# Odysseus in Aeschylean Drama: Revisiting the Fragments

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Odysseus plays no part in the extant plays of Aeschylus. However, he is an important figure in several of the poet's fragmentarily preserved works.[1] The most intriguing part of Odysseus' story, his *nostos*, is treated by Aeschylus in a highly fragmentary and controversial tetralogy, possibly consisting of the tragedies *Psychagogoi*, *Penelope*, and *Ostologoi*, and the satyr play *Circe*.[2] A close reading of the fragments allows us to understand that the tragic poet deliberately deviates from all epic traditions, both Homeric and Cyclic, in order to deprive Odysseus of his admirable abilities and cast him in a different light. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Aeschylus deconstructs the resourceful man of the Homeric and cyclic tradition and instead presents a man humbled by gods and mortals, who, even after victoriously returning home, is anything but a winner.

## 1. Introduction

The tragic poets of the classical era find themselves at the receiving end of a rich mythological tradition whose origins date back to pre-Homeric times. By either agreeing with earlier models or proposing alternative versions of well-known myths, each poet reshapes the ever-changing Greek mythological corpus.[3] Both Homer's and the cyclic poets' works form the

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[1] E.g. *Hoplon Krisis*, *Palamedes*, *Philoctetes* and possibly *Telephus* and *Iphigeneia*. See also Stanford 1968:261n2.

[2] The ongoing debate over the nature and the order of the plays has resulted in numerous combinations within the tetralogy. See *TrGF* 3 (Radt) 113–114. I follow the aforementioned conjecture proposed by Wilamowitz 1884:194, *pace* Stanford 1968:103 who considers both *Psychagogoi* and *Ostologoi* to be satyr dramas and Hall 2008:38 who suggests that *Penelope* may too have been a satyr drama. Sommerstein 1996:70 accepts the conjecture proposed by Wilamowitz and so do nowadays most scholars. See e.g. Cousin 2005:138–139 and Gantz 2007:58–60.

[3] This is what Segal 1986:49–50 describes as *mythical mega-text*, a common background of mythological themes and motifs, the content of which each poet interprets and recreates based on the conventions and needs of the genre they serve. The mythical mega-text includes themes, patterns and ideas that are known to the public as well as to

epic traditions concerning Odysseus that Aeschylus draws on to shape his aforementioned trilogy. Despite the abundance of dramatic episodes that the cyclic poems offer, it is indisputable that Homer's influence is paramount, and that Aeschylus engages in an intertextual discussion where the *Odyssey* is the main intertext.

The first play of the trilogy, the *Psychagogoi*, (*The Ghost-raisers*, in Greek *Ψυχαγωγοί*) tackles the topic of the Homeric, and probably also cyclic, *Nekyia*.[4] The surviving fragments suggest that professional necromancers aid Odysseus in his perilous but successful attempt to contact Teiresias, the seer who prophesies the hero's death. The setting of the play must have been a lake from which one could enter the Underworld, a lake either next to the Acheron river or the Avernus *nekyomanteion*.[5] The play starts with Odysseus finding the oracle and meeting its inhabitants, the members of the Chorus, who introduce themselves as necromancers, worshippers of Hermes.[6] The necromancers proceed to advise Odysseus on the ritual he must follow to summon the spirits of the dead.[7] Upon doing so, Odysseus at some point brings up the spirit of Teiresias, who foretells the king's bizarre and inglorious death (he will be pierced and fatally poisoned by the sting of a sting-ray concealed in the excrement of a heron).[8] We do not

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the poets and are either subjected to change or preserved as they are by every artist who approaches them over time. This results in the creation of a dense web of interconnectedness that is poised consciously by poets one after another and which the public has the ability, to a greater or lesser degree, to recognize and then reinterpret. See also Lamari 2010:119–120.

[4] It is very likely that a similar Nekyia was part of the epic poem *Nostoi*. See Danek 2015:361–365 who explains that *PEG* F3–9 are part of a catalogue that contains additional information about characters who are mentioned in the counterpart catalogue of the Homeric Nekyia. West 2013:279–280, suggests that in the *Nostoi* it is Menelaos who descends to Hades and not Odysseus.

[5] Sommerstein 1996:349.

[6] Cf. *TrGF* 3 273.

[7] Cf. *TrGF* 3 273a.

[8] Cf. *TrGF* 3 275.

know how the play concludes, but it is probable that Odysseus announces his departure to Ithaca, where the second part of the tragic trilogy unravels.[9]

*Penelope*, of which we know very little, comes second. It certainly takes place in Ithaca, somewhere inside the king's palace, and deals with the killing of the suitors. As Sommerstein observes, it would have been impossible for the play to be set in the hall of the palace, which was dominated by the suitors, given that at some point the killing of the suitors would take place, an event that could not be dramatized directly. He thus suggests that it takes place in the upper chambers, where the queen lived.[10] As the only surviving fragment of the tragedy confirms, *Penelope* involves an important talk between Odysseus and his wife, in a scene that constitutes an intertextual dialogue with the interview described in *Odyssey* xix. In *TrGF* 3 187 Odysseus introduces himself to Penelope as a ''Cretan of noble lineage'', probably at the crucial moment before the killing of the suitors.[11]

The conclusion of the trilogy is arguably the most controversial one. The *Ostologoi*, (*The Bone-gatherers*), recalls the last book of the *Odyssey*, and the beginning of the *Telegony*,[12] where the relatives of the murdered suitors arrive at the king's palace and gather the remains of their loved ones. It is evident from the two surviving fragments that in the Aeschylean account of the myth Odysseus stays at the palace and does not flee to the countryside, as he does in the *Odyssey*.[13] He thus confronts the relatives, who form the Chorus of the play, at the palace, surrounded by the dead bodies of the suitors, or perhaps, the urns containing their bones,

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[9] Sommerstein 1996:350n2 entertains the possibility that the information Odysseus receives from Teiresias and perhaps his mother, could lead him to announce that he is going home in disguise, a decision that dramatically alters the development of the tragic plot.

[10] See Sommerstein 1996:350, a suggestion also supported by Gantz 2007:59.

[11] Cf. *Odyssey* xii 172 ff.

[12] Cf. arg. 1a West: «οἱ μνήστορες ὑπὸ τῶν προσηκόντων θάπτονται».

[13] Sommerstein 1996:351.

which must appear on stage. It is likely that the Chorus seeks explanations from Odysseus for his crime, who in turn recounts the humiliation he suffered by the suitors when he was disguised as a beggar and had yet to reveal his identity. Those humiliations are by far worse than the ones described in the *Odyssey*; Odysseus says that the noble men of Ithaca used his head as a target during the game of *kottabismos*,[14] and recalls the time when one of the suitors threw a chamber pot at him, soiling him with its content.[15] Unlike the epic Odysseus, his tragic descendant tries, and obviously succeeds in persuading the people of Ithaca about the righteousness of his actions without the use of violence. It is impossible to say that Athena plays no part in the reconciliation, but it is safe to hypothesize that at the end of the play, with or without divine intervention, the Chorus and Odysseus make peace and no further retribution is sought.[16]

*Circe* is unquestionably of satyric nature and completes the dramatic tetralogy. The play, evidently related to *Odyssey* x, narrates the metamorphosis the Odyssean crew suffers at the hands of Circe, but perhaps with a grotesque twist that has Odysseus' men turn to monkeys instead of swine. This is Buschor's suggestion who relied on a bell krater found in Syracuse that depicts satyrs transforming to monkeys.[17] However, it seems a bit far-fetched to associate the krater with the Aeschylean *Circe* without additional, more solid evidence. Moreover, if we take into consideration that in both Euripides' *Cyclops* and Sophocles' *Inachus* the satyrs take up the role of herders, it is tempting to assume that in the Aeschylean play too the satyrs

[14] *TrGF* 3 179.

[15] *TrGF* 3 180.

[16] See Sommerstein 1996:352 who argues that an intervention by Athena might have occurred.

[17] See Buschor 1927:232.

shepherd Circe's pigs, among which are Odysseus' men, waiting for their king to liberate them.[18]

Unfortunately, our knowledge concerning these plays cannot go much further. For reasons we can only presume, the Odyssean tragedies were less popular than the Iliadic ones.[19] Still, however little the information regarding the trilogy is, it is apparent that Aeschylus draws upon popular Homeric and cyclic episodes in order to compete with the epic world and its dynamics. The poet engages in a dialogue with his archetypes and proceeds to revise them. Sadly, the fragmentary nature of the trilogy does not grant us the evidence to understand the full extent of this revision.

## 2. Deconstructing Odysseus

Aeschylus employs various mechanisms and techniques through which he successfully deconstructs the epic hero and presents instead a very different Odysseus from the one the epic traditions have created. In order to do so, the tragic poet needs to reshape both the characters and the setting of each myth to detach them from the glory of the epic world. The reframing of epic episodes against a different background, the portrayal of positive epic episodes in a negative light, the use of epic language and style to undermine the *grandeur* of its genre, and the ironic allusions to epic are some of the techniques Aeschylus deftly employs.

### 2.1. Changing the setting

One of Odysseus' most enviable achievements is his journey to the Underworld, the place where man had yet to reach νηὶ μελαίνῃ.[20] In the *Odyssey*, Circe gives Odysseus detailed and

[18] This is Sommerstein's suggestion 1996:351 who does not consider at all Buschor's hypothesis.

[19] It could of course be simply explained by the fact that the source text of the plays, the *Odyssey*, was less prominent in antiquity than the *Iliad*. For an overview of other possible reasons see Sommerstein 1996:352–353.

[20] Cf. x 502.

useful advice (x 504–540), but she is not physically present when the hero travels to the Underworld. Odysseus is alone in his journey to a fearsome, unknown place that is literally positioned at the edge of the world, namely the end of the Ocean (ἐς πείραθ' ... 'Ωκεανοῖο, x 12).[21] Upon successfully following Circe's advice, Odysseus must then interact with the souls of the dead in a state of constant fear of the known and unknown terrors that await him.

This dangerous trip is transformed in the *Psychagogoi*, since the tragic poet reframes it against a different, far less dangerous, background. To begin with, the Aeschylean Nekyia takes place in a geographically identifiable place, a lake either next to the Acheron or the Avernus oracle of the dead.[22] The place is not explicitly specified, but it is nonetheless realistic.[23] Useful information concerning the locale of the ritual can be deduced from fragments 273 and 273a. In fr. 273, the Chorus mentions that they live around a lake (περὶ λίμναν), whereas at the beginning of fr. 273a they instruct Odysseus to stand on the precincts of the fearsome lake (φοβερᾶς λίμνας, 2). Both the Avernus and the Acheron oracles of the dead are located next to a lake and are accessible by ship. They might be in a remote location, and perhaps they had fallen into disuse by the time *Psychagogoi* was written, but they are nonetheless historical *nekyomanteia*, known to the audience.[24] As a result, by transferring the Nekyia from its

[21] Perimedes and Eurylochus help Odysseus at the beginning of the ritual (xi 22–23 and 44–45), but their presence can hardly be considered comforting. The fact that they are not mentioned again after they help their king perform the sacrifice allows us to assume that they go back to the ship and play no part in what happens next.

[22] There is no consensus on the matter, and trying to pick one over the other seems meaningless. E.g. Ogden 2001:48 argues in favour of the Acheron oracle, while Kramer 1980:18 prefers the Avernus oracle. Other suggestions, such as the Lake Stymphalus in Arcadia and the oracle near Ephyra in Thesprotia (both entertained by Lloyd-Jones 1981:22) can safely be rejected. The first one is not a *nekyomanteion* site, whereas the latter is not even located at a lake. For a more detailed analysis of the matter see Rusten 1982:34–35.

[23] See Mikellidou 2016:336, who points out that it is perhaps the nature of the tragic genre that makes it necessary for the action to take place in an existing location.

[24] Mikellidou 2016:337.

Odyssean undetermined geographical setting to a real-life location, Aeschylus removes the exotic element and significantly lessens the fear of the unknown that Odysseus is faced with.[25]

Moreover, in this version of the myth, Odysseus is not alone in his quest; he is accompanied and aided by the members of the Chorus, who are professional necromancers that give him advice so that he can safely summon Teiresias. The fact that the Chorus is physically present during this adventure, diminishes the danger Odysseus is faced with. Finally, the Chorus says that the souls of the dead will travel upwards to meet with Odysseus (ἑσμὸν ἀνεῖναι, fr.273a, 10), and that the water too moves upwards (ὕδωρ ... ἀνεῖται, 11–13). This means that all activities take place on the surface, i.e. in the world of the living. There is no blurring between the two worlds as is the case in the epic.[26] To sum up, Aeschylus places the entrance to the Underworld in a real and not a magical place, portrays an Odysseus that is not alone but accompanied by attendants of the oracle and includes no implication of a *katabasis* in his play.

Moving on to the second play of the trilogy, *Penelope* probably takes place in the queen's chamber,[27] away from the space that grants Odysseus his epic glory, i.e. the hall of the palace where he kills the insolent suitors. As the title of the play suggests, Penelope herself and subsequently her room inevitably become the focal point of this tragedy, and it is safe to assume that secondary characters of the epic, such as the nurse Eurykleia or even nameless maidservants are employed to narrate Odysseus' actions that happen ''off-screen''. As a result,

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[25] It should nonetheless be noted that Cousin 2005:145 suggests that the action takes place in a mythical location, just like in Homer's *Odyssey*, and finds no allusions to a historical spot. She agrees, however, that in the *Psychagogoi* Aeschylus deconstructs the values and heroic traits of the epic world.

[26] It should however be underlined that in Homer the theme of the *katabasis* is only mentioned once, at the beginning of book xi. In fact, Odysseus neither crosses the threshold into Hades nor appears in front of the gods of the Underworld. The souls of the dead come toward Odysseus or are seen in the distance. See Heubeck & Hoekstra 1989:76. Yet, Odysseus sees some figures that could not have come up to meet him, such as Tantalus, an inconsistency noted by West 2013:280.

[27] As mentioned above, see note 10.

Odysseus probably shows up only before and after the *mnesterophonia*. By doing so, Aeschylus deprives him of his moment of glory by making his feat the background of the play.

### 2.2. Marginalizing Odysseus

The change of setting and the subsequent shift in focus result in the marginalization of Odysseus. Aeschylus downplays the hero's contribution during both the journey to the Underworld and the killing of the suitors. As far as the *Psychagogoi* is concerned, it is reasonable to argue that Aeschylus' choice to surround Odysseus with necromancers deprives him of his traditional role of the leader. Fragment 273 contains the self-description of the Chorus:

Ἑρμᾶν μὲν πρόγονον τίομεν γένος οἱ περὶ λίμναν.

We, who dwell by the lake, honor Hermes as our ancestor.[28]

The members of the Chorus call themselves a γένος, which means that they identify as a race that has its origin in the area close to the lake (περὶ λίμναν). Therefore, they are native people in charge of the operation of the oracle. The mention of the worship of Hermes points to a group of specialised necromancers and so does the title of the drama, "*Ψυχαγωγοί*", a title that evidently describes the identity of the Chorus. In ancient sources, the word ψυχαγωγός is used to describe a regular profession and not an occasional occupation.[29] Had Aeschylus decided to choose a Chorus of sailors or, even better, the nameless souls of the dead, Odysseus would have easily outshone them and retained his leading part in the expedition. Moreover, he

[28] Trans. Lloyd-Jones 1963[7].

[29] See e.g. Phryn. *PS* 127.12. Mikellidou 2016:337 underlines the importance of the choice of the formal verb τίομεν, which leaves no room for doubt that the Chorus consists of professional attendants of the sanctuary.

would have been obligated to use his celebrated cunningness and boldness, whereas now all he does is participate in what is more or less a walkthrough. Hence, this specific choice of Chorus changes the uncharted mission to a prescribed ritual, leaving no room for bravery and initiative on behalf of Odysseus. Furthermore, it is important to notice how the Chorus addresses Odysseus. In fr. 273a, they call him ὦ ξεῖν', stranger, which shows that they either do not recognise him at all or that at the very least they do not consider him their king. To them, Odysseus is merely a stranger that is fully dependent on their instructions in order to complete his mission. Lastly, it is remarkable that fr. 273 is one of the few tragic verses delivered in hexametres. The choice of this formal metrical pattern is indicative of Aeschylus' attitude toward Homer; the tragic poet adopts epic style only to use it in an attempt to challenge the *grandeur* of the epic poetry.[30] The Chorus that uses the metrical pattern of the epic is the one who eventually undermines the leadership of one of epic poetry's most celebrated heroes.[31]

*Penelope*, on the other hand, might seem to be too much of an enigma, due to the lack of testimonies and surviving fragments. Be that as it may, one can argue that naming the play after Penelope and not after its alleged major episode, i.e. the killing of the suitors, might be a conscious attempt by the poet to shift the attention away from Odysseus and focus on his wife instead.

### 2.3. Twisting the epic imagery

Aeschylus presents an aesthetic that is full of contradictory images in order to describe situations that both recall and at the same time negate the epic world. The surviving

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[30] Mikellidou 2016:337n19.

[31] This is not the only time Aeschylus deviates from the metrical patterns of tragic poetry in order to engage in an intertextual dialogue with the Odyssean tradition. For another example of this technique see Μαρκαντωνάτος-Τσαγγάλης 2008:45–46.

fragments of the *Psychagogoi* help us realise how Aeschylus undermines epic imagery. To begin with, fr. 273a contains the description of the infernal lake that echoes the Homeric one but is full of conflicting images:

ἄγε νῦν, ὦ ξεῖν', ἐπὶ ποιοφύτων
ἵστω σηκῶν φοβερᾶς λίμνας
ὑπό τ' αὐχένιον λαιμὸν ἀμήσας
τοῦδε σφαγίου ποτὸν ἀψύχοις
αἷμα μεθίει
δονάκων εἰς βένθος ἀμαυρόν.
Χθόνα δ' ὠγυγίαν ἐπικεκλόμενος
χθόνιόν θ' Ἑρμῆν πομπὸν φθιμένων
[αἰ]τοῦ χθόνιον Δία νυκτιπόλων
ἑσμὸν ἀνεῖναι ποταμοῦ στομάτων,
οὗ τόδ' ἀπορρὼξ ἀμέγαρτον ὕδωρ
κἀχέρνιπτον
Στυγίοις να[σ]μοῖσιν ἀνεῖται.

Come now, stranger, stand on the grassy
precincts of the fearful lake and,
after you have gathered the blood from the throat
of this victim, let it fall for the lifeless ones
to drink
into the dark depths of the reeds.
And as you invoke ancient Earth,

and chthonian Hermes, conveyor of the dead,
implore chthonian Zeus to send up
the swarm of the night-wanderers from the mouths of the river,
whose branch, this undesirable water
that washes no hand,
is sent up by the streams of the Styx.[32]

Aeschylus describes a landscape that recalls the one described by Circe in the *Odyssey* (x 509–510 and 513–515):

ἔνθ' ἀκτή τε λάχεια καὶ ἄλσεα Περσεφονείης
μακραί τ' αἴγειροι καὶ ἰτέαι ὠλεσίκαρποι,
[...]
ἔνθα μὲν εἰς Ἀχέροντα Πυριφλεγέθων τε ῥέουσι
Κώκυτός θ', ὃς δὴ Στυγὸς ὕδατός ἐστιν ἀποῤῥώξ,
πέτρη τε ξύνεσίς τε δύω ποταμῶν ἐριδούπων·

where is a level shore and the groves of Persephone—
tall poplars, and willows that shed their fruit
[...]
There into Acheron flow Periphlegethon
and Cocytus, which is a branch of the water of the Styx;
and there is a rock, and the meeting place of the two roaring rivers.[33]

[32] Trans. Bardel 2005 with few adjustments.

[33] Trans. Murray 1919.

In the *Odyssey*, the infernal landscape appears to be a rocky and desolate one. The only trees Odysseus is expected to see are in Persephone's groves, namely poplars and willows that shed their fruit. There is no mention of grass or reeds, and the landscape is a barren and infertile one. In Aeschylus, however, the Chorus speaks of the grassy precincts of the oracle (ποιοφύτων σηκῶν), a description that suggests a fertile place. Shortly after that, the Chorus contradicts themselves by mentioning the existence of reeds (δονάκων), which are invariably found in marshes.[34] Moreover, the water of the infernal river, which is sent up by the streams of Styx (ἀνεῖται), is in fr. 276 described as one of "stagnant current" (σταθεροῦ χεύματος). The adjective σταθερός indicates immobility, whereas the word χεῦμα is associated with the flow of the rivers. An immobile river is of course an *oxymoron*, one of the many Aeschylus employs in the play.[35]

Besides that, Aeschylus describes the tragic Underworld and its inhabitants with words that carry strong infernal connotations (e.g. χθόνιον, νυκτιπόλων, φθιμένων, ἀψύχοις) but eventually fail to create the same atmosphere as in the epic. Given that the Aeschylean Underworld is intentionally positioned on the surface and both the water and the souls of the dead move upward, the terror inspired by the infernal imagery is lessened. In general, Aeschylus describes a place that is fertile and barren at the same time, a landscape where vegetation and reeds coexist, and a river whose water keeps moving upward while remaining immobile at the same time. Overall, it is evident that Aeschylus employs ambiguity intentionally in order to present an Underworld that is different from the epic one. At first sight, his description might seem in accordance with the epic, but the use of oxymorons and

[34] Mikellidou 2016:335.

[35] See Cousin 2005:144. We can be certain that the meaning of σταθερὸς here is stagnant and not steady because Photius in his lexicon specifies that the word is sometimes used ἐπὶ στασίμου, and proceeds to quote fr. 276 as an example. See Photius' *Lexicon*, s.v. σταθερόν.

conflicting images, as well as the subtle changes he makes to the world of the dead, give away his reinterpretation of the epic Underworld.[36] Aeschylus toys with the infernal connotations of his description and uses epic imagery and vocabulary to present an Underworld that seems to be like that in the epic but is actually not at all what the spectator or the reader has learned to expect to see.

### 2.4. Inverting the prophecy

In the epic tradition, the purpose of Odysseus' journey to the Underworld is to find Teiresias, so that the seer can tell the hero how to proceed in order to return to Ithaca. At some point during his speech, the seer also prophesies Odysseus' death. In the *Odyssey* (xi 134–137), Teiresias predicts a gentle and peaceful death for the hero that will come at an old age:

> [...]θάνατος δέ τοι ἐξ ἁλὸς αὐτῷ
> ἀβληχρὸς μάλα τοῖος ἐλεύσεται, ὅς κέ σε πέφνῃ
> γήρᾳ ὕπο λιπαρῷ ἀρημένον· ἀμφὶ δὲ λαοὶ
> ὄλβιοι ἔσσονται. [...]
>
> [...] and death shall come to you far from the sea,
> a death so gentle, that shall lay you low when you
> are overcome with sleek old age, and your people
> shall dwell in prosperity around you. [...][37]

Odysseus will see his people prosper and eventually die ἐξ ἁλὸς (away from the sea or from the sea) in a way that can be considered ideal. The phrase ἐξ ἁλὸς is perhaps intentionally

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[36] See also Cousin 2005:151.

[37] Trans. Murray 1919 with few adjustments.

ambiguous and has hence become the subject of scholarly dispute,[38] but it is reasonable to assume that Teiresias predicts a death that will come to Odysseus in dry land, after having escaped from the sea, the domain where Poseidon exhibits his wrath.[39] His death is described by Teiresias as ἀβληχρὸς μάλα, meaning *very gentle*. The adjective λιπαρὸς that is used to describe the hero's old age literally means "shiny", but in this context points to an old man that is wealthy and healthy-looking.[40] The word ἀρημένος means burdened, overcome, and depicts the weight the years will have placed on Odysseus' shoulders. It goes without saying that the prosperity of their people is of great importance for all good kings and Odysseus should be no exception. Teiresias' reassurance that his people will be ὄλβιοι, happy and blessed with riches, completes the picture of a perfect death. Odysseus will die having accomplished all his duties both as a war hero and as a king.[41] It should nonetheless be noted that Teiresias uses the verb πέφνῃ (θείνω), a verb that is invariably used in the epic to describe a violent death, usually a death on the battlefield.[42]

According to a post-Homeric epic account of Odysseus' death, the one told by the poet of *Telegony*, Eugammon, the hero is killed by Telegonus, the son Odysseus had had with Circe. This account offers a different interpretation of ἐξ ἁλὸς. Telegonus travels by ship to Ithaca (therefore, he comes from the sea) and wounds his father with an arrow whose edge is made

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[38] See Heubeck & Hoekstra 1989:86.

[39] See Tsagalis 2015:392.

[40] Cf. the phrase λιπαρῶς γηρασκέμεν in IV 210 that is used to describe the good old age that gods have granted Nestor.

[41] What is considered to be the ideal death in the *Odyssey* is naturally very different from the one in the *Iliad*. A glorious death at a young age on the battlefield is no longer the inner telos of the hero, who now wants to return home and enjoy a peaceful and prosperous life for him and his people. See Heubeck & Hoekstra 1989:86.

[42] In fact, this is the only time attested where the verb is used to describe a natural death. See Autenrieth s.v. *φένω (instead of the correct θείνω. The reconstruction of the present tense form of the verb Autenrieth offers is wrong.)

by the spine of a stingray, a sea creature. The ancient scholia on the *Odyssey* can prove helpful on the matter:

> ἔξω τῆς ἁλός· οὐ γὰρ οἶδεν ὁ ποιητὴς τὰ κατὰ τὸν Τηλέγονον καὶ τὰ κατὰ τὸ κέντρον τῆς τρυγόνος.
>
> Sch. *Od.* xi 134 = F5 West

> οἱ νεώτεροι τὰ περὶ Τηλέγονον ἀνέπλασαν τὸν Κίρκης καὶ Ὀδυσσέως, ὅς δοκεῖ κατὰ ζήτησιν τοῦ πατρὸς εἰς Ἰθάκην ἐλθών ὑπ᾽ἀγνοίας τὸν πατέρα διαχρήσασθαι τρυγόνος κέντρωι.
>
> Sch.[D] ibid.

The scholia suggest that the poet of the *Odyssey* does not know of Telegonus, who is a later invention, and who travels to Ithaca searching for his father only to end up killing him unaware of who he is. Telegonus kills his father with a sting-ray spear (τρυγόνος κέντρωι), and he himself obviously travels to Ithaca by ship, which means that Odysseus' death eventually comes from the sea. So, it seems that Eugammon reinterprets the Odyssean prophecy and presents a drastically different ending for Odysseus, one where the death comes from the sea and not away from it, with the post-Homeric invention of Telegonus taking the leading part.[43] Evidently, this death cannot be considered either gentle or ideal, given that Odysseus is violently killed by his own offspring. It is, nonetheless, a somewhat heroic death, because Telegonus, albeit unknowingly, engages in a battle with his father, making Odysseus die a death that resembles those reserved for the warriors in the *Iliad*.

In the *Psychagogoi*, the prophecy (fr. 275) appears to be quite different:

[43] On Eugammon's inventions see also Tsagalis 2014:460–461.

< ΤΕΙΡΕΣΙΑΣ (ad Ulixem)>

ἐρωδιὸς γὰρ ὑψόθεν ποτώμενος

ὄνθῳ[44] σε πλήξει νηδύος χαλώμασιν·

ἐκ τοῦδ' ἄκανθα ποντίου βοσκήματος

σήψει παλαιὸν δέρμα καὶ τριχορρυὲς.

< Teiresias (speaking to Odysseus)>

for a heron in flight

will strike you from above with its dung when it opens its bowels;

and from this the barb of a sea-creature

will rot your aged, hairless skin.[45]

There is no doubt that Aeschylus consciously and ironically inverts the epic prophecies. A heron will strike and infect Odysseus' skin with his dung that will contain a lethal spine of fish; such an ignominious death is certainly in contrast both to the gentle death Teiresias predicts in the *Odyssey* and the quasiheroic death Odysseus suffers in the *Telegony*. In fact, the Aeschylean prophecy echoes both epic accounts: Odysseus dies at an old age and he does so because of an injury caused by a sea creature (ποντίου βοσκήματος). However, his death is neither heroic nor serene.

Aeschylus describes the king's agonizing decay and awards him an unheroic and undignified death. He focuses on the negative aspects of old age and puts emphasis on the king's demise rather than prosperous longevity. His skin is described as παλαιὸν and τριχορρυὲς. Παλαιὸν is self-explanatory, whereas τριχορρυές, which is a *hapax legomenon*, refers

[44] My emphasis.

[45] Trans. Sommerstein 2008.

to the shedding of hair, a process associated with physical decline and loss of strength. Thus, the good-looking skin of the epic (cf. the adjective λιπαρός, xi 136) is transformed into a rotting one. Odysseus' death will come slowly and probably in an agonising way, as the verb σήψει (< σήπω, rot) suggests. The contrast with the verb πέφνῃ we read in Homer, is striking; the Odyssean prophecy describes a death that will at least be quick, whereas the tragic prophecy a slow, torturous one.

Moreover, the cause of his death is absurd to the point of ridiculous. One could argue that Aeschylus spares Odysseus from being killed by his own son—a fate not unknown to tragic heroes—but the alternative the poet offers seems much more dishonourable. His death does not correspond at all to the values of the epic poetry.[46] In fact, his demise is so ludicrous that some scholars considered the *Psychagogoi* to be a satyr drama.[47] Odysseus dies an old, decaying, ordinary man, not by the hand of a brave hero but because of an infection caused by a trivial sea creature. However troubling this choice might seem, it can be explained—as I will attempt to show below—if considered part of the intertextual dialogue Aeschylus consciously creates between his poetry and that of his epic predecessors.[48]

### 2.5. Employing intertextual irony

In his attempt to undermine and eventually deconstruct the epic Odysseus, Aeschylus uses epic language in order to describe a reality that opposes the glory of epic. The tragic poet

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[46] Cousin 2005:150.

[47] Cf. e.g. Stanford 1968:103. Sommerstein 1996:350 thoroughly justifies the classification of the play as tragic. Gantz 2007:59 considers the prophecy to be puzzling and admits that so far no satisfactory explanation has been offered about it.

[48] West 2013:313 argues that Aeschylus alludes to a pre-epic tradition of Odysseus' death. He considers the bizarre circumstances of his death part of a riddle-myth. The heron story with all its peculiar details is the solution that can bypass Odysseus' immunities and kill him.

alludes to the epic text through ironic intertextual puns. The most characteristic examples come from the surviving fragments of the *Psychagogoi* and, more specifically, the prophecy.

Teiresias speaks of a heron, a bird that will eventually be the cause of Odysseus' death. As we already saw, the mention of the heron is a bizarre and puzzling one, but it can be understood as an ironic allusion to the epic text. In the *Iliad*, in the highly controversial book X,[49] as Odysseus and Diomedes get ready to go spy on the Trojans, they hear the cry of a heron that flies on their right side. It is too dark for them to actually see the bird, but they interpret its cry as a good omen. In fact, the heron is sent by Athena to assure the two warriors of the success of their mission (X 274–277):

τοῖσι δὲ δεξιὸν ἦκεν ἐρωδιὸν ἐγγὺς ὁδοῖο
Παλλὰς Ἀθηναίη· τοὶ δ' οὐκ ἴδον ὀφθαλμοῖσι
νύκτα δι' ὀρφναίην, ἀλλὰ κλάγξαντος ἄκουσαν.
χαῖρε δὲ τῷ ὄρνιθ' Ὀδυσσεύς, ἠρᾶτο δ' Ἀθήνῃ·

and for them Pallas Athene sent forth on their right a heron,
hard by the way and though they saw it not
through the darkness of night, yet they heard its cry.

[49] In the past, book X had been usually thought to be a rhapsodic addition or a late composition. See e.g. the works of Fenik 1964, Hainsworth 1993 et. al. Few scholars considered it part of the *Iliad* in the past, e.g. Shewan 1911. Whether it was composed at the same time as the other books or not is, for the purpose of this paper, irrelevant. What matters is that as Dué & Ebbott 2010:13 argue, the night raid described in book X "is a traditional theme, with its own traditional language, subthemes, conventions, and poetics, but nonetheless part of the same system of oral poetry to which the entire *Iliad* belongs." See also Lord 1960:194, who suggests that both *Iliad* IX and X were orally composed within the same traditional poetic system and therefore should be considered equally "Homeric." It is hence safe to assume that Aeschylus knows of this book as part of the epic tradition that precedes him.

And Odysseus was glad at the omen, and made prayer to Athene.[50]

In the *Iliad*, Odysseus is glad to hear the heron (χαῖρε ᾽Οδυσσεύς), because the bird is a sign of his upcoming victory. In Aeschylus, the heron (fr. 275, 1) signifies the hero's death. Both sent by the gods, the epic heron foreshadows the favourable outcome of the mission, whereas the tragic one, consciously chosen by Aeschylus, marks Odysseus' demise.

Later in the *Iliad*, during the funeral games in honor of Patroclus (XXIII 771–783), Ajax and Odysseus engage in a speed race to win a silver bowl, part of the ransom Patroclus had received for Priam's son, Lycaon. The race is close, but Ajax is ahead until Odysseus prays to Athena to help him win. Athena intervenes and makes Ajax slip on the filth (ὄνθος) of the sacrificed bulls (XXIII 784–785). As a result, Odysseus outruns him and wins the race. Ajax's nostrils and mouth are filled with the filth of the bulls (ἐν δ' ὄνθου βοέου πλῆτο στόμα τε ῥῖνάς τε, XXIII 787) and he has to spit in order to be able to speak (ὄνθον ἀποπτύων, XXIII 791). It is an unflattering image for the epic warrior, whom Athena ridicules to help her favourite hero win. When he does speak, Ajax acknowledges that Athena caused him to fail, acting like a mother to Odysseus and helping him instead. Odysseus takes a victory he should not have won, by having a god cheat on his behalf. In Aeschylus, now, a different ὄνθος (fr. 275, 2) causes Odysseus the greatest defeat of his life, a painful, torturous death.[51]

It is important to notice that in both Iliadic episodes Odysseus prays to Athena, who always listens to his prayers and helps him. One might argue that after all the times Odysseus cheated through divine intervention both death and defeat, his dramatic fall from a gracious epic portrayal might be necessary for balance to finally be achieved. The tragic Odysseus is not only

[50] Trans. Murray 1924.

[51] There is very little doubt that Aeschylus alludes to this specific scene, since the word ὄνθος does not appear anywhere else in the epic. See Richardson 1993:256.

left unprotected by the gods, but he also must redeem himself for all the times his epic predecessor received their blessings. Aeschylus uses the elements of his epic triumphs against him; the heron that was once a herald of victory now becomes the carrier of the poison that will kill him, whereas the filth that once ensured his athletic victory now contains the spike that will lead to his final defeat.

### 2.6. Portraying positive episodes in a negative light

We already examined the methods Aeschylus uses to side-line and eventually undermine the epic Odysseus in the *Psychagogoi* and *Penelope*. Similar is the case with the last part of the trilogy, the *Ostologoi*. Aeschylus opts to portray positive epic episodes in a negative light, a method also employed at the *Psychagogoi*, where he twists the epic prophecy of a gentle death and presents instead one of an undignified and agonizing demise.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus' return to Ithaca is not followed by immediate glory. The king is mocked by the suitors while he is disguised as a beggar. In book xvii, for example, Antinous throws a footstool at Odysseus and hits him (xvii 462–463), angering the other suitors and causing Penelope to curse him. Odysseus is often attacked and sometimes mocked, but not ridiculed. In general, epic Odysseus gets to defend himself from the suitors and the insolent beggar, Iros, who insults him. In the *Ostologoi*, however, it seems that Odysseus fails to react to the humiliations he is subjected until he reveals who he is and kills the noble youth of Ithaca. The affronts contained in fr. 179 and 180 are so extreme that they encouraged some scholars to assume that the *Ostologoi* is in fact the satyr play of the tetralogy.[52]

[52] On the debate see Gantz 2007:59.

In the two surviving fragments of the tragedy (*TrGF* 3 179 and 180), Odysseus recounts the humiliation he suffered at the hands of Penelope's suitors. Odysseus is the speaker in both fragments, whose text can be reconstructed as follows:

< ΟΔ.>
Εὐρύμαχος οὗτος ἄλλος οὐδὲν ἡσσονας
ὕβριζ' ὑβρισμοὺς οὐκ ἐναισίους ἐμοί·
ἦν μὲν γὰρ αὐτῷ σκοπὸς ἀεὶ τοὐμὸν κάρα,
τοῦ δ' ἀγκυλητοῖς κοσσάβοις ἐπίσκοπος
< χ> ἐκτεμὼν ἡβῶσα χεὶρ ἐφίετο[53]

*TrGF* 3 179

<Odysseus>
Eurymachus here, another, brought no less
unseemly outrage upon me;
for he continually made my head his mark,
and at it, with bent-armed casts,
his vigorous hand kept aiming true.[54]

In book xviii of the *Odyssey*, Eurymachus, angered by the beggar's words, seizes a footstool and attempts to hurt Odysseus, who however manages to avoid being struck (xviii 390 ff.). In the first fragment of the *Ostologoi*, Eurymachus uses Odysseus' head as a target during a drinking

[53] For this fragment only, the text follows Lloyd-Jones's edition and not Radt's.

[54] Trans. Lloyd-Jones 1963.

game and is told to have repeatedly succeeded in offending him, without missing once (5). What he fails to do in epic, Eurymachus manages to do in tragedy.

Later in the *Odyssey*, during the dinner scene in book xx, an arrogant suitor, Ctessipus, throws a cow's hoof at Odysseus, but misses:

> ὣς εἰπὼν ἔῤῥιψε βοὸς πόδα χειρὶ παχείῃ,
> κείμενον ἐκ κανέοιο λαβών· ὁ δ' ἀλεύατ' Ὀδυσσεὺς
> ἦκα παρακλίνας κεφαλήν. μείδησε δὲ θυμῷ
> σαρδάνιον μάλα τοῖον [...]
>
> upon saying that he threw with strong hand the hoof of a cow,
> taking it up from the basket where it lay; but Odysseus avoided it
> with a quick turn of his head, and in his heart he smiled
> a right grim and bitter smile. [...][55]

The comparison with the second fragment of the *Ostologoi* is striking:

> <ΟΔ.>
> χ - ὅδ'ἔστιν, ὅς ποτ'ἀμφ'ἐμοὶ <u>βέλος</u>
> <u>γελωτοποιόν</u>, τὴν κάκοσμον οὐράνην,
> ἔρριψεν οὐδ'ἥμαρτε· περὶ δ'ἐμῷ κάρᾳ
> πληγεῖσ' ἐναυάγησεν ὀστρακουμένη
> χωρὶς μυρηρῶν <u>τευχέων</u>[56] πνέουσ' ἐμοί.

[55] Trans. Murray 1924, with few adjustments.

[56] My emphasis.

*TrGF* 3 180

< Odysseus>

There is the man who once hurled at me (nor did he miss his aim)

a missile that caused them all to laugh,

even the ill-smelling chamber-pot;

crashed about my head, it was shivered into shards,

breathing upon me an odour unlike that of unguent-jars.[57]

Odysseus explains that, unlike their epic ancestors, the suitors who attacked him did not miss (ἡβῶσα χεὶρ ἐφίετο 179, 5 and ἔρριψεν οὐδ'ἡμαρτε 180, 3). Aeschylus seems to recall the epic text to ''correct'' it by having the suitors aim right this time. In the epic poem, it is Odysseus who smiles after Ctessipus attempts to ridicule him (μείδησε), safe from the embarrassment and certain of his upcoming revenge. In the Aeschylean drama, it is the suitors who laugh at him (βέλος γελωτοποιόν), after the chamber pot is broken over his head. The unheroic use of vocabulary (βέλος, τευχέων) and the assaults against the king's head (179, 3 and 180, 3), i.e. the part of his body that is made to wear the crown, the symbol of his power, all contribute to the deconstruction of Odysseus' epic prestige.

Overall, the description of a king whose head becomes the target during a drinking game (fr. 179) as well as that of one who passively lets an intruder break a chamber pot over his head (fr. 180, 3–5) is highly uncharacteristic of the Odysseus we know from the epic poetry. However necessary it may be for Odysseus to not reveal his identity before his plan for killing the suitors is set in motion, the extent of the ridicule he has to suffer is excessive. Aeschylus consciously portrays a positive epic episode, Odysseus' return to Ithaca, in a negative light; He

[57] Trans. Lloyd-Jones 1963.

has the suitors succeed in their failed epic attempts to humiliate Odysseus and thus takes away from him all the victories the epic poet had granted him. In the *Ostologoi*, Aeschylus humbles the king and makes him recount how he became the laughingstock of the suitors, in a way that forces him to relive the degradation for a second time. Furthermore, even at the end of the Aeschylean trilogy, the killing of the abusive suitors and the subsequent restoration of peace in Ithaca probably bring little joy to Odysseus. The prophecy of his disgraceful death hangs over his head, making his reinstatement to his pre-war status a less triumphant one than the one in the epic.

## 3. Conclusions

In his trilogy concerning the Odyssean *nostos*, Aeschylus deconstructs the epic hero and the world from which he comes. The tragic poet deprives Odysseus of his best epic qualities. The heroic traits that made him so special in the epic saga, namely his bravery, cunningness, and endurance, are all downgraded and challenged in the tragic trilogy. Aeschylus employs various mechanisms and techniques through which he successfully deconstructs the epic hero and presents a new Odysseus that hardly resembles the one the epic traditions have created.

Aeschylus reshapes both the characters and the setting of the Odyssean saga in order to detach them from the glory of the epic world. In the *Psychagogoi*, the poet reframes the trip to the Underworld against a less dangerous background and puts Odysseus in the side-lines by having a chorus of professional necromancers take up the leading part during the perilous quest. Aeschylus then inverts the epic prophecy concerning Odysseus' death, by changing his demise into an unheroic and undignified one, unlike the two epic deaths we know of. Lastly, Aeschylus imitates and at the same time undermines the epic imagery and style, a process which results in the creation of conflicting images that both recall and negate the epic world. In *Penelope*, Aeschylus continues to marginalize Odysseus by presumably having his loyal wife

be the protagonist of the drama. He makes the killing of the suitors the background of the action instead of the central theme of the play. The last part of the trilogy, the *Ostologoi*, involves the portrayal of positive epic episodes in a negative light, since Odysseus' arrival in Ithaca and the abusive behaviour he is faced with is portrayed in an excessively unflattering way. Finally, the unheroic use of epic vocabulary throughout the trilogy contributes to the further deconstruction of the heroic values and traits of the epic Odysseus. Overall, Aeschylus presents an Odysseus that is not much more impressive than a regular man; he is outshone by other characters, his epic achievements are no longer presented as great feats, he is humiliated and brought to his knees by gods and humans. He is, finally, defeated.

Understandably, the highly fragmentary nature of the Aeschylean text does not allow us to fully support the above-mentioned assumptions. Hence, the full extent of the intertextual dialogue between Aeschylus and the epic poetry cannot be estimated. Furthermore, evaluating the trilogy in the full context of 5$^{th}$ century reception of Odysseus would require a longer effort, a worthy goal that calls for further research. It should nonetheless be mentioned that the normalisation of heroes is a continuous trend in 5th century tragedy, where poets put emphasis on the limits imposed by human nature. Scholars so far have chosen to explain Odysseus' portrayal by Aeschylus in agreement with this trend.[58] However, Aeschylus' portrayal might also be explained as an attempt to give the myth a serious twist. The epic Odysseus, the clever man who never experiences defeat and has divine support in everything he does, must finally pay back for all the times gods tipped the scale in his favour. His humbling fall from grace might be necessary for ethical balance to be restored. Thus, the tragic

[58] See Mikellidou 2016:341 *pace* Stanford 1968:105 who suggests that Aeschylus dislikes the traits of Odysseus' character and therefore presents him unfavourably in his plays.

Odysseus is now unprotected by the gods, not because either of them are evil but because he finds himself in need of redemption due to what the epic Odysseus did.

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