[40] Classicists often approach the poems by looking at the role of formal institutions of authority and then commenting on the functions they performed.[41] Politics, from this perspective, "came to be identified with the emergence of an autonomous polis,"[42] that is, of a formal body that directs and oversees the process of political legislation, thereby providing legitimacy to all government decrees and decisions. As, for example, Scully

[36] A. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*.

[37] Plato, *Protagoras,* 318.E, 323.D; cf. M. Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* pp.20-1.

[38] Plato, *Protagoras,* Pro 318.E; cf. M. Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* pp.20-1.

[39] M. Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p. 21; cf. E. Vavouras, "The distinction between nomos and 'physis", pp. 33-154, in Plato, *Gorgias,* Thessaloniki, Zitros 2008 (in modern Greek), pp.68-9.

[40] D. Dobbs, "Reckless Rationalism and Heroic Reverence in Homer's Odyssey", *The American Political Science Review,* 81, no. 2, 1987, p. 491.

[41] For example, W. Dolan, The Pre-State Community in Greece, *Symbolae Osloenses* 64, 1989, p.16; cf. G. Runciman, "Origins of States: The Case of Archaic Greece", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, 1982, p.24.

[42] D. Hammer, *The* Iliad *as Politics,* p.25.

writes, in the Homeric world, there is no "trace of a polis in its political sense."[43] The absence of such an organisation, as in the case of the Achaian camp, "almost invariably led to a view of the Homeric world as prepolitical."[44] For Runciman, a true state requires concentration of power, institutionalised judicial roles and specialisation of governmental roles. In contrast, most Homeric societies lacked a well-developed and fully structured form of governance; and common life, he assumed, revolves around patriarchal rule.[45] Thus, Homer's world was a collection of "semistates," in which most people are neither citizens nor subjects, but more like "an audience."[46] Cleavages (especially in the *Iliad*) are the consequences of personal rivalries rather than political disagreements.[47] Conversely, Hammer sees politics as "a realm in which people think about themselves, and constitute themselves, as communities,"[48] instead of locating political action solely in systems of formal representation. This approach to politics confined to institutions of formal legislating "constrain[s] our understanding" of how, in the Iliadic world, power was, to a great extent, diffused in the *demos*.[49] Moreover, Hammer builds on Victor Turner, a cultural anthropologist and speaks of the political fields as bodies of decision-making that are not associated with "institutional and territorial boundaries."[50] The political field, he argued, is a broad and fluid arena (or network); it is the place of *agora*, where the *synaxes* take place, and disputes (among the members of the *laos*) are expressed. In such fields, power is often contested and negotiated. Here, emphasis is given to performative relations.[51] Hence, even if formal democratic institutions are absent, such relations display a good deal of "Promethean" characteristics; that is, persons participate in collective decision-making processes. Thus, a political space is not exclusively a parliament building or a senate; it can include local communities or networks of transnational cooperation. Hence, one might consider several activities as political: for example, the questioning of the legitimacy of an authority, the exercise of force, peace-building efforts, debates concerning specific demands on behalf of the members of the community, the encounter with ethical dilemmas in civic

[43] S. Scully, "The Polis in Homer: A Definition and Interpretation", *Ramus,* 11, no. 1, 1981, pp.55-6, p.107, pp.11-2; M. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, New York, 1982, p.34; M. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, Cambridge, 2012, pp.51–52.

[44] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* 25.

[45] W. G. Runciman, *Origins of States*, p.351, p.358, p.355, p.360.

[46] Ibid.

[47] E. Lowell. *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides*, Cambridge, 1989, pp.27–28.

[48] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.32.

[49] Ibid., p.44.

[50] Ibid., p.26.

[51] Ibid., p.82.

obligations and responsibilities, and so on.[52] Hammer focuses on the way cities, such as Delos, Delphi, Thermon, and Eretria, were constructed, emphasising the role of the *agora* as well as the role of temples in facilitating *synaxes* for the purpose of collective decision-making.[53] Hence, in the Homeric world, power relations are staged within spatially arranged arenas of communal life, designed to promote public interactions, "in which the people seem to play some role in expressing their opinion."[54] Here we see the blazing fire of Prometheus warming the souls and minds of noble men, sparking their desire to act and speak, to discuss and negotiate, taking upon themselves the course of their common world.

This informal *polis* that Hammer identifies in the Homeric "political fields" is echoed in other aspects of the epic, particularly in the poet's emphasis on *themis*. We can suggest that *dikē* is to *themis* what (active) *aischynē* is to *aidōs*: In the same way *aidōs* informs the establishment of a mature moral compass before the execution of an act, *themis* informs perceptions that precede *dikē,* which rests on formal administration of justice. In other words, *themis* represents divine order, custom and tradition.[55] Thus, she is associated with the pre-legal sense of order, while *dikē* is linked to more developed systems of law and government. But in the absence of a codified justice system, *themis* serves as the primary expression of justice in Homer's world. Additionally, much like Prometheus's gift of fire, *themis* is of divine origin;[56] it descends to the world of the mortals and becomes part of their daily living experiences. Though she manifests in a primal way, human agency remains crucial in enacting her decrees. However, to what degree human agency in the Homeric world is truly free, given the influence of fate and the intervention of the gods, remains a critical question. This has been another point of debate among classicists. For example, Bruno Snell assumes that in Homer most events are engineered by divine will, and therefore "human initiative has no source of its own; whatever is planned and executed is the plan and deed of the gods."[57] Human action and thought in the poems, Erbse argued, depend upon divine providence.[58] But while divine action decisively influences the outcome of certain events, the protagonists can still express agency; thus, recklessness and utter ruin are a matter of personal

[52] Loc.cit.

[53] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p. 36, p.47.

[54] D. Hammer, *Homer, Tyranny, and Democracy,* p.340.

[55] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* p.23.

[56] N. Yamagata, *Homeric Morality,* p.19.

[57] B. Snell, *Lexikon des Frühgriechischen Epos*, Göttingen, 1982, pp.29-30.

[58] H. Erbse, *Untersuchungen zur Funktion der Götter im Homerischen Epos*, Berlin, 1986, p.297, p.299.

responsibility.[59] Conversely, Hammer asserts that neither fate nor the gods themselves control all aspects of human action.[60] In the *Iliad,* we see fate (αἶσα) imposing her grand designs without controlling the consequences of the frantic human impulse for exaggeration, which often leads to the violation of all moral limits (that is, to *hubris*).[61] Quite often, fate or divine will undermine someone's status, causing (for example) a hero to lose a fight or get dishonoured. The hero responds to this challenge not by giving up; he attempts to retrieve his status through brave actions, speeches or revenge.[62] For example, in Book 23 (of the *Iliad*), funeral games are held by Achilles to honour his fallen friend Patroclus.[63] We read about Diomedes initially trailing Eumelos; he is hindered by Apollo but aided by Athene, who restores his whip and sabotages Eumelos's chariot, driving his "shaft in the ground" and "causing Eumelus to fly over a wheel," allowing Diomedes to take the lead.[64] While Eumelos finishes last, Achilles honours him with a special prize.[65] The response to this accident, caused by divine intervention, is to neither "conform nor act contrary to divine intention but,

[59] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.53; A. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, pp.2-3, pp.22-23.

[60] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.54.

[61] This definition of *hubris* is provided by Castoriadis: see, *The Greek Imaginary*, p.152, p.154, p.177. It is also discussed in my previous works: M. Theodosiadis, Republican Perspectives on Populism and Hope (Beyond Christopher Lasch), *Doctoral Thesis, Goldsmiths (University of London),* 2021, p.7, pp.21-2; Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p.18; cf. the "the hubris of Agamemnon" ("ὕβριν ἴδῃ Ἀγαμέμνονος") is translated by Ahrensdorf as "folly" (or madness) (Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.143). In the *Iliad,* misguided judgments that lead to *hubris* are often personified by Ate, Zeus's daughter; Ate "has skill to blind" (Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 19, 92) the minds of kings, warriors or rulers out of ignorance or false confidence of excessive pride**,** encouraging them to transgress moral limits. According to Castoriadis, *hubris* occupies a central position in the poem's thematic concerns. The protagonists constantly invoke moral transgression (*hubris*), causing disasters. This rekindles continuous action. For example, Agamemnon ruthlessly insults Apollo's servant; in response, Apollo unleashes a plague of cholera on the Greek camp. When Agamemnon is forced to return Chryseis, he commits an act that exceeds his rights; he takes a woman who belonged to Achilles' spoils, inciting Achilles's rage. But when the Trojans enter the Achaian camp, Achilles sends Patroclus to fight against them, urging him to remain defensive. Patroclus oversteps his limits and is killed (ibid). For more concerning this definition of *hubris,* see: M. Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p.18; cf. C. Castoriadis, *A World in Fragments,* California, 2007, p.93; C. Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary: From Homer to Heraclitus*, pp.139-40.

[62] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.59, pp.64-5.

[63] These events include: chariot racing, boxing, wrestling, footraces, and more. In the Homeric world, these games promote the values of heroism (*kleos*) and respect for the dead. They also strengthen social bonds among warriors and reaffirm heroic status through athletic competition and excellence.

[64] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 23, 392-4.

[65] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 23, 558-565.

instead, to rectify the results created by chance."[66] As we see, the author affirms the meaningful exercise of human agency without, on the other hand, ignoring its limits.[67] The gods in the *Iliad,* he explained, act as a force "originating outside of, and upon, the human will."[68] Therefore, agency is exercised in accordance with divine will.[69] There is, in other words, no "free-floating" human agency, seeking to reaffirm its autonomy in the world; instead, action "occurs within the realm of one's allotment," in which "the characters … argue … judge … appease and are appeased."[70]

However, Homeric society does not limit human agency solely in light of fate or divine providence. Much like political Prometheanism, Homer highlights the flaws of human initiative, reminding us of the inherent vulnerabilities and limitations of human judgment. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound,* the knowledge the titan gifted to humanity is considered as "*thnatous āgan*" ("θνατοὺς ἄγαν");[71] that is, excessive (*āgan*) for the nature of the mortals (*thnatous*).[72] Because of this, Prometheus installed in men and women false promises ("blind hopes") ("τυφλὰς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐλπίδας κατῴκισα"),[73] that they could someday end up "living the eternal and indestructible life of the Gods."[74] Put differently, he endorsed a form of excessive optimism, encouraging humanity to set up ambitious plans that their frail (human) nature could scarcely sustain. This view undermines the assumption that humans are always morally reliable. Thus, humanity's very capacity for reason is often clouded by various selfish passions. Likewise, Homer was cognizant of the implications of the weaknesses of human judgment in participatory politics:[75] the *demos* can often make misguided decisions, fuelled by error and *hubris*. The author highlights how the people of Troy "shouted agreement with Hector, / like children," approving his "ruinous plan," scorning Polydamas, who offered

[66] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.66.

[67] Cf. C. Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*; G. P. Bifis, P. Giannopoulou, and A. M. Argyrakoup. "Cornelius Castoriadis. The Greek Imaginary: From Homer to Heraclitus", *Conatus,* 2, 2023, p.329.

[68] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.51.

[69] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.51. As the same author argued, "[n]either the individual nor the community simply accepts the results of chance but seeks, instead, to manage chance by restoring aretê [*excellence*] to accord with one's status" (ibid, p.72).

[70] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.77.

[71] Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound,* 533.

[72] M. Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p. 19.

[73] Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound,* 263.

[74] Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p.19; cf. Vavouras. "What is Prometheanism? Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism", *Dia-noesis: a Journal of Philosophy*, 2025, 17, pp. 417-8.

[75] A. Feldman, *Homer and Democracy,* p. 342.

sound criticism.[76] But while the poet underscored the vulnerabilities of political participation in the light of the inherent limits of the moral capacities of humans, he did not go as far as to propose "the abolition of the people's right … by a baronial state."[77] In Feldman's view, Homer does not support the concentration of political power in a noble class of moral experts, who exclude the *demos* from the political realm, imposing despotic rule in the name of decency. Likewise, Hammer speaks of the dangers demagogues pose in the plebiscitarian/participatory politics; leaders can either use their personal authority in seeking acclaim, or "they can play upon the more autocratic elements of charisma by "hid[ing] behind" a legitimacy that appears to be derived from "the will of the governed.""[78] The author offers a hint of this by discussing Agamemnon's moves in Book 2: the king summons the Achaians to assembly and tells them that the "will of all-powerful Zeus" is to "sail to our cherished fatherlands, / for we will never take the streets of Troy!"[79] The "[f]uture generations" will consider this move "disgraceful," but the war is lost, he argued, and the Ahcaians can do nothing against the will of the father of the Olympian gods. Agamemnon tests if the desire of the Ahcaian camp to continue fighting remains firm; he intends to examine whether the soldiers would challenge his discouraging words, responding with renewed determination and confidence in victory. Odysseus warns that the people may impulsively follow ill-considered words, driven by passions and emotions.[80] Nestor reinforces this view by comparing the assembly to children, who so many talk like children and "who care nothing about the deeds of war."[81] Indeed, Agamemnon miscalculates the reaction of the people; the entire *synaxis* "stirred and, shouting / raced for the ships,"[82] and is restored "through the personal authority of Odysseus, as he is instructed by Athene."[83] Interpreted through the lens of political Prometheism, this event reveals the fragility of the human capacity for moral reasoning. Consequently, a *thnatous āgan* knowledge and power must be cautiously used; in the absence of self-restraint and moderation, it could engender disastrous impacts. In other words, human agency must be exercised within the bounds of self-limitation. We find this idea resonating with Protagoras' *aidōs* (the internalised shame that directs behaviour *before* action, as noted earlier) and *themis* (restoration of justice). The following sections examine

[76] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 18, 310-2.
[77] A. Feldman, *Homer and Democracy,* p.342.
[78] D. Hammer, *Homer, Tyranny, and Democracy,* pp.341-2.
[79] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 111-141.
[80] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 142.
[81] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 337-8.
[82] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 149-150.
[83] D. Hammer, *Homer, Tyranny, and Democracy,* p.342

how Homer's poems touch upon these concepts (of *aidōs*, active *aischynē*, and *themis*), examining their roles as mechanisms of self-restraint, intertwined with political agency. I will begin by analysing how Homeric society, despite its aristocratic leanings, emphasises the significance of collective participation in decision-making processes. To do so, I will identify passages that highlight the poet's emphasis on political participation through the means of *piphauskētai* and *agorevein*. To cut a long story short, in the poet's (Promethean) perspective, the *demos* (*laos* or *plethos*) is portrayed as having a notable role in influencing public life, while kings maintain a significant role, without influencing all collective decisions nevertheless.

2. The Lyre: Power, *Doxa* and the Public Realm

Both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* open with an emphasis on public *synaxes*, "described as the "voice of the people"', where the members of a community "put forward and argue."[84] In these "political fields" the Achaians could "passed their judgments";[85] in these open spaces *timountai oi andres* ("τιμιούνται οι ἀντρες"); men can, in simple terms, receive *timē* (glory and great reputation fame), or according to a different translation, "wisdom and polish."[86] In Ahrensdorf's terms, they ""come to be distinguished"."[87] Similarly, in the democratic assemblies of ancient Athens, orators had to set themselves apart by tirelessly striving to persuade others, presenting their personal opinion as the most excellent[88] and "showing oneself to be the best of all."[89] For Arendt, this "uninterrupted contest of all against all, of *aein aristeuein*," was the most characteristic aspect of the "agonal spirit of the Greek city-life,"[90] ruled by *action,* that is, with "active political discussions," and simultaneously with "the critical evaluation of all opinions expressed."[91] This term (*aein aristeuein*) is found in *The Iliad*: "αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων"; it is translated as "strive to excel and surpass all others" in the pursuit of *timē* through word and speech, that is, through *doxa* (opinion) and rhetoric (or, to use Homer's words, through through *piphauskētai* and

[84] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* p.30.

[85] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 11, 806; cf. D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* p.46.

[86] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 9, 441.

[87] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer and The Tradition of Political Philosophy,* Cambridge, 2022, p.89.

[88] C. Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary: From Homer to Heraclitus*, p.239; Arendt, *The Human Condition,* Chicago, 1988, p.41.

[89] H. Arendt, *The Promise of Politics,* New York, 2005, p.16.

[90] Loc.cit.

[91] M.Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p.32; cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p.27.

agorevein). The Greek word *doxa* is also translated as glory; it corresponds to a type of *timē* attributed to the speaker who is distinguished and praised for the sharpness of his rhetorical wisdom and clarity. In Homer's world, one "stands out from his audience" and others "gladly look to him" if "his speech is steady, with calm dignity."[92] In the context of democracy, *ἀγορεύειν,* that is, relying on *praxis* (πρᾶξις) and *lexis* (λέξις), on action and (public) speech, is essential for ""the immortalization of oneself through famous deeds" and the acquisition of worldly fame.[93] Hence, the term *doxa* captures both *lexis*, public opinion and glory; for opinion itself is not a merely passive belief; it is directly associated with one's capacity to *aristeuein* in speech and wisdom publicly demonstrated, earning a good reputation and enduring fame in respect. As Arendt argued, (political) action is coextensive with Aristotle's conception of man as a *zōon politikon* (political animal). However, the political animal "can be fully understood only if one adds his second famous definition of man as a *zōon logon ekhon* ("a living being capable of speech")."[94] "[T]he specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and "reified" only through a kind of repetition," namely, through imitation (or *mimēsis*), which according to Aristotle is appropriate to the *drama*, whose name derives from the Greek verb *drō̃* (δρῶ), implying, "to act."[95] For Hammer, action requires a realm "for the exercise of logos," for the practice of the "distinctively human facult[ies] of language and reason," which "in a political setting included questions of what is just and unjust."[96]

In other words, the political being uses *logos* to distinguish between just and unjust; here *logos* implies the capacity of engaging with open debates, of moving ahead and speaking/arguing («πιφαύσκεται ἠδ' ἀγορεύει»)[97] in the *synaxes*; for political engagement is never possible in isolation, in the intimate life of the private sphere.[98] According to the Greeks, living outside an organised *politeia*, where public interaction and

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[92] Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 8, 17-1.

[93] M.Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p.33; cf. H. Arendt, *The Life of The Mind,* New York, 1978, p.71.

[94] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p.27.

[95] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p.187; cf. D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* p.12; M. Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p.18. In short, drama was "μιμοῦνται δρῶντας," namely, the *mimēsis* (imitation) of people in action (Aristotle, *Poetics,* 1448a.3); it drama "indicates that playacting is actually an imitation of acting" (H. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p.187).

[96] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* p.49.

[97] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 2, 31-2.

[98] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p.118.

mutual responsibility establish the necessary conditions for men to become political animals, was a characteristic of the barbarian way of life,[99] or of tyrannical and despotic kingdoms.[100] The barbarians were *aneu logou*; that is, they were deprived not merely of the faculty of speech as such, but "of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other."[101]

The same (Promethean) emphasis on publicness is also demonstrated in Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops (giant one-eyed creatures) in Book 9. These creatures rely on primitive technology[102] and *boulephorous agoras* to make judgments of *themis*;[103] they have "no common law[s]"[104] and each decides "for his own wife and children".[105] According to Deneen, the Cyclops "do not meet in order to deliberate, neither to settle conflict … nor to satisfy what Aristotle described as the characteristics of political animals."[106] Hence, they are not men of action; they are far removed from structures that safeguard public interaction and dialogue; they live in "monstrous" (or barbaric) communities.[107] Confined to a private existence, they share no concern "for what the others think" ("οὐδ' ἀλλήλων ἀλέγουσι");[108] they do not take into consideration the words and deeds of others in common associations. Thus, having relinquished their duty to engage with processes through which their individual demands and expectations are continuously evaluated through means of standing up (*piphauskētai*) and speaking/arguing (*agorevein*), they are bound to a crude philistinism of daily labour that clings to the barest instincts of survival and devours political freedom and intellectual wisdom *in toto*.[109] Here we see Homer describing in a quasi-archetypal fashion the tension between the "civilised" (or Promethean) life of the public sphere and the subhuman (according to Arendt) private realm.[110] This realm, Arendt emphatically stressed, escapes the eye of the *polis*; it is entirely consumed by activities revolving around the necessity of meeting material (or

[99] Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy,* p.25.

[100] Ibid, pp.4-5; p.87.

[101] H. Arendt, *Human Condition,* p.27.

[102] P. Deneen, *The Odyssey of Political Theory: The Politics of Departure and Return*, New York, 2014, p.33.

[103] C. Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, pp.139-40.

[104] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 2, 112.

[105] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 9, 115.

[106] P. Deneen, *The Odyssey of Political Theory*, p.34.

[107] C. Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, pp.139-40.

[108] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 9, 115.

[109] Vavouras, The Place of Wisdom: From Antiquity to Machiavelli, *Cogito - Multidisciplinary Research Journal,* 17, 1, 2025, p.8

[110] H. Arendt, *Human Condition,* p.27.

biological) human needs.[111] As opposed to the Athenian public realm, which is characterised by political freedom and equality before the law, the private sphere is hierarchically instituted, under a despotic structure.[112]

We see, therefore, that (as Caostoriadis also argued) this distinction between the non-human and monstrous types of life with the political community of public life is echoed in the Cyclopean life.[113] Moreover, Homer's emphasis on "publicness" is also evident through his critiques "of leadership as premised on personal prerogative," best exemplified by Agamemnon (as demonstrated in the preceding sections).[114] Simply put, *themis* is not the ruler's personal entitlement, but a standard by which leaders must be held accountable. Though invoked by an aristocratic elite,[115] she represents collectively negotiated norms about fairness, leadership and collective responsibility within the *synaxes* of the common people. This topic will be further discussed in the next section, where I will also examine how such critiques (on leadership) shed light on the importance of *aidōs* and active *aischynē* in shaping an ethic of self-limitation. I will, finally, explain how *aidōs* counterbalances the *hubris* of the *dēmos*, a significant transgression the poet treats with deep concern.

4. Who Owns the *Politeia*? Homeric *Basileia*, Public Responsibility and the Ethics of *Aidōs*

In the Homeric world, the capacity to *aristeuein* (through speech and deed) played an important role in establishing one's social status. Royal titles undoubtedly confer significant prestige and social admiration; however, they do not guarantee total social recognition.[116] Paris demonstrates that being the prince of a city is not enough to receive praise; one must gain recognition through rhetoric, deed, effort and discipline.[117] Hereditary succession in the position of the *basileus,* Wess argued, was highly competitive and contested in the *synaxes*.[118] Likewise, Hammer stressed that appointment to the throne was contingent upon election or formal confirmation by the *synaxes* of the *agora*.[119] Homeric societies are

[111] Loc.cit.

[112] Aristotle, *Politics,* 1253b.9.

[113] C. Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary,* pp.139-40.

[114] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* p.25.

[115] S. Stuurman, *The Voice of Thersites*, pp.172-3, p.175; D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* p.25.

[116] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.82.

[117] I. Tripoula, "The ethics of war leadership," *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy,* 15, 2024, pp.125-6.

[118] V. Wees, *Status Warriors: War, Violence and Society in Homer and History.* Amsterdam, 1992, pp.81-83, pp.89-125.

[119] L. Morgan, *Ancient Society,* p.146-7, p.225; A. Feldman, *Homer and Democracy,* pp.339-340.

organised in political associations, rather than in families and clans.[120] For Morgan, in the event "it were known that the office had passed from father to son this might have suggested the inference of hereditary succession, now adopted as historically true, while succession in this form did not exist."[121] According to Aristotle, in most ancient constitutions "as depicted by Homer," the *basileis* had to inform the people about their moves and decisions; in turn, these decisions had to be publicly deliberated; they were, in other words, subjects to debate, because (in Aristotle's mind) good decisions are always made through *prohairesis* (προαίρεσις), that is, through procedures of public discussion and dialogue.[122] More importantly, a king (or *basileus*) must always remain loyal to the public.[123] Thus, "[t]he voice of the people was the supreme law for *basileus* and *boule*."[124] In Book 4 of the *Odyssey*, we find Medon describing Odysseus "greatness" with the following words: the king "never spoke or acted without justice, / among the people. / Lords are mostly biased ["ἤ τ᾽ ἐστὶ δίκη θείων βασηλήων"]; / they favour one person and hate another."[125] Here, Wilson's translation of Greek "θείων βασηλήων" (*theiōn basilēon*) as "lords" obscures the exact meaning of the passage; the *basilēon* refers to kings whose power is considered *theíon,* namely, ascribed by god. This power is unquestionable. Such kings demand devotion and praise because of their status alone; they "act without justice." They often "favour one person," literally, the person who actively supports their self-serving goals, and "hate another," namely, the individual whose interests conflict with their rapacious desires. In simple terms, absolute rulers treat the *politeia* as their private property. In this regard, the power they wield is "anti-Promethean"; they expel the *demos* from the political fields, which they treat as their own *res privata*. In contrast, political Prometheanism associates the *politeia* with the *dēmion*, with the "public matter."[126] Prometheanism endorses this principle of shared responsibility (*aidōs*).

To further corroborate this view, Hammer argued that in the Homeric world, abuse of power and despotism arise when the *basileus* is unable to separate his private desires from public claims, considering *themis* an issue

[120] K.A. Raaflaub, Homer to Solon: The Rise of the Polis, The Written Sources. *The Ancient Greek City-State, edited by Mogens Herman Hansen*. Copenhagen, 1993, pp.41-105.

[121] L. Morgan, *Ancient Society,* p.147, p.225.

[122] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1111a.

[123] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* pp.24-6; cf. Homer *Iliad,* Book 20, 4-5; Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 2, 28-32.

[124] A. Feldman, *Homer and Democracy,* p.341.

[125] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 4, 689-692.

[126] D. Hammer, *Homer, Tyranny, and Democracy,* pp.338-9.

of his own will.[127] This is the basis of Agamemnon's leadership, as portrayed in his quarrel with Achilles. For Agamemnon, "power appears as a possession … like strength or might, that he can use to compel others to obey."[128] In Book I, the king blames Achilles as a man of serious standing "above us all," that is, for desiring absolute "power to rule everyone."[129] Conversely, Achilles accuses the *basileus* of ruling through "personal prerogative,"[130] thereby indulging his lust for power that overrides the common good. He highlights the profound disconnect between the stated purpose of the war, the rescue of Helen, and Agamemnon's self-centred motivations. As we read Book 9: "What reason is there to fight Trojans? / Why did [Agamemnon] gather and bring this army here? / Was it not on account of fair-haired Helen?"[131] While Achilles "laid waste a dozen cities / near Troy, another eleven on foot" and "seized fabulous treasure from each city / and brought it all back … to Agamemnon," the latter seized the wife he "slept by and cherished."[132] Agamemnon is, therefore, "vindictive …, and devouring";[133] he profits greatly from the war, claiming the lion's share, while Achilles and the Achaians for almost nine years, "in a noble spirit of generosity," were fighting "to gratify Agamemnon and to win honor [*kleos*] for him."[134] However, Agamemnon "has no feelings of shame [or *aidōs*] in the face of such generosity, no reverence for such nobility, and no gratitude for such sacrifice."[135] Homer depicts Achilles shouting against Agamemnon using the following words: "*anaidès am' espometh' ophra sy chairēis*" ("ἀναιδὲς ἄμ' ἐσπόμεθ' ὄφρα σὺ χαίρῃς"); "[w]e all came here for your sake, shameless king."[136] Agamemnon is "without" *aidōs*; not only does he lack the moral awareness to recognise the wrongness of his disgraceful deeds before carrying them out, but also he expresses no regret or active *aischynē*. He only cares about "his own profit, his own prizes, and his own wealth."[137] As we know, in the *Iliad*, Achilles led the assault on Lyrnessus

[127] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* 24-5.Thus, within a lawful *politeia* the responsibility of upholding justice is shared by its own members, young and old; it does not exclusively rest in the *basileus* himself (cf. Homer *Iliad,* Book 20, 4-5; Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 2, 28-32).

[128] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.90.

[129] Homer, *Iliad*, Book 1, 287-8.

[130] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* pp.24-5; cf. Homer, *Iliad*, Book 1, 150.

[131] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 9, 336-9; cf. P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue: Creating the Foundations of Classical Civilization.* Cambridge*,* 2014*,* p.121.

[132] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 9, 328-337.

[133] D. Hammer, *Homer and Political Thought,* 24; cf. Homer, *Iliad*, Book 1, 150.

[134] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.138.

[135] Loc.cit.

[136] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 1, 158.

[137] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.138.

during the Trojan War, and "bereft of the young woman, fair-haired Briseis" as a war prize.[138] When the aristocrats go to war together, they divide the spoils accordingly, "giving each his due portion."[139] However, in Book 1 (of *The Iliad*), Agamemnon is forced by Apollo to return his captive, Chryseis;[140] and as compensation, he captures Achilles' Briseis.[141] In this moment, Agamemnon violates the aristocratic code, revealing his egotism and readiness to exploit power for personal gain.[142] Thus, Achilles wonders: why should he and the Achaians risk their lives to "to wage [a] fruitless war"[143] that only benefits Agamemnon and Menelaus, who do "not think or care about us"?[144] Notice that in Book 1, Achilles accuses the king by using the following words: "*anaideiēn epimeinē kerdaleóphron*" ("ἀναιδείην ἐπιειμένε κερδαλεόφρον"), denouncing him for his "shamelessness and greed."[145] By calling him *kerdaleóphron*, the warrior highlights how the *basileus* exploits public matters (*dēmion*) for personal advantage; this is because his *phrēn* (mind or spirit) is not concerned with *themis*; rather, it is absorbed by a selfish *kerdos* (gain or profit). Homer uses the word *anaideiēn* ("lack of shame") once again to link *aidōs* with the *dēmion*. To make this point more precise, we should note that Achilles's critique does not address Agamemnon's lack of *aidōs* exclusively; he also "criticizes the Achaians for acquiescing in the foolish and unjust rule of Agamemnon."[146] As Ahrensdorf notes, the king was so unrighteous that Achilles finds "unreasonable for any of the Achaians to obey him";[147] to use my terms, Agamemnon's power is so unjust that submission to it demonstrates blatant lack of *aidōs*. While lack of active *aischynē* primarily characterises the king's personality, as he has already committed a *hubris*, the loss of *aidōs* concerns both him (as observed earlier) and the Achaians, who do

[138] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 2, 688.
[139] S. Stuurman, *The Voice of Thersites*, p.176.
[140] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 1, 430-447.
[141] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 1, 184-7.
[142] S. Stuurman, *The Voice of Thersites*, p.176.
[143] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 9, 322.
[144] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 1, 160.
[145] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 1, 149. In Ahrensdorf's mind, Achilles suggests that he and all the Achaians "have been fighting the Trojans for nine years, not out of self-interest, but in a noble spirit of generosity, to gratify Agamemnon and to win honor for him" by rescuing Helen (*Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.138). However, "Agamemnon has no feelings of shame in the face of such generosity, no reverence for such nobility, and no gratitude for such sacrifice." (ibid.).
[146] Ibid, p.139.
[147] Ibid, p.138.

not express *nemesis* (the rightful anger)[148] against his transgressive and self-centred rule.

In the same way, the people in *The Odyssey* are portrayed as fully responsible, potent and active political agents; they are indebted to uphold the ethical principles of mutual respect. In short, the *demos* must take matters into their own hands, denouncing structures that perpetuate injustices and forbidding the few powerful and privileged from exercising arbitrary force upon others. More to the point: In Book 2, Telemachus (the son of Odysseus), nineteen years after Odysseus' departure, is urged by goddess Athena to call for a public meeting. Aigyptos reminds the assembled Ithacans that "[w]e have not met in council since the day / Odysseus departed with his ships."[149] Telemachus, in a bid to ignite the community's conscience and sense of justice, condemns the suitors with the following words: "You … all should feel ashamed! Consider / what others in the neighborhood will think!"[150] This passage offers one of the clearest descriptions of active *aischynē* in Homer's *Odyssey*: a powerful sense of guilt brought before the audience – the Ithacan public. Moreover, this guilt highlights the need for a shift in attitude, moving towards *aidōs*. This is particularly clear in the depiction of the suitors as *anaideis* (without *aidōs*),[151] who commit *aischea* instead of limiting their desires, acting according to the *timē* (honour and dignity) of others.[152]

This nascent form of public deliberation and emphasis on the duty of each member of the community to uphold the principles of justice in order to safeguard an environment of mutual friendship are among the key elements of democracy that we later identify with the democratic *politeia* of Athens. The same meaning is conveyed in another passage of Book 2, where we find Penelope (Odysseus' wife) urging Dolius (the house slave) "to hurry off and sit beside Laertes, / and tell him everything; he may decide / to go in tears to ["*exelthōn laoisin* - ἐξελθὼν λαοῖσιν"] plead with those who want / to kill godlike Odysseus' son, his grandson."[153] The word "plead" does not accurately describe the Greek *exelthōn laoisin*, literally translated as *exiting the private sphere to meet the people in the public square* (in the political field). In short, there is hope that Laertes will decide to join the *synaxis*, informing the Ithacans about Penelope's suffering at the hands of the suitors, who have usurped the household and forced her

[148] *Nemesis* usually refers to the rightful anger of the audience, of the public, of the *demos,* when a person becomes *anaidhs* (lack of *aidōs*) and behaves against *themis*; cf. N. Yamagata, *Homeric Morality,* pp.156-7.

[149] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 2, 26-7.

[150] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 2, 64-5.

[151] See Section One.

[152] L.D. Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology of Ethics*, p.103.

[153] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 4, 736-41.

way into her private sphere, expecting her to cease hoping on Odysseus' return so that she can marry one of them. The household is taken over by cynical men, who take advantage of their might to gratify their lust for domination. But the suffering inflicted by these unjust forms of rule must be publicly condemned by everyone; the *demos* must never remain silent when *hubris* is committed. This emphasis on public responsibility is also confirmed from another angle: since in the Promethean mindset *themis* is a public duty, we understand that the responsibility to actively oppose cruel practices of oppression rests not exclusively with leaders, but also with the *laos*. This is also illustrated in Mentor's arguments (who was in charge of the household during Odysseus' absence): "But I do blame" the δήμῳ [demos], who remains passive and never speaks against the suitors, though the *demos* itself far outnumbers them ("πολλοὶ ἐόντες").[154] Thus, the *demos* must uphold the demands of *themis*. Upon adhering to these, the *laos* condemns and rejects *hubris*. But as we can clearly see, this stance requires the internalisation of *aidōs*. By doing so, the people cultivate high moral standards and become capable of practising self-restraint.

Furthermore, Aegyptius addresses the suitors using the following words: *aidesthēte periktíonas anthrōpous* ("αἰδέσθητε περικτίονας ἀνθρώπους"). They translate as follows: "feel shame before your fellow men".[155] This phrase carries a double meaning: *prima facie,* it denotes that the suitors must feel *aischynē* for their disgraceful deeds; "[c]onsider / what others in the neighborhood will think," Aegyptius shouts.[156] Let us be reminded again of Aristotle's assertion that "people blush" out of *aischynē* and "feel disgrace"; for moral persons have no need to feel *aischynē*, since they have adopted the virtue of *aidōs*.[157] Thus, the suitors must blush out of shame (in front of the *laos*) for their choices. However, we can see that in this passage, Homer uses the word *aidesthēte* (from which the term *aidōs* is derived). We might interpret this to mean that the suitors are called not merely to feel *aischynē* in response to their wrongdoing. Rather, this feeling must trigger a shift in their mindset, driving them toward actions aligned with *aidōs*. We see here again that this active *aischynē* – that leads to *aidōs* – is linked to the *dēmion* (δήμιον). Let me further clarify this point: when one is active he/she is concerned with the public affairs; as the previous section clarified by reflecting on Arendt, *action* is synonymous with "publicness," and more precisely, with the participatory politics of the *synaxes*. Hence, (active) *aischynē* becomes a political force and plays a significant role within the fabric of the communal sphere.

[154] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 2, *Odyssey,* 238-40.
[155] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 2, 64; translation mine.
[156] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Book 2, 64-5.
[157] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1128b; cf. Section One.

To summarise, active *aischynē* fosters *aidōs* not simply to the mind of the wrongdoer but to the public as a whole. It reminds the wider community that decisions must be carefully considered before they are collectively made, so that *hubris* will be avoided. As Hammer also argued, participatory politics, where the *demos* and a leader cooperate, inherit the threat of tyranny; charismatic authority figures often exploit popular desires in order to consolidate their self-serving rule. "In such circumstances," Stuurman explains, the ruling aristocracy faces two dangers: abuse of power by the *basileus* and popular revolt.[158] The *Iliad* turns on the first danger: Agamemnon exemplifies best "the risk that the chief king can endanger the entire community" as we have already seen.[159] However, the second danger is also present; when Agamemnon abuses his power, he almost provokes a rebellion among the soldiers. This, according to the same author, is best exemplified by the role of Thersites in the poem.[160] It is time to move on, discussing how *aidōs* and *aischynē* appear in the poems to show the flaws in human judgment, which connects to the second principle of political Prometheanism: scepticism concerning the limits of the moral capacities of humans. To clarify this dynamic in the context of Thersites' episode, we must consider the dominance of *kleos* in the Homeric social value structure.

4. The Scepter and the Shame: the *Hubris* of the *Demos*

We get the best hint of how *aidōs* and active *aischynē* are absent when they are most needed in the mistreatment of Thersites. In brief, the Achaian makes a similar critique with Achilles: Agamemnon is greedy, selfish and unjust; he is "never satisfied with his part of the spoils."[161] More importantly, he is (as previously stated) a *kerdaleóphron* commander, who exploits the pursuit of *kleos* (a public demand) for his personal gain. Thersites urges the Achaians to "go home in our ships, leaving the man / and his prizes here at Troy, so he may see / that none of us cares the least whit for him."[162] Like Achilles, Thersites voices his contempt for the lack of *aidōs* and active *aischynē* on behalf of his fellow soldiers, who – out of cowardice (Stuurman argued) – submit to the king.[163] He urges them to abandon Agamemnon in Troy; without the ordinary Achaians, the king would be helpless. In this way, Thersites highlights "the indispensable role of the common soldiers in the fighting,"[164] "implying that there should be

[158] S. Stuurman, *The Voice of Thersites*, p.186.
[159] Loc.cit.
[160] Loc.cit.
[161] S. Stuurman, *The Voice of Thersites*, p.175.
[162] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 236-8.
[163] S. Stuurman, *The Voice of Thersites*, p.175.
[164] Ibid, p.177,

something in it for them too; otherwise, they might as well go home, leaving Agamemnon to his own devices."[165] But instead of receiving support from his peers, even from Achilles himself, he is humiliated and suppressed; Odysseus hits him "until he bent double and wept pain's tears."[166] For Hammer, Thersites is punished because "his lower status does not allow him to speak in this way against the king."[167] He lacks the heroic stature of Achilles and, for this reason, he is quickly silenced. Vico pictures Thersites as "a character of the plebeians who served the heroes in the Trojan war" but was "beaten by Ulysses … with the scepter of Agamemnon, just as the ancient Roman plebeians were beaten by the nobles."[168] For others, Thersites' violent silencing reinforces the dominance of Homer's aristocratic ethos – one that is nearly impossible to challenge or transcend.[169] John Ferguson regards Thersites as a proto-liberal martyr; this "caricatured and ruthlessly manhandled" cruelty "is the beginning of a democratic to aristocratic and misuse of power."[170] This stark contrast in how similar criticisms are received underscores a deeper issue within the Homeric value system. In a nutshell, the disparity between Achilles and Thersites could be also explained through the *kleos*-centered value system of the Homeric world: Achilles has proven his excellence and virtue (*arete*) as a warrior. Thus, he earned him renown. On the other hand, Thersites, neither mighty nor accomplished, lacks such recognition. Thus, he is not punished for being low-born; the Achaian lacks the military prestige of Achilles. And he is described as a "[b]owlegged," "lame," and "disgrace among the Greeks at Troy."[171] More importantly, Thersites is *aischistos* ("αἴσχιστος").[172] The poet's application of the adjective *aischistos* (or *aischros*), although closely related to *aischynē*, on this occasion is not synonymous with lack moral shame *after-the-act*; the *aischistos* is "ugly";[173] that is, he commits deeds that are not well received by the public,

[165] Ibid, p.176,

[166] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 266.

[167] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.61.

[168] G. Vico, *The New Science*, New York, 1948, p.123.

[169] A. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, p.34, p.173; W. Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, Vol. I*. New York, 1945, p.19. This reading is shared by both conservatives and contemporary Marxist scholars; the former endorse Odysseus's suppression of Thersites, who is not a hero but a deranged personality; the Marxists view Thersites as an oppressed rebel to whom the audience must sympathise. Such readings are also offered by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Moses Finley, F. A. Paley and so on (S. Stuurman, *The Voice of Thersites*, p.180).

[170] J. Ferguson, *Utopias of the Classical World*, Cambridge, 1991, p.11.

[171] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 216-9.

[172] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 216.

[173] E. Lowry, *Thersites: A Study in Comic Shame*, p.11, p.13; D. L. Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology of Ethics*, p.4, p.54, p.57.

since they lack elegance and eloquence. We could, therefore, agree with Lowly[174] that Thersites' physical deformities do not define his role as an anti-hero; rather, his rhetorical "ugliness" causes anger and indignation as it stands in opposition to the aristocratic Homeric decorum. In Homer's words, Thersites "spoke shameful words," or "improper for the audience" –"*épea phresin hēisin acosma"* ("ἔπεα φρεσὶν ἧσιν ἄκοσμά");[175] the word *a-cosma* is formed by the prefix "a," implying "without," and *cosmos,* translated as the "crowd," or the "people." Furthermore, the verb *cosmo* denotes the application of beauty or adornment. This suggests that Thersites lacked not only a noble physique but, more importantly, rhetorical eloquence. His "ugliness" mainly derives from his words, deemed utterly inappropriate for the crowd of the Achaians; they caused *lōbē* (λώβη), that is, "outrage," and *oneidos* (ὄνειδος) ("insult").[176]

From a different angle, in Book 2 Odysseus claimed that "[a]ll the Achaeans here cannot be kings / That would bring chaos. There must be one chief, / one king, who must be the man Cronus' son put / in charge of scepter and laws so he could rule."[177] Additionally, in the midst of a dangerous disorder, Odysseus resorts to physical coercion[178] by striking commoners with the sceptre, rebuking them with words.[179] Hence, does the Ithacan king affirm Agamemnon's authority, as Ahrensdorf claimed?[180] For Hammer, Odysseus' coercive tactics do not restore Agamemnon's power; "what holds the political field together now is not people acting together, but force."[181] In simple terms, the Ithacan king stops the soldiers by relying on compulsion, replacing mutual cooperation and trust with fear and force. For Hammer, the use of force by Agamemnon "only to weaken his power" and when the Ahcaians are imperilled, he is unable to do anything to help them."[182] This is because "Agamemnon is powerless", says the same author;[183] true power is not coercion used arbitrarily in the pursuit of obedience; coercion and violence "prevent the development of power" by fostering "the conditions for isolation."[184] Thus, violence denies the very condition of power: namely, the capacity of the people to act and speak

[174] Ibid, pp.40-1.
[175] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 213.
[176] E. Lowry, *Thersites: A Study in Comic Shame*, p.19, p.29, pp.39-40.
[177] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 203-5.
[178] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 199.
[179] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 2, 198.
[180] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.45.
[181] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.88.
[182] Ibid.*,* p.90.
[183] Loc.cit.
[184] Ibid., p.91.

together.[185] More importantly, power "is located not in a person but in the political field. Power originates when people speak and act with each other and enables groups to act together to pursue particular goals."[186] As Arendt argued, power is never the property (*res privata*) of an individual; it belongs to groups, unions and peoples and "remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together."[187] Power "arises from the constituting of a political space."[188] But if arbitrary coercion undermines both power and loyalty toward a leader, as Agamemnon's case explains, how is it that Odysseus, who also employed brutal physical coercion, succeeded in inspiring obedience, uniting the Achaian camp? Could the reason behind Odysseus' success be his ability to tap into deeper collective aspirations embedded in the Homeric value system, most notably, the pursuit of *kleos*? Ahrensdorf offers further insight into this dynamic.

As the author argued, *kleos* "cannot be shared" or distributed;[189] it is not a collective reward. Rather, it is doled out to individuals who demonstrate exceptional military excellence. To avoid misunderstandings, *kleos* is also attributed to those who "fight bravely" and defend their community, which provides them "with material honors, such as the "choice meats and the filled wine cups," as well as good farmland, Hammer claimed.[190] Simply put, glory is bestowed upon those who abandon the security of their private walls and sacrifice their personal well-being to safeguard the common good. Here, the attribution of *kleos* arises from the expression of an "ethical self," which prioritises the duty to defend collective well-being and security over selfish enjoyments. But even when framed as service to the collective, the pursuit of glory remains fundamentally self-serving; military excellence on behalf of the community can serve less as an expression of civic duty than as a strategic path to individual renown. For example, Hector is commonly perceived as a humble figure, devoted to the common good of the Trojans and his family. He ostensibly emerges as a prudent and exemplary leader,[191] who embodies the virtue of loyalty to one's people and one's loved ones;[192] he "fights on, apparently in order to fulfil his duty to protect his city, his family, and his soldiers."[193] When he is confronted by Helen, he responds with the

[185] Loc.cit.

[186] Ibid., p.90.

[187] H. Arendt, *On Violence,* New York, 1970, p.44; cf. D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.91.

[188] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.92.

[189] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.170.

[190] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Ethical Thinking*, p.208.

[191] I. Tripoula, *The ethics of war leadership,* p.125.

[192] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* pp.94-6.

[193] Ibid, p.86.

following words: ""Do not encourage me to sit … My heart urges me to rush back and aid / the Trojan men who badly need their leader."[194] Unlike Achilles, Hector never expresses anger towards the Trojans and never attacks Priam as bitterly as Achilles attacks Agamemnon.[195] But if Hector is just, why does he not save his city from utter destruction "by opposing the pro-war policy of his father and brother?"[196] Why does he insist with such a frenzied passion on fighting an 'ill-fated' (in the words of Andromache) and unjust war? "Your fury will be your death. You do not care / for your son or hapless wife, all but widowed / because the Argives soon will end your days."[197] Andromache suggests that Hector's insistence to fight the Achaians overpowers "both his reason and his pity … sacrificing his own life and thoughtlessly ruining the happiness of his wife and also of his child,"[198] who will find "no solace" but "only grief."[199] "Stay here on the wall," she insists, "rather than widow me and orphan your son. / Station your men at the wild fig where Ilium / is most vulnerable, its wall least high."[200] However, Hector considers retreat an act of cowardice and prioritises his public honour over his family's future. And he responds with the following words: it would be "my shame among / the Trojan people would be far too heavy / were I to avoid the war as would a coward," since he "was raised to be brave / and always to fight among the forward Trojans."[201] He knows that the fate of Troy is sealed, but he keeps "fighting on for the sake of his own glory."[202] His main concern is not the common good or his family, the Trojan women and children, or the war's outcome; for he fears shame and abasement (passive *aischynē*): he dreads the thought of being killed "like a helpless woman."[203] Thus, "his defeatism gives him license to pursue his self-interest."[204] With this in mind, we could assume that since *kleos* plays a central role in Homeric society and so long as it encourages self-serving ambitions, Agamemnon's prolongation of the war aligns with the Achaeans' demands. In other words, Odysseus and Nestor's rhetorical defences of Agamemnon's autocratic rule serve to

[194] Homer, *Iliad*, Book 6, 360-363.
[195] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.99.
[196] Ibid, p.96.
[197] Homer, *Iliad*, Book 6, 407-9.
[198] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.100-1.
[199] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 6, 412-3.
[200] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 6, 431-4.
[201] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 6, 441-5.
[202] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.108.
[203] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 22, 125; cf. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* 99. In this way, Hector denounces Paris for choosing to retreat, shaming himself while delighting their foes (Homer, *Iliad*, Book 3, 39-55; Book 6, 521-526; cf. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.104, p.108).
[204] Ibid, p.111.

reinforce a hierarchical structure that channels the individual aspirations of each soldier for *kleos* into sanctioned expressions.[205] Perhaps, this explains the reasons Odysseus's violent enforcement of despotism is not shamed and despised.

Beyond their superior rhetorical skills, there is another reason that Odysseus and Nestor win the debate and Achilles and Thersites do not: Odysseus and Nestor act in accordance with fate, which has already preordained Troy's ultimate destruction. This accord with destiny grants them a significant advantage. Given the dictates of fate and the predetermined outcome of the war, can we conclude that the Achaians lack *aidōs*? Do they lack the agency and will to uphold *themis*? As it has already been claimed, divine will and fate act "outside of, and upon, the human will."[206] While there is no "free-floating" human agency operating in absolute autonomy, people can still debate, make decisions, seek reconciliation and respond to others; their choices and actions carry significance.[207] Hence, even if Troy's fate is sealed, the Achaians could reflect on Thersites' speech; they, perhaps, had no power to influence the final cause of the war, but they could reconsider their strategy, moving beyond Agamemnon's policies. Yet, this did not occur, as Thersites was brutally suppressed.

Much like Achilles, Thersites draws attention to the *anaideia* of the Achaians, demonstrated not simply as obedience to an unjust authority but (in Yamagata's definition) through a refusal to aid the helpless or a display of contempt for the vulnerable[208] (as his case denotes). However, we have seen that the pursuit of *kleos* either leads them to disregard their *aidōs* in favour of self-serving ambitions or to reinforce hierarchical double standards, silencing those lacking renown. Though Odysseus' violent tactics certainly play an important role in uniting the political field (as Hammer notes), the pursuit of *kleos* and its tendency to incite selfish ambitions, ultimately encourages devotion to the cause of war. We understand then that those who possess the Promethean (*thnatous āgan*) flame, bear a formidable responsibility: they must cultivate self-limitation to confront and temper the deeply rooted vices inherent in the human condition. They must, in other words, be guided by *aidōs*, active *aischynē*, and *themis*, the very ethical virtues that balance ambition with humility.

[205] P. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue,* p.45.
[206] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.51.
[207] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.77.
[208] N. Yamagata, *Homeric Morality,* pp.170-1.

Conclusion

This study explored the participatory aspects of Homer's epics; while lacking formal institutions, Homeric society in institutional terms, evoke a distinctly "Promethean" vision of human agency, one marked by the capacity to use *logos*, that is, to deliberate and judge in "political fields," where communal ethics, public speech, and shared norms of justice begin to take root. Far from portraying a world governed exclusively by aristocratic decree or divine will, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* highlight the importance of popular involvement in collective decision-making. The presence of *synaxes*, the invocation of *aidōs*, and the recurring concern for *themis* reveal a world where politics is already in formation, although not formalised as, for example, was the case in the Athenian *polis*. In line with the second principle of political Prometheanism, Homer's epics dramatise the fragility of the human capacity for judgment, highlighting the problem of *hubris*. In this regard, the fire Prometheus offered to humanity (according to Aeschylus and Protagoras), which burns in the speeches of Achilles and Thersites, in the restraint urged by Telemachus, and even in the *synaxes* of Ithaca and the Achaian camp, requires modesty and civic conscience; this fire is excessive for mortals.

Ultimately, Homer's epics are not merely mythic tales of divine wrath or heroic glory; as Hammer claimed, Homer was also "a political thinker"; his poems are "work[s] of political thought," and they are "engaged in [a] critical reflection," which "is political in nature."[209] Such a reflection sheds light on the limits of power and the perils of charismatic leadership. It also reveals that the legitimacy of authority does not lie in divine providence, faith or noble birth alone; honour and respect are also earned through dialogue, fairness and the capacity for *aidōs*. This is the essence of the Promethean burden in politics: not merely to act, but to act with a view to common responsibility; not merely to speak, but to speak with *dēmos*, in the shared pursuit of *themis*.

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[209] D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics,* p.5.

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