

# CRITICAL INSIGHTS

## Violence in Literature

Editor

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# The Foundations of Violence in Ancient Greek Literature

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Thomas Palaima

In spring of 431 BCE, months before the beginning of what we may justly call the first long, continuous, and two-parted world war in Western history, the so-called Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) between the city-state of Athens and her subject allies and the Spartans and their allies, many thousands of adult male citizens of Athens sat together in the theater of Dionysus beneath the south wall of the acropolis and took in the play we now call Euripides' *Medea*. The preceding fifty years had seen almost constant localized warfare in the greater Greek world. Athenian citizens were major participants in that widespread recurring violence (Palaima, "Civilian Knowledge").

The *Medea* was the first of the set of four plays by Euripides produced on that given day and the only one to survive. The title it is known by rightly identifies the character who is the focus of the play: Medea, a non-Greek princess from the furthest eastern limits of the Black Sea, who, as she herself admits in the play, has betrayed her father and fatherland for love of the Greek adventurer-hero Jason. Medea kills her own younger brother and cuts his body into chunks of bloody flesh that she, then even more sacrilegiously (if we can put such matters on a sliding scale), flings from Jason's ship into the sea, in order to slow the pursuit of her country's royal fleet. When Jason and Medea reach Jason's home city of Iolcus in northern Greece, Medea tricks the daughters of Jason's uncle—who has usurped power from Jason—into killing their own father in an act of rejuvenation magic that Medea makes sure will fail. Jason and Medea then flee to Corinth where King Creon gives them refuge.

The play is set in Corinth. It lays out for us how and why this exotic, feared, socially isolated, non-Greek woman—a murderess who deals in the dark arts of magic—decides to kill her children and then does kill them. The trigger event is the news that Jason will

abandon Medea and their two children, in order to secure material well-being and a renewal of his faded fame and prestige by marrying a young princess, daughter of the king.

A definitive scholarly commentary on the *Medea*, written by Denys L. Page seventy-five years ago, just before the outbreak of another horrific world war, had this to say about the key action in the play:

The murder of children, caused by jealousy and anger against their father, is mere brutality; if it moves us at all, it does so towards incredulity and horror. Such an act is outside our experience, we—and the fifth century Athenian—know nothing of it. (xiv)

The abominable violence of a mother killing her children is not outside our experience, and I doubt whether it was outside the experience of the ancient Athenians. The larger question, however, is what set of cultural conditions made the ancient Athenian audience and still makes modern readers and audiences want to know how and why a mother could be brought into a psychological state and mindset in which killing her own children with her own hands becomes, to her, what she has to do.

As with elements of the Old Testament, the earliest recorded literary texts in ancient Greek were songs from a long-standing oral tradition that were selected, edited, and written down in order to ensure their preservation. From the time when alphabetic writing was first introduced, around the eighth century BCE, down through the full development in fifth-century classical Athens of many of the literary genres, especially poetic forms that we still consider canonical, Greek literature is mainly a public performance literature embedded in a still primarily oral culture. And it is run through with violence.

This is true even if we leave aside the two famous early epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, attributed to Homer. The two great Homeric song poems lay out, with an almost clinical accuracy, the hard realities—psychological, physical, emotional, and practical—of what human beings go through in practicing and experiencing violence: when state-sanctioned and state-organized armies are

away at war; when the inhabitants of cities and countries are fighting in defense of their territories, homes, families, and ways of life (the ancient Greek *politeia*, from the word *polis*, was used by the ancient Greeks for their peculiar form of city and is related to our word “politics,” that is, “matters having to do with living in a *polis*”); and when soldiers return home to their communities, where life has gone on without them and where even their closest friends and family members have not shared the sufferings and hardships they, as combat veterans, bring back hard-wired in their memories. These are aspects of violence we still want and need to know about as individuals and members of families and larger social groups when and after our country is at war.<sup>1</sup> So it is no wonder that the Homeric epics have survived and are translated anew generation after generation.

Violent acts and their immediate effects and after-effects, direct and indirect, on human beings consume the lengthy song poems—the *Iliad* is 15,693 lines long, the *Odyssey* 12,110. In the *Iliad*, over two hundred combat deaths are described in gruesomely graphic detail. They are so numerous and so grisly that one critic remarks, “in terms of sheer body count, most of those that perish in battle seem to have been created simply in order for others to kill them” (Marks 300).

In the *Iliad*, the goddess Hera offers up for annihilation the innocent citizens of the three friendliest cities (Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae) where she is worshiped dutifully and piously (Homer, *Iliad* 4.50–54). Agamemnon, commander-in-chief of the Greek forces attacking Troy, declares his aim to exterminate the Trojans as a people by killing all the males in the city, even male fetuses in their mothers’ wombs (Homer, *Iliad* 6.51–65). Priam, king of Troy, conjures up a nightmare image of what will befall him once his son Hector is killed by Achilles in combat. The very dogs, to which Priam once fed scraps from his table, will feast upon and mutilate the genitals of his corpse (Homer, *Iliad* 22.66–76).

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, the returning king, slaughters the men who consumed his resources in his long absence and hangs the female servants who took pleasure with them. Earlier in the

cave of the Cyclops, Polyphemus grabs several of Odysseus' men and smashes their heads open upon the rocks in the same violently matter-of-fact way that, Homer notes in a simile, human beings kill unwanted puppies in a new litter (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.289–290). In the same episode, we get what is to us a ghastly, detailed description of what happens to an eye—in this case, the giant eye of a Cyclops—when it is pierced by a sharpened and fire-hardened wooden staff (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.387–394). It is worthwhile thinking about what sensibilities, cultural values and histories, life experiences, and personal expectations the audiences, who received such violent scenes during their realization in recitation (for song poems) or enactment (for plays), must have had.

The hero of the *Iliad* is Achilles. His name means “he who causes hurtful woe to the male fighting force” (*akhi-* from Greek *akhos*; see our word “ache”; *-lleus* ultimately from *lāos*). As the story of the *Iliad* unfolds, we see that Achilles causes countless sufferings for soldiers in both the enemy Trojan *lāos* (army) and his own Greek *lāos* (army). The hero of the *Odyssey* is Odysseus. He is, as the Coen and Stanley brothers played with his name in the soundtrack to the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the “man of constant sorrow,” literally “the man who *has to do with* painful sorrow.”<sup>2</sup> These two heroes enact what their names signify through violence, what Simone Weil in her classic essay on the *Iliad* calls “the use of force” (Holoka).

Ancient Greek mythmakers (the word *muthos* means simply “something uttered,” i.e., what we call a “story”) did not shy away from describing brutally violent acts. They told stories that describe extreme violence, which causes severe psychological and physical trauma, including macabre forms of death. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, a mother with her aristocratic women friends, while in the ecstasy (literally *ekstasis*, emotionally and psychologically “standing outside yourself”) of Dionysiac ritual in the mountainous countryside, tears apart her own son, the young King Pentheus, whose name comes from the root *path-* meaning “suffer” (see our English words “pathos,” “pathetic” and “sympathy”), and fixes his severed head on a pike. They think they have killed and beheaded a lion. She and



her fellow celebrants, carrying his mounted head, parade exultantly into the horrified city (*polis*, see *politeia* above) where the return to organized communal life brings them back to their senses.

The violence in Greek literature—excluding, hereafter, war literature *per se*—is wielded almost indiscriminately. Its targets include noble and reverent men and women, the old and the young, the strong and the weak, the helpless remnants of the fighting force of the hero Odysseus and newborn puppies, those who have sinned and those who are pure and righteous and helpless.

The violence often cascades and careens. In Euripides' play *Herakles*, performed in 430 BCE, a year after *Medea*, when the Peloponnesian War had begun and a devastating plague was breaking out in Athens, murders are planned and executed in mafia-like power struggles between the families of the hero Herakles and the usurping ruler Lycus. Put the word “don” in front of these two names, and it is easier to understand that we are seeing a clan blood feud play out between the family of Don Herakles and the families of two other ancient mafia godfathers. The violence here, however, is compounded by what our society would now diagnose as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) affecting Herakles (Mercouri), and it is mixed in with intra-family violence and what human beings conceive of as divinely sanctioned killing.

Lycus sets in motion the slaughter of Megara, the wife of Herakles and daughter of the legitimate king, Creon, and their three children. When they take refuge at an altar of Zeus, Lycus orders a pyre to be built around them and Megara and her three children to be burned alive. Herakles returns from a harrowing and traumatizing labor in Hades—his task was to bring the hound of hell, Cerberus, out of the underworld. He kills Lycus, but is then driven mad at the instigation of the goddess Hera, wife of Zeus, for no better reason than that she has always disliked Herakles. Iris, the messenger of the gods, and the *daimōn* (see below) Madness come down from Olympus to effect her plan. In his deranged state of mind, Herakles thinks he is killing Eurystheus, another hated power rival, who had set him on his twelve labors, and Eurystheus' children. Instead, he kills his own wife Megara and their three children.

All this takes place in Thebes, a city of violence from the time it was founded:

Thebes, where dragon teeth  
Were broadcast and sprouted full-grown fighters  
Berserk to kill each other.

Ares kept a few back  
From the slaughter and they put down roots—their children's  
Children grew up here in this city Kadmos  
Built from the ground up.

(Euripides, *Herakles* 8–13, translation Sleight)

We sample the murderous fury that consumes Herakles when, having returned, he declares to Megara and the chorus of old men of Thebes what he intends to do.

As for me, for the matter is now in my hands,  
first I'll go and tear down, foundations and all, the palace halls  
of this new self-installed ruling family. I'll slice off his fucking  
head  
and throw it to the dogs to drag about like a chew toy. As for  
the Thebans,  
whoever was one of us, whoever we treated well and went over  
to them,  
I'll bring them down with this here unbeatable club of mine.  
As for the rest of them, I'll spray arrows all over the fucking  
place  
and fill the entire sacred Ismenus river with corpses of all  
kinds,  
an all out slaughter, and the clear spring waters of Dirce, I'll  
make them run blood red.  
For who deserves my protection more than my wife, my kids  
and my old man.

(Euripides, *Herakles* 565–575, translation mine)

Herakles' acts in obtaining vengeance will include decapitation, sacrilegiously defiling a corpse, and rampant clubbing to death of all Thebans who in any way associated themselves with the usurper's

family. He'll then create a bloodbath with his rapid-fire bow, a kind of ancient Bushmaster model XM-15. The slaughter it causes will pollute the sacred river Ismenus by choking it with dead bodies. And it will make what the Greeks literally call the "white" waters of the equally sacred Dirce spring and stream flow blood red.

Well before Alfred Hitchcock in his film *Psycho* (1960) orchestrated, with the body and eye of actress Janet Leigh in a scene set in a Bates Motel bathroom, the violent choreography of knife blade, shower head, tub drain, and shower curtain, Aeschylus in his tragedy *Agamemnon* has Agamemnon's unfaithful and long murderously hateful wife and queen Clytemnestra—hateful because Agamemnon had killed their daughter Iphigeneia in blood sacrifice to the goddess Artemis at the start of the Trojan expedition, in order to gain fair winds for the sailing of his armada—fawningly seduce him, on his triumphal return from Troy, into entering into the palace at the top of the site of Mycenae. There, she kills him with knife blow after knife blow in the royal bathtub (a rare luxury even in fifth-century Athens).

Clytemnestra comes out on stage afterwards, spattered with his blood, and describes her act in an orgasmic ecstasy:

I stand here where I struck, and the deed is done.  
This was my work, I do not deny it.  
I cast my vast net, tangling around him,  
wrapping him in a robe rich in evil.  
I struck him twice and he screamed twice,  
his limbs buckled and his body came crashing down,  
and as he lay there, I struck him again, a third blow  
for underworld Zeus, the savior of the dead.  
He collapsed, gasping out his last breath,  
his life ebbing away, spitting spurts of blood,  
which splattered down on me like dark sanguine dew.  
And I rejoiced just as the newly sown earth rejoices,  
When Zeus send the nourishing rain on the young crops.

(Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1380–1392, translation Meineck)

Clytemnestra shows pride in her plan and its execution. She has finally outwitted and put to death arguably the most powerful man in all of Greece, the commander-in-chief of the allied forces that took the citadel of Troy. She revels in giving the details of the three knife blows, as if she is a holy priestess blood-sacrificing a male victim in full prime in long-delayed compensation for the young daughter whom ten years before, Agamemnon, husband and father, had ritually slain (slitting her throat with a knife) before she had even reached marrying age. The blood that pulses from Agamemnon's wounds, wounds Clytemnestra has made, spurts upon her like refreshingly welcome bloody dew, a morning mist that falls upon and nourishes young plants growing in the field. No one who did not understand the psychological states of people committing violent acts could have written so macabrely vivid and riveting a passage. Aeschylus was a combat veteran. He had fought at the plain and beach of Marathon during the first Persian War (490 BCE), the Normandy of ancient Athenian history (Palaima, "When War").

How and why was extreme violence so prevalent in Greek literature? Why was it depicted so graphically in plays that were publicly performed at large-scale annual ritual dramatic festivals in the *polis* of Athens and songs that were publicly sung at other public festival competitions? What atmosphere, social norms, and worldviews made violence in literature commonplace? Why does it fascinate us now?

Violence had to be of interest and pleasing to the audience, or else the playwrights and singers would not have chosen violent themes for their tragedies and song poems. They were, after all, in serious public competitions and, to focus on tragedy, the subject matter of a play and its treatment were crucial for its success in performance. A chief social motivation for good behaviors or excellent achievements among men in Greek culture was the *kleos*, "communal fame," that they would win by performing well in what they were obliged to do as soldiers, citizens, athletes, and what we would call politicians—and in the simultaneously civic and religious song, dance and theatrical competitions put on within their *poleis* (plural of *polis*). Archetypically, Achilles was willing to trade a long

life in enjoyable and undisturbed obscurity for a short life with *kleos* as a soldier and field commander. For the tragic playwrights, victory at the festivals was serious business to a degree that we cannot fully comprehend.

One set of clues about the cultural environment for Greek literature of violence comes from what we know about Greek religious thought from the central text called Hesiod's *Theogony* (*Birth of the Gods*). Other insights come from Hesiod's *Works and Days*. In the *Works and Days*, Hesiod examines through a moral filter the history of Greek culture and the moral and ethical codes and behavior patterns that prevail in contemporary Greek society. The *Theogony* is generally compared, as a creation myth, to the book of *Genesis*. The *Works and Days* has elements that are parallel to biblical parainetic or morality literature.

As with the cultures of Egypt, Israel, and the Near and Middle East, the supernatural world that the Greeks, from 800 to 400 BCE, posited as affecting, if not fully controlling, human affairs was permeated with violence. The chief gods in these cultures were essentially "warrior kings" (Hiebert 876–880), who used violence or the threat of violence to maintain their dominance, to subject other forces (both spiritual entities and what we would consider natural forces within the physical universe) to their wills, and to keep the *kosmos* (the organized and orderly world) stable. The violence on high, as it were, reflected the conditions of power relationships in Greek culture of the period—recall here how violently Herakles exerts his power in the bloodbath he envisions and how Clytemnestra achieves her vengeance by using a bath as a sacrificial altar. Violence was wielded among the gods to establish and maintain a stable *status quo* under Zeus. This served as a paradigm for human beings who hoped that otherwise unattainable justice would prevail on earth through at least the threat of violent intervention from the divine sphere.

The *Works and Days* and *Theogony* of Hesiod, both song poems of about 1,000 lines in length using the same artificial dialect and dactylic hexameter verse form as the Homeric poems, reflected the view of natural and supernatural worlds imbued with violence

that prevailed throughout Greek culture from the time when these poems coalesced into their present forms ca. 700 BCE through the following three centuries.

The ancient Greeks in historical times, and even earlier, so far as we can tell from the economic documents (Palaima, “Linear B Sources”) and depictions on wall paintings and man-made artifacts from the major palatial centers of the late Greek Bronze Age (e.g., Pylos, Mycenae, Thebes, Tiryns, Knossos) ca. 1600–1200 BCE, were polytheistic and held a shared belief in an eventually fixed pantheon of deities, who dwelled on Mount Olympus. In both works of Hesiod, however, the focus on an all-powerful storm god named Zeus, who can violently force natural and supernatural powers to his will, verges on monotheism.

The *Works and Days* opens with a short hymn to the Muses. They themselves, Hesiod tells us, sing in celebration about:

the will of great Zeus.  
Easy for Him to build up the strong  
And tear the strong down.  
Easy for Him to diminish the mighty  
And magnify the obscure.  
Easy for Him to straighten the crooked  
And wither the proud.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 6–12, translation Lombardo)

The Muses’ own song makes clear that justice (*dikē*) ultimately resides in Zeus, a great hope for mortal human beings whose lives, as Hesiod describes prevailing conditions, are generally worse than Thomas Hobbes’ famous description. Most human beings in rural areas in the early seventh century BCE lived in “continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man [was] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 76).

No small wonder, then, that the first principle of society that Hesiod takes up in the *Works and Days* is *eris*, which has a range of related meanings: “political or domestic strife,” “conflict in battle,” and most neutrally “a spirit of competition.” In Homer, *Eris* is personified as a *daimōn*, a supernatural force that “distributes”

whatever powers it controls to mortals for good or for ill. *Daimones* (the plural form) are not what we would call full-fledged “gods,” but they affect human behaviors, lives, and societies. *Eris*, as a *daimōn*, is a sister of the dreaded god of war Ares. *Eris* drives men on to war with one another.

Hesiod soon takes up why life is so difficult for human beings, why we have to strive and struggle, often with no real gain. At one time:

the human race  
had lived off the land without any trouble, no hard work,  
No sickness or pain that the Fates give to men  
(and when men are in misery they show their age quickly).  
(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 111–114, translation Lombardo)

But because Prometheus stole fire and brought it to mortals, Zeus ordered other divine beings (Hephaestus, Athena, Aphrodite, Hermes, the Graces, Persuasion and the Seasons) to construct for mortal men an irresistible “evil thing” (*kakon*), in fact their *very own* “evil thing,” in which they would delight, embracing it in love. This evil thing was the first woman, infused by Aphrodite with “painful desire and knee-weakening anguish,” supplied by Hermes with a “bitchy mind and a cheating heart” and “lies and wheedling words,” and built by Hephaestus with a “face like an immortal goddess” and “the figure like a beautiful desirable virgin’s” (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 77–102). Thus was Pandora brought into being. Her name is understood either as meaning “all-giver” of gifts, good and bad, or herself “all-gifted” with attributes by this consortium of divine designers and manufacturers.

Daily life was so bleak, hard, and randomly violent that what Pandora lets loose upon the world is not a small perfume jar, cosmetic case, or jewelry box of evils, as in many later and modern European depictions, but an entire large clay storage jar (*pithos*) full of *kēdea lugra* (literally “miserable or mournful troubles,” with the words here having the full force of the roots on which they are built: “misery” and “mourning”) (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 115–116). A few lines later, Hesiod emphasizes that there are *muria lugra*, or

“tens of thousands of miseries”—a “myriad” is the highest number for which the Greeks had a word—now wandering throughout the world (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 121–122, li. 100). The verb “wander” is important because it emphasizes the randomness with which violent evil can strike human beings, a notion that Herodotus, the first major Greek historian, almost three centuries later picks up on in his encapsulation of what it means to be a human being: *pan ho anthrōpos sumphorē*, “a human being is entirely a matter of chance coincidence.” The very period in which Hesiod is living and singing shares in the conditions he puts *in illo tempore*, in mythic time. The earth is full of evils (*kaka* “bad things”). The sea is full of evils, too. And diseases voicelessly prey in silence upon human beings, day and night.

This prompts Hesiod then to tell us how the hard times in the world came about. It is here we may note the centrality of violence as a key to the wretched and disordered state of humankind. The story Hesiod tells, an adaptation of Near Eastern models, is the Myth of the Five Ages (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 129–234).

Human beings once dwelled in a Golden Age created for them by the “immortals dwelling in heavenly halls” in the time when Kronos—the major male Greek deity, whom Zeus, son of Kronos, overthrew—was dominant. This period was without diseases, without hard labors and without the pains of work. There was no getting old. Grain-giving cropland produced food abundantly of its own accord. Human beings did not go to war or murder one another, but they lived congenially at ease in fine cities and peacefully shared their products among each other. They were rich in healthy livestock, and they were *philoī*, “friends,” in the narrow Greek sense, with the blessed gods.

A *philos*, “friend,” is someone with whom one shares a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship. A common Greek tagline in tragedies and other works of literature bearing on the nature of friendship and the realities of living in Greece is that the best thing that one can do in life is “help your friends and harm your enemies.” In the hyper-pragmatic Greek moral world, however, this is dependent upon both parties in a friendship maintaining the



capability to be of benefit to each other. A downturn in health or personal fortunes or a wrong turn in choosing social alliances could turn former friends into non-friends or enemies. That everyone was a friend in the Golden Age shows that it is a true Never-never Land, an impossible condition to maintain in the real world that human beings continue to inhabit. In the real world, violence and sheer bad luck disrupt peaceful, and what we would call healthy, relationships.

This paradise of sorts came to an end. Hesiod remarks that the human beings of this Golden Age have become now themselves holy and good *daimones*. These Golden-Age *daimones* act as guardians of human beings and do their best to ward off evils, safeguard just acts, and “repay criminal acts.” Note what these three functions reveal about the non-paradisiacal outlook on human society of the audience for Hesiod’s song poems. For them the everyday expectation is that evils are prevalent, justice is endangered, and retribution needs to be sought for criminal acts. The guardian spirits from the golden age are givers of “abundance,” a true benefaction in an environment that yields the basic necessities of life begrudgingly and only when compelled to do so by continual hard work, human ingenuity and good luck with the weather, the environment and the dispositions and actions of other human beings in your family, clan and broader community.

The human beings of the succeeding Silver Age took a long time to mature and then lived short adult lives. Far from being *philoï* of the blessed gods, they had no desire even to attend upon the gods (*therapeuein*, cf. English “therapy”) or to make sacrifices on the holy altars dedicated to the gods, pious behavior that Hesiod says is *themis* (a “set down law”) for human beings who act according to established customs. But the fatal flaw of the humans of the Silver Age was that they could not keep themselves from *atasthalos hubris*, “reckless or wicked violent action” (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 155–156, li. 134).

*Hubris*, or in its Latinized form *hybris*, is the Greek value word that stands for various forms of violence that has social consequences. There is no generally accepted etymology for the word, though one attractive proposal derives it from two roots that mean “high” and

“heavy.” It, then, literally means something that defies or violates the law of nature, whereby objects that have weight fall down under the force of gravity—i.e., something that is heavy should not, and actually cannot, be high. *Hubris* generally has the sense of violating a set boundary or the established rules of the physical world, human society, or prescribed behavior towards the gods. For this reason, it is used in modern English to describe hybrid plants and animals. In producing hybrids, human thought and skill have defied the laws of nature.

Angry with their impious acts, Kronos does away with men of the Silver Age. His successor as “warrior king” of the gods, Zeus, creates men of the Bronze Age (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 164–177). These human beings epitomize violence. They are characterized as a race (*genos*, see our English word “genocide”) that is *deinon*, “terrifying,” and *obrimon*, “mighty, strong.” We are told these men were preoccupied with *hubries* (plural), “wantonly violent acts,” and *stonoenta*, “acts that are literally made of groans, wailings, lamentations.” They kill each other off and death takes them, although they are *ekpagloi*, “frighteningly terrifying.”

Next came a “divine race of heroes” made by Zeus (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 180–194). This race behaves more justly and nobly. They are even called demigods (*hēmitheoi*). They precede the race of human beings of Hesiod’s own time, the Iron Age. This stage is a clear interpolation into the scheme of generations of human beings in steady decline and designated by metals of decreasing value. The cycles of Greek myths about heroes made the addition of this phase necessary in order to make sense of traditional history.

The heroes are killed off, however, through the violence of evil war (*polemos kakos*) and the dread battle cry or din of war (*phulopis ainē*) in such monumental war adventures as the *Seven Against Thebes* (the prototype for Kurosawa’s *The Seven Samurai* and the Hollywood western *The Magnificent Seven*) and the Trojan War.

With this background of the negative evolution of human beings, Hesiod arrives at the Iron Age in which he lives. His view of the Iron Age (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 200–234) is violently apocalyptic. Here, even toil and labor have an inherent violence

that ceaselessly, day and night, wears down and destroys men. Like an Old Testament prophet, Hesiod proclaims that Zeus will destroy men of this age on moral grounds. There will be a dissolution of all the social connections and interactions that make society function and life worthwhile.

Fathers will be at odds with their sons. Guests will be disconnected from hosts. The so-called *xenia* relationship between arriving outsiders and unrelated heads of households reduced and curtailed violence by obliging strangers to behave respectfully towards one another in codified roles as guests and hosts.

In Hesiod's Iron Age, brothers will be at odds with each other and children will disrespect parents once the parents have become old. Cities will be stormed and sacked. Men who respect oaths, adhere to justice and are just plain good will be out of favor. Evil-doers and men who are "violence incarnate" will be held in high esteem. The end game will see the two socially significant *daimones* named *Aidōs* (social shame that assures right, proper, and good behavior) and *Nemesis* (retribution for wrongdoing) abandon the earth, leaving behind *algea lugra* ("mournful pains") for death-beset human beings. In the end, there will be no defense at all against evil:

There go Shame and Nemesis. And horrible suffering  
Will be left for mortal men, and no defense against evil.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 233–234, translation Lombardo)

At this point, Hesiod offers his most famous story, besides the tale of Pandora, in the *Works and Days*. The tale of the hawk and the nightingale (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 235–245) is a stunningly raw description of the law of tooth-and-claw violence. Its only saving grace is that its message that "might makes right irrelevant" just might persuade the corrupt petty kinglets who wield power and authority in backwater territories in Hesiod's time to be fearful that Zeus might assert his power over them. In fact, Hesiod says explicitly that it is a "fable for kings" (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 235), i.e., a story that they need to think about.

The hawk says to the nightingale, as he flies on high with her in his talons:

No sense in your crying. You're in the grip of real strength now.  
And you'll go where I take you, songbird or not.  
I'll make a meal of you if I want, or I might let you go.  
Only a fool struggles against those who are stronger.  
He will not win and he suffers pains in addition to disgrace.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 240–244, translation Lombardo)

Indeed, Hesiod summons up an apocalyptic vision of what the warrior sky god Zeus, dispenser and protector of Justice, will bring to pass for human beings who behave violently and lawlessly.

But for those who live for violence and vice,  
Zeus, son of Kronos, broad-browed god, decrees  
A just penalty, and often a whole city suffers  
For one bad man and his damn fool schemes.  
The son of Kronos sends them disaster from heaven,  
Famine and plague, and the folk wither away,  
Women stop bearing children, whole families  
Die off, by Zeus' Olympian will. Or another time  
He might lay low their army, or tumble down  
Their Walls, or sink all their ships at sea.

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 276–285, translation Lombardo)

The *Theogony* of Hesiod reinforces in the divine sphere the violence and instability that in the *Works and Days*, after the golden age, have pervaded the human sphere. In the *Theogony's* scheme, one epoch ruled by a chief male deity succeeds the next. Kronos, the youngest son of the earth mother Gaea and the first supreme male god Ouranos (the vault of the sky), in complicity with his mother, castrates his father. As we might now expect, Hesiod describes the scene in all its gloriously gory splendor:

From his dark hiding-place, the son reached out  
With his left hand, while with his right he swung  
The fiendishly long and jagged sickle, pruning the genitals

Of his own father with one swoop and tossing them  
Behind him, where they fell to no small effect.  
Earth soaked up all the bloody drops that spurted out,  
And as the seasons went by she gave birth to the Furies  
And to great Giants gleaming in full armor, spears in hand.  
(Hesiod, *Theogony* 179–186, translation Lombardo)

Later, Zeus, with the assistance of three fantastically powerful, early-born monsters known as the *Hekatonkheires*, the “Hundred-Handers,” comes to power in an all-out war against the monstrous Titans, who were born from Ouranos before his castration. Zeus unleashes his own violence to subdue opposing supernatural forces and demonstrate his power to one and all:

And now Zeus no longer held back his strength.  
His lungs seethed with anger and he revealed  
All his power. He charged from the sky, hurtling  
Down from Olymp[us] in a flurry of lightning,  
Hurling thunderbolts one after another, right on target,  
From his massive hand, a whirlwind of holy flame.  
(Hesiod, *Theogony* 690–695, translation Lombardo)

Yet mortal human beings still lived in the world that Hesiod, Homer, Herodotus, and the tragic playwrights preserve for us. It is a violent world in which:

. . . Night bore hateful Doom and black Fate  
And Death and Sleep and the brood of Dreams.

And deadly Night bore Nemesis too, more misery  
For mortals; and after her, Deception and Friendship  
And ruinous Old Age, and hard-hearted Eris.  
And hateful Eris bore agonizing Toil,  
Forgetfulness, Famine and tearful Pains,  
Battles and Fights, Murders and Manslaughters,  
Quarrels, Lying Words and Words Disputatious,  
Lawlessness and Recklessness.  
(Hesiod, *Theogony* 211–212, 223–230, translation Lombardo)

This is the world the ancient Greeks learned of and knew from their central enculturating texts. They knew and feared that sons could kill their fathers and vice versa. They knew about incest, fratricide, frenzied mass killing, and infanticide. They knew a mother could kill her children. They explored the circumstances, conditions, inner psychological state, and triggering events that could cause a mother to kill her children. And in Aristotle's view, what they witnessed aroused in them pity and fear, and it then somehow purified or distilled those natural emotions surrounding their reality-based anxieties.

Euripides' *Medea* appeals to us now, not as an unrealistic horror film, but because we, along with the ancient Greeks, understand that the world is a violent place and it pays for us to know what leads to violent acts that only seem to have been ruled out by strong social, religious, educational, and legal principles and taboos.

The play offers a stunning psychological portrait of a powerful woman brought by powerful erotic emotions into a position of isolation and powerlessness in a culture not her own, but one she chose, while betraying every important social link to her own culture: fatherland, father, and brother. Medea is a woman with strong powers in the black arts and with strong passions. She has a strong love for her children. She has religiously deep feelings of oath-bound love for the now middle-aged Greek adventurer hero Jason, whom she considers her husband. She is a woman betrayed by a shell of a hero, an anxious middle-aged man looking now for comfort and position, trading his reputation, his *kleos*, for security and status. Jason is a man capable of believing his own lies.

Like so many ancient Greek texts, Euripides' *Medea* uses violence to make us see who we are as human beings and how artificial the limits on our violent instincts and actions are. *Medea* helps us not to tell so many lies about human violence and not to trust fully in the lies we do tell.

## Notes

1. For more on this issue, see Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*.

2. See our English word “anodyne.”

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