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‘What yoke of necessity have I fallen under!’

*Aidōs, ‘perfection’, and ‘debt’ as
correspondences between ‘Iphigenia
at Aulis’ and ‘The Killing of a
Sacred Deer’*

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Summary

In this thesis, I interpret the dialogue between Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia at Aulis* (5th century BC, henceforth *IA*) and Yorgos Lanthimos' film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017, henceforth *TK*). The research question is: how does the characters' approach to the supposed external factors of *aidōs*, 'perfection', and 'debt' connect the tragic narratives of *Iphigenia at Aulis* and its reception *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*?

I use a methodological framework consisting of corresponsive reading and emotion studies. Corresponsive reading, originally developed by Heynders (2006) as a method for comparative poetry analysis yet also applicable to comparative reception studies in general, consists of four phases. The first phase is determining the impression a text makes on its reader. The second and third phases, which happen simultaneously, are close reading and spatio-temporal contextualisation (in the author's other work or in the oeuvre of another author) to ground the impression. Finally, the correspondences between various texts are interpreted. Additionally, I use emotion studies in ancient literature as described by Cairns (2008) and the mood-cue approach developed by Smith (2013). Cairns' method entails analysing emotion words (*aidōs* and related terms), emotion as expressed through language (e.g. expressions of shame), and descriptions of the physical manifestations of emotions (e.g. kneeling out of respect). Smith explains that in a film, so-called emotive cues (all audiovisual signs in a film, ranging from the actors' facial expressions to editing choices) construct its overall mood, a predisposition to a certain (set of) emotion(s). I analyse the following emotive cues: physicality (body language and the representation of bodies in space through camera work), speech (what is said), and deliverance (how it is said).

In *IA*, the characters' fixation on social, moral, religious, and gender norms, and their volatility stand out. Furthermore, they are either highly emotional or distant, and the play itself features many ironic passages. Consequently, my impression is that *IA* criticises too zealous adherence to rules. Regarding *TK*, I combine my own impressions with reviews. The camera work is intrusive and the characters' verbal and physical behaviour is mostly stiff and emotionless, which results in an artificial or hyper-realistic style. The combination of dark and silly (sexual) humour, the unclear message, and the vague connection with *IA* create an uncomfortable viewing experience. After exploring these impressions through close reading and grounding them in Euripides' and Lanthimos' oeuvre, I conclude the following. *IA*'s characters hide behind *aidōs* to avoid having to face the responsibility and horrible consequences of their actions and indecisiveness. In *TK*, the characters cling to 'perfection'

and 'debt' to the same end. Although both sets of characters act as if these external factors leave them no choice, Euripides and Lanthimos show that they place themselves under a yoke of necessity. When read together, then, *IA* and *TK* evoke questions about the essence of morals, who or what determines their meaning, and humans' place in the world: are we the plaything of external forces or rather irresponsible actors?

Introduction

On November 3 2017, when Yorgos Lanthimos' film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* was released in the UK, film critic Jonathan Romney wrote that the 'cold-blooded grand guignol' sat 'directly in the lineage of Greek tragedy'. He added that Lanthimos had revealed 'the narrative and emotional extremity traditionally repressed by the formal restraint of classicism.'¹ Although Romney refers to Greek tragedy in general, he points out that Lanthimos' film relates to one play in particular: *Iphigenia at Aulis*, written by Euripides in 408/406 BC. In that story, Greek general Agamemnon offends Artemis by shooting one of her sacred deer. The furious divinity prevents Agamemnon and his army from leaving Aulis and setting sail to Troy (the Greek fleet was on its way to retrieve Helen, the wife of Agamemnon's brother Menelaus) and demands that the general sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia. In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, cardiologist Steven Murphy 'tries on the punishment of Agamemnon'² as he is also forced to murder one of his children to appease an offended higher power, a teenage boy called Martin, whose father died on Steven's operating table. The film's narrative and emotional extremity, Romney explains, are caused by the characters' 'affectless delivery' and almost emotionless response to the extreme situations they find themselves in. This acting style, combined with the characters' 'exaggeratedly prosaic' and inappropriate language (Romney refers to Martin's 'quasi-homoerotic curiosity about Steven's body hair'), give the film an absurdist feel.

However different the critics' judgements of Lanthimos' film – from Romney's positive review to O'Connell, who found it 'somewhat underwhelming with a faint air of contrivance'³ – they all agreed on two things. The characters' demeanour is strangely austere and abnormal, and the film is somehow connected to Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Despite this consensus, until now no critic has analyzed how exactly the tragedy and the film inform each other. It is this complex relationship between something ancient and something new, more specifically Euripides' tragedy and Lanthimos' film, which is central to this thesis.

¹ Jonathan Romney, "Film of the Week: The Killing of a Sacred Deer Replays Greek Tragedy as Modernist Guignol | Sight & Sound," British Film Institute, November 3, 2017, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/killing-sacred-deer-yorgos-lanthimos-greek-tragedy-modernist-guignol>.

² Romney (2017).

³ David O'Connell, "The Killing of a Sacred Deer," 2020filmsight, November 17, 2017, <https://2020filmsight.wordpress.com/2017/11/17/the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer/>.

Research question and sub-questions

In this thesis, I argue that people's attitude to certain apparent external factors lies at the heart of the connection between Euripides' tragedy and Lanthimos' film. The research question is: how does the characters' approach to the supposed external factors of *aidōs*, 'perfection', and 'debt' connect the tragic narratives of *Iphigenia at Aulis* and its reception *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*? The research consists of four sub-questions, which are informed by the method used (see below):

1. What is the impression of *Iphigenia at Aulis* (henceforth *IA*) and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (henceforth *TK*)?
2. How do the supposed external factors of *aidōs*, 'perfection', and 'debt' appear in both works?
3. How does the context of both works inform the characters' engagement with the external factors?
4. How does the characters' approach to *aidōs* in *IA* inform the characters' approach to 'perfection' and 'debt' in *TK* and vice versa?

Methodology: corresponsive reading and emotion studies

The sub-questions correspond with the four phases of this thesis' main method, i.e. corresponsive reading. Corresponsive reading is a method for comparative literary analysis developed by Odile Heynders, Professor of Comparative Literature at Tilburg University in The Netherlands. It consists of the following phases: determining the impression a text makes on its reader, conducting formal analysis of said text (close reading), spatiotemporal contextualisation in the author's other/another author's work (this and the previous phase happen simultaneously), and connecting various texts to form an explanatory framework.⁴ Two additional concepts are included: *thaumasia*, the reader's attentiveness to things with which they are already so familiar as to not see them anymore, and echo, meaning that one text can remind its reader of another or multiple text(s), even when they are not directly connected.⁵

Although corresponsive reading was originally developed for comparative poetry

⁴ Odile Heynders, *Correspondenties. Gedichten lezen met gedichten* (Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 13-22, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/heyn005corr01_01/index.php.

⁵ Heynders (2006, 21) provides the following example. The Russian poet Joseph Brodsky wrote an essay for the *Times Literary Supplement* in which he constructed a narrative out of multiple unconnected poems. Brodsky describes how texts from Boris Pasternak (1949) and Marina Tsvetajeva (1923) tell the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. When taking Tsvetajeva's poem as Jesus' love declaration to Mary Magdalene, Pasternak's poetry can be considered her response to him.

analysis, it resonates with comparative reception studies in general, as it provides a practical tool for this theoretical framework and values subjective reading as a starting point for close reading. This also adheres to Lanthimos' call to his viewers:

'We [i.e. Lanthimos and frequent co-writer Efthymis Filippou] always try to make our films quite open, so that people can think whatever they want about them. And then, it's up to the viewer to start thinking about the situation, be engaged, hopefully, with the film – actively, not passively.'⁶

Finally, corresponsive reading allows comparative analysis between works that are not related through biographical or literary-historical evidence – such as an ancient Greek tragedy and a modern internationally produced film.

As mentioned, I argue that the echoes and correspondences between *IA* and *TK* are the concept of *aidōs*, 'perfection', and 'debt'. The ancient Greek word *aidōs* denotes (self-)respect, honour, and shame for oneself or others. 'Perfection' is defined as the fixation on control, achievements/successes of oneself and others, visible wealth and beauty, and being the picture-perfect suburban family. 'Debt' entails paying off debts and framing everything, including affective bonds, as impersonal transactions. The notions of self-respect and shame in *IA* are reflected in *TK*'s characters' penchant for perfection; self-respect follows from conforming to the ideal (e.g. the ideal family), shame from deviating from it. However, by reducing relationships to impersonal transactions, the film's characters' can move past shame and (self-)respect without having to face the negative and often disconcerting consequences of their actions. As such, 'perfection' and 'debt' in *TK* are echoes of *aidōs* in *IA* (see Chapters 3 and 4).

To analyse *aidōs* in *IA*, I follow the method described by Douglas Cairns.⁷ He states that any study of emotions in ancient literature must include emotions words (e.g. *aisxunomai* 'to be dishonoured', *aparthenontos* 'unmaidenlike', so inappropriate for a girl to say/do), how emotion is expressed through language (e.g. Clytemnestra's supplication before Achilles in 900-901: *οὐκ ἐπαιδεσθήσομαι ἴω προσπεσεῖν τὸ σὸν γόνυ / θνητὸς ἐκ θεᾶς γεγῶτος· τί γὰρ ἐγὼ σεμνύνομαι*; 'I will not be ashamed to fall to your knees, / a mortal born from a goddess; because why would I give myself airs?'), and how its physical manifestations are described

⁶ Göteborg Film Festival, "Göteborg Film Festival 2012 – Master Class Yorgos Lanthimos," YouTube, February 21, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLCgibK8jI>.

⁷ Douglas Cairns, "Look Both Ways: Studying Emotion in Ancient Greek," *Critical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (December 2008): 43–62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8705.2008.00853.x>. Cairns is Professor of Classics at Edinburgh University.

(e.g. the former ‘to fall to your knees’; another example is Clytaemnestra confronting Agamemnon with his lie in 1142-12243a: *αὐτὸ δὲ τὸ σιγᾶν ὁμολογοῦντός ἐστί σου / καὶ τὸ στενάζειν*. ‘Your very silence is a sign of you admitting it, / and your groaning’). To analyse what I consider the echo of *aidōs* in *TK*, viz. the notions of ‘perfection’ and ‘debt’, I utilise the mood-cue approach by Greg M. Smith.⁸ Smith explains that in a film, so-called emotive cues (all audiovisual signs in a film, ranging from the actors’ facial expressions to editing choices) construct its overall mood, i.e. a predisposition to a certain (set of) emotion(s). Because the mood-cue approach foregrounds audiovisual rather than narrative elements, it is well-suited for a non-traditional (i.e. Hollywood-style) film such as *TK*. My film analysis revolves around the following emotive cues: the characters’ physicality (body language and the representation of bodies in space through camera work), speech (what is said), and deliverance (how it is said). Not only has Lanthimos himself repeatedly stated the importance of these elements in his oeuvre, but these cues are also similar to what Cairns describes as ‘physical manifestations of emotions’ and ‘expression of emotion through language’.

Status quaestionis: *aidōs*, ‘perfection’, and ‘debt’

The LSJ provides the following definition of *aidōs*: ‘I. reverence, awe, respect for the feeling or opinion of others or for one’s own conscience, and so shame, self-respect (...) sense of honour. II. that which causes shame or respect. III. personified, Reverence, (...) Mercy’. In analysing *aidōs*, scholars distinguish between these different emotions, their direction, and their motivation. According to Jäkel, fear or respect for the gods results in either concern or fear for others. This means that people, following divine law (motivation), show ‘respect’ towards others (direction) or fear ‘shame’ for themselves for violating those laws.⁹ Similarly, Lombard explains how both ‘objective, external conventions’, e.g. divine law or certain codes of conduct, and ‘subjective, inner ethic’ evoke *aidōs* as ‘retrospective shame of a guilty conscience’ or ‘respect’/‘reverence’.¹⁰ Additionally, *aidōs* is connected to other concepts. Szlezák discusses *aidōs* in connection with *gnōmē* ‘judgement, intelligence’ and the adjective *sofos* ‘clever, wise’.¹¹ Stockert emphasises the relation of ‘shame’ with *anangkē* ‘necessity’,

⁸ Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 41-62. Smith is Assistant Professor of Communication at Georgia State University.

⁹ Sigfried Jäkel, “Φόβος, σέβας und αἰδώς in den Dramen des Euripides,” *Arctos - Acta Philologica Fennica* 14 (1980): 15–30, <https://journal.fi/arctos/article/view/88007/47200>.

¹⁰ D.B. Lombard, “Aspects of αἰδώς in Euripides,” *Acta Classica* 28 (1985): 5–12, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24591885.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A19c3f8249b0e630caebcdc61c8ed1bae&a_b_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1.

¹¹ Thomas Alexander Szlezák, “Mania und Aidos: Bemerkungen zur Ethik und Anthropologie des Euripides,” *Antike und Abendland* 32, no. 1 (1986): 46–59, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1298773540?accountid=11795&imgSeq=1>.

notably in Agamemnon's case, who is torn apart by 'γνώμη (die ihm seine Sicht der Situation vermittelt), der αἰδώς, die ihn vor solcher Tat instinktiv zurückschrecken läßt [sic], und der überwältigenden Macht ἀνάγκης, die ihn letztlich doch dazu zwingt.'¹² Finally, Michelakis and Gregory both discuss people's sense of *aidōs*, notably in the meaning of modesty and (fe)male virtue, as the result of elite education.¹³

In his seminal work on *aidōs*, Cairns not only describes the abovementioned translations and related concepts, but most importantly defines *aidōs* as an affect, an emotion that denotes a way of perceiving and responding to the outside world.¹⁴ In his discussion of the various forms of *aidōs* in Euripides' oeuvre, categorizing them according to context,¹⁵ he devotes a section to *IA*. Although people's concern for their honour is mostly presented as a positive trait in Euripidean tragedy, nobility's sense of honour is ridiculed in this play. Cairns refers to Achilles' arrogant focus on his status and his resentment towards Agamemnon for disrespecting it (897, 899, 926-931, 938-949, 959-969, 973-974), to Agamemnon's envy of low-born people (446-449), and his subsequent lament on his inability to weep in the face of adversity because of his nobility (451-453). Cairns also draws attention to the awkwardly clashing or reversed gendered forms of *aidōs* in Achilles' and Clytaemnestra's first encounter (819-852) and Iphigenia's character development. *Aidōs* in the sense of 'shame' peaks in the aforementioned encounter. The boastful Achilles is remarkably shy in the presence of the beautiful queen and the formerly proud Clytaemnestra becomes highly embarrassed after finding out she has been deceived by her own husband. Achilles knows she has been tricked, which only augments her humiliation. Iphigenia changes from a naïve, scared girl (see 631-637: she leaps into her father's arms, and 1211-1252: she begs Agamemnon to spare her) into a patriotic hero (see her speeches in 1374-1401 and 1416-1420, her conversation with her desperate mother in 1433-1466, and her subsequent paean in 1467-1508). All this results in a play 'in which conventional standards of behaviour are questioned, playfully exploited, and even ridiculed'.¹⁶

Other scholars agree that *IA* mocks the notion of *aidōs*, especially in its sense of

¹² Walter Stockert, *Euripides, Iphigenie in Aulis Band I. Einleitung und Text* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), 26.

¹³ Pantelis Michelakis, *Euripides: Iphigenia at Aulis* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2006); Justina Gregory, "Iphigenia at Aulis," in *Brill's Companion to Euripides Volume I*, ed. Andreas Markantonatos (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 395-414.

¹⁴ Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 5.

¹⁵ Cairns (1993), 265-314. The categories are 1) personal honour and status (martial, non-martial, regarding friends/suppliants/guests), 2) honour, reputation, retrospective shame, guilt, and 3) sexuality/the sexes. The information in this paragraph is Cairns' reading of *IA*.

¹⁶ Cairns (1993), 313.

(self-)respect. Conacher argues that Iphigenia's strength and courage are parodied in Agamemnon, Menelaus, Achilles, and Clytaemnestra.¹⁷ Collard and Morwood remark that *IA*'s characters are 'highly conscious of the conventional demands for appropriate behaviour but these become irrelevant'¹⁸ in the situations they face, which leads to irony. Contrary to the aforementioned scholars, Vellacott and Michelakis interpret *IA*'s treatment of *aidōs* as (dark) ironic criticism rather than just irony. In his study of irony in Euripidean drama, Vellacott concludes that *IA* sharply criticises the characters' volatility. At times, they insist they are in total control of the situation (e.g. Achilles' claims he can and will save Iphigenia to Clytaemnestra in 935-939, 948-954, 970-972, 1005-1007, 1028, 1359-1361 and to the girl herself in 1404-1415, 1421-1432); at other times, they deny their agency and claim themselves victims of necessity – which, according to Vellacott, is actually 'their own weak selfishness'.¹⁹ Michelakis states that 'social conventions or ideals may serve as a yardstick for humanity', but the characters' terrible circumstances also question, parody, and satirise them and expose them as 'superficial or inadequate'.²⁰

There are only a few studies of *TK*. In his article on the film, Filippaki defines its genre as a so-called 'neuro-thriller', a term coined by Patricia Pisters to describe 'the suspenseful film that is constructed around affective evocation rather than emplotment'.²¹ Contrary to the traditional thriller that evokes suspense and fear through supernatural phenomena (aliens, ghosts, etc.), in neuro-thrillers the horror lies in their neoliberal framework.²² Relationships are transformed into impersonal transactions based on supply and demand, debt and repayment. Emotions have little to no place in this world and the body, that of oneself and of others, is used as a commodity. Filippaki discusses Kim and Bob as examples. Both teens offer their bodies/body parts to others in an attempt to save themselves; Kim offers herself to Martin and later to Steven, and Bob offers his hair and his career to his father.²³ Bob offering his future to Steven touches upon another feature of the neuro-thriller, viz. that people view themselves and others as projects instead of persons. In the Murphy

¹⁷ Desmond J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme and Structure* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 360-361.

¹⁸ Christopher Collard and James Morwood, eds., *Euripides: Iphigenia at Aulis Volume 1 Introduction, Text and Translation* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 34.

¹⁹ Philip Vellacott, *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 221.

²⁰ Michelakis (2006), 49.

²¹ Iro Filippaki, "Violence as Embodied Neoliberalism in the Neurothriller," *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 30, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 138–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2019.1597609>.

²² Filippaki (2019), 141-145. Unless noted otherwise, the examples and information in this paragraph is derived from Filippaki's reading of *TK*.

²³ Filippaki (2019), 148-152. I will return to these scenes in Chapter 2.

family, success is highly valued. Kim must excel in her choir, Anna proudly tells one of Steven's colleagues that Bob's piano teacher says he is 'very talented', and Steven himself is often shown at his place of employment, the hospital. This neoliberal work ethic resonates with what I define as 'perfection' (see above). The characters' fixation on this work ethic draws attention away from what is actually happening, i.e. the physical abuse and oppression caused by the fact that bodies are used as objects in transactions. For example, during the love-making scene between Steven and Anna, she pretends to be sedated to indulge Steven's fetish (the suppression of the body). Another example is Anna giving Matthew, one of Steven's colleagues, a hand job in exchange for information about Steven's involvement in the death of Martin's father (the body used in transactions). The use of one's own or others' body as a commodity is what I define as 'debt' (see above). The last feature of the neuro-thriller is its main purpose. The narrative questions evoked by the film remain unsolved to draw attention to the characters' affective experience of the situations they face. As a result, viewers are left to judge the characters' behaviour and interpret the film themselves. As mentioned, there are few studies of *TK*, but the film has received attention from reviewers. Some of the more prominent readings are *TK* as 'a cautionary tale about the consequences of hubris', as a story about "the West's" obsession with financial excess, and as a deconstruction of the nuclear family.²⁴

Analysing without judging the characters' behaviour and not influencing the viewer's opinion is also an important feature of Lanthimos' oeuvre. In an interview with American stand-up comedian and podcaster Marc Maron, Lanthimos stated that he aims to expose his viewers to socio-cultural experiments that they must interpret themselves. For example, his 2009 film *Dogtooth* (*Kunodontas* in Greek) explores dictatorial familial power dynamics and *The Lobster* (2015) questions if true love can exist within totalitarian societies that use it as a tool of control and oppression.²⁵

²⁴ James Berardinelli, *Review of Killing of a Sacred Deer, The (United Kingdom/Ireland, 2017): A movie review by James Berardinelli*, review of *TK* by Yorgos Lanthimos, ReelViews, October 25, 2017, <https://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/killing-of-a-sacred-deer-the>; Maria Gavala, *Ο σύγχρονος μύθος και η σκοτεινή γοητεία του αλλόκοτου (The modern myth and the dark charm of the uncanny)*, review of *TK* by Yorgos Lanthimos, Σινεφιλία (Cinephilia), n.d., <http://cinephilia.gr/index.php/tainies/hellas/6064-o-sygyxronos-mythos-kai-i-skoteini-goiteia-tou-allokokotou>; Orestes Ampelikiotis, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer | Κριτική + Ανάλυση (Review + Analysis)*, review of *TK* by Yorgos Lanthimos, *Random!*, November 12, 2017, <http://www.rndm.gr/tainies/the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer-review-analysis/>. Berardinelli interprets *TK* as a tale about hubris, Gavala as a story about the West's obsession with financial wealth, and Ampelikiotis as the deconstruction of the perfect family. I will return to different impressions of *TK* in Chapter 1.

²⁵ Yorgos Lanthimos, *WTF with Marc Maron Episode 992 – Yorgos Lanthimos*, interview by Marc Maron, 2019, <https://www.mixcloud.com/WTFwithMarcMaron/episode-992-yorgos-lanthimos/>.

Thesis structure

In the first chapter, I determine the impressions of *IA* and *TK*. The second and third chapter combine close reading with the contextualisation of both works. In Chapter 4, I interpret the connection between the tragedy and the film and explain their combined significance by building on the echoes pointed out in Chapter 3. Finally, I answer the main research question and the sub-questions. In *IA*, the characters are highly emotional and fixated *aidōs*, which manifests as a fixation on social, moral, and religious rules and obligations. Contrastingly, *TK*'s characters are mostly dispassionate and not concerned about norms and values but obsessed with perfection and (paying off) debt. When read together, the tragedy and the film construct a dialogue about the essence of morals and virtues, their (incorrect) foundations, and what it means to be human: do we have agency in the face of crises and, if so, can we bear the responsibility that comes with it? I end with a discussion of the used methods, suggestions for further research, and a brief self-evaluation.

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Chapter 1. The initial experience: impressions of the tragedy and the film

Heynders explains corresponsive reading as the act of framing a particular reading experience and relating it to what has been read previously.²⁶ As mentioned in the Introduction, the first phase of corresponsive reading is determining the impression of a text, in this case *IA* and *TK*. Heynders defines ‘impression’ as the reader’s mental picture and proposition of meaning,²⁷ which is later grounded in formal analysis (i.e. close reading and contextualisation). In this chapter, I first discuss my own impressions of *IA* and *TK* and then continue with others’ mental pictures of the film.²⁸

Sincere Panhellenism or critical irony

After reading *IA*, several elements stood out to me, notably the characters’ obsession with social and moral rules and (in)appropriate behaviour in themselves and others. The tragedy opens with the Old Man (henceforth OM), one of Agamemnon’s servants, criticising his master’s behaviour (1-41). Agamemnon repeatedly opens and closes a letter to Clytaemnestra, containing the message to not send their daughter to Aulis. An earlier letter said to bring Iphigenia to Aulis, supposedly to marry Achilles but in reality so she could be sacrificed to Artemis. He eventually throws it to the ground in despair and says he envies low born people, because they live carefree lives and can freely show their emotions. In response, the OM denounces Agamemnon’s self-pity and disregard of his honour. (Dis)regard for one’s own or someone else’s honour is a recurring feature of *IA*. During the *agōn* of Agamemnon and Menelaus, the brothers point out each other’s objectionable behaviours, including Menelaus’ fixation on retrieving a cheating wife (dishonourable behaviour on his part) and Agamemnon disrespecting his own family by forbidding Menelaus to go (317-413). Later, Agamemnon tries to keep Clytaemnestra in the dark about Iphigenia’s sacrifice. However, as a proud queen and mother Clytaemnestra is persistent to attend her daughter’s wedding, which results in a lengthy discussion about proper wedding rituals (685-741). In these scenes, Clytaemnestra shows a profound sense of honour and self-respect. Achilles and Iphigenia also show a remarkable sense of decorum. Achilles’ response to Clytaemnestra’s moving plea is not an acknowledgement of her and her daughter’s terrible fate, but an account of his many virtues (919-974). Iphigenia is the (ironic) pinnacle of female etiquette. When seeing the party that

²⁶ Heynders (2006), 20.

²⁷ Heynders (2006), 18.

²⁸ To my knowledge, there are no reviews of *IA* comparable to those of *TK*. The play is discussed by Aristotle in his *Poetics* and *Politics*, and George Adam Kovacs (“Iphigenia at Aulis: Myth, Performance, and Reception” (PhD Thesis, 2010)) has reconstructed the ancient audience’s impression based on the themes of virgin self-sacrifice, Panhellenism and criticism on war, (gender) decorum, and the play’s dramaturgy.

has come to lead her to the altar, she worries not about death but about the impropriety of being seen by men (1340-1344) and she later describes her self-sacrifice for Greece as her 'long-lived / memorial and my children and my marriage and my reputation.' (1398-1399).

A second feature of *IA* are the many changes of mind. Besides Iphigenia's well-known speech (1368-1401), Menelaus and Agamemnon radically shift their opinions. In their abovementioned *agōn*, Agamemnon refuses to harm his family for his scorned brother's sake, who in turn reproaches him for this. Later, when Menelaus returns, he tries to convince Agamemnon, who is now determined to sacrifice his daughter, not to go through with it.

A third element of the tragedy is its combination of intense emotions, mostly expressed by the women, with emotional detachment. Iphigenia and Clytaemnestra experience utter despair, grief, and horror after learning of Agamemnon's betrayal and their fate. Whereas Iphigenia eventually accepts her death, Clytaemnestra remains broken until the very end of the play, when she calls out for her daughter (1615-1618) and does not respond to Agamemnon's painfully (for Clytaemnestra, that is) cheerful farewell (1621-1625). This ties into the fourth feature of *IA*, i.e. Agamemnon's approach to the sacrifice. On the one hand, he suffers from the knowledge that he must murder his daughter. On the other hand, he does not consider himself responsible; rather, it is Calchas/Artemis, the army, Odysseus, and Greece that force him to commit this crime (89-93, 105-106, 518, 528-536, 746-748, 1257-1275). Agamemnon, then, switches between extreme feelings (despair, grief, fear) and emotional detachment.

After reading *IA*, my mental picture consisted of the characters' obsession with social and moral (gender) norms, decorum, volatility, and the paradox of intense emotions and aloofness. Moreover, because of the irony in many passages (e.g. Achilles' ignorant arrogance during his encounter with Clytaemnestra), I had the impression that *IA* criticised (too) zealous adherence to norms and values. In the next chapter, I will return to Agamemnon's and Iphigenia's behaviour in more detail.

Hidden meanings or pretentious film

One of the first things that struck me about *TK* was the camera work. It features many zoom-ins and tracking shots that creep towards or around the characters, which creates an uncomfortable viewing experience. It feels as if you are intruding on the characters' lives and witness events that you are not supposed to see. Besides the camera work, the characters' acting style is extremely awkward. Their behaviour is stiff and robot-like, as if they are programmed to do "human" things (make small talk at the dinner table, visit friends, make

love).

There is also the film's remarkable combination of dark humour and silly jokes. Near the end of the film, when Steven must choose whom to sacrifice, his wife Anna remarks: 'I believe the most logical thing, no matter how harsh this may sound, is to kill a child. Because we can have another child, I still can and you can. And if you can't, we could try IVF – but I'm sure we can.' The fact that a mother is not only willing to sacrifice her children to save herself but calmly provides the 'most logical' explanation make for a disturbing scene. Contrastingly, the film's sexual jokes are below-the-belt humour. When Martin's mother tries to seduce Steven by complementing and eventually passionately kissing his hands, she demands he tries 'her tart' before he leaves. Martin tells Kim a French joke: *Dans le bus, il y a vainqueurs et vaincus*. This sentence means: 'On the bus, there are winners and losers'. However, when read aloud, it also sounds like 'On the bus, there are twenty hearts (*vingt cœurs*) and twenty asses (*vingt culs*).' The already uncomfortable mood is augmented by the film's unclear message, which is typical of Lanthimos' films, and ditto connection with *IA*. The characters are focussed on transaction and debt; they offer "gifts", including their own bodies, to others in exchange for protection (see Anna's remark above) or information (e.g. Anna giving Matthew a hand job). Consequently, the film could be considered a critique on the modern capitalist world.²⁹ This does not, however, clarify the film's relation to Euripides' tragedy. After watching the film for the first time, I had found some narrative and thematic similarities. Steven is the Agamemnon-figure, Anna is Clytaemnestra, and their children Kim and Bob are Iphigenia and Orestes. Martin, who seems to possess a supernatural power, could represent Artemis. However, the goddess is absent from the tragedy, while Martin is a prominent character in the film. Both works depict filicide, (self-)sacrifice, and obsession with or detachment from social and moral decorum, but a film that its director describes as having a dialogue with *IA* must have more engagement with the tragedy than these similarities – and if not, *TK*'s nihilism would reveal something about Lanthimos' take on an ancient tragedy.

As mentioned, *TK* has received much attention from reviewers. Many of them describe the film's camera work and acting style as 'antiseptic', 'voyeuristic', and 'claustrophobic'.³⁰ One reviewer also compared the film's characters to non-humans, not

²⁹ See Filippaki's reading (2019).

³⁰ Brian Tallerico, "The Killing of a Sacred Deer Movie Review (2017) | Roger Ebert," Roger Ebert, October 20, 2017, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer-2017>; Orestes Ampelikiotis, "The Killing of a Sacred Deer | Κριτική + Ανάλυση," Random, November 12, 2017, <http://www.rndm.gr/tainies/the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer-review-analysis/>.

robots, but to ‘pod people trying to fake it to fool the humans.’³¹ These styles are considered either artificial or hyper-realistic, but all reviewers maintain that Lanthimos presents and deconstructs a ‘world of suburban perfection’ and ‘the myth of the perfect suburban family’. Besides the film’s camera work and acting style, its remarkable sense of humour is mentioned frequently. Romney describes *TK* as a ‘modernist guignol’, a theatrical production that features melodramatic tension, horror, and shock.³² Most reviewers label the film ‘absurd’/‘absurdist’ because of its strange humour and unclear story. For example, Scharres describes *TK* as a ‘crazily absurd world where everything is backwards’, and Ebiri remarks that the film’s ‘narrative logic is strained until it goes fully absurd’.³³ Additionally, many reviewers mention the film’s dark and perverse comic elements, mostly in reference to the characters’ obsession over bodies/body parts. Romney explains Martin’s curiosity about Steven’s body air as ‘quasi-homoerotic’, Scharres calls it ‘perverse’, and Ampelikiotis and Cvack describe *TK*’s humour as cynical and disturbing.³⁴ All of this results in a film that is ‘awkward’ (especially regarding the interactions between Steven and Martin),³⁵ scary,³⁶ ‘surreal’ in terms of jokes³⁷ and general aesthetic,³⁸ and ‘detached’ with outbursts of intense emotions.³⁹ Shanahan remarks that ‘the characters’ detachment leads to our own. Their blankness is ours. (...) bone-dry, cold, and extremely distant.’⁴⁰ Our ‘blankness’, however, does not mean that we do not react to *TK*. Lanthimos and Filippou do not elicit an emotional response (like traditional Hollywood films do), but aim to shock their audience.

Although many reviewers point out similar elements in *TK*, their final judgements

³¹ Gregory Smalley, “LIST CANDIDATE: THE KILLING of a SACRED DEER (2017) | 366 Weird Movies,” 366 Weird Movies, November 16, 2017, <http://366weirdmovies.com/list-candidate-the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer-2017/>.

³² Romney (2017).

³³ Barbara Scharres, “Cannes 2017: ‘the Killing of a Sacred Deer,’ ‘the Day After,’ ‘the Workshop’ | Festivals & Awards | Roger Ebert,” Roger Ebert, May 22, 2017, <https://www.rogerebert.com/festivals/cannes-2017-the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer-the-day-after-the-workshop>; Bilge Ebiri, “Cannes’s Beguilements,” The Village Voice, May 25, 2017, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/05/25/canness-beguilements/>.

³⁴ Romney (2017); Scharres (2017); Ampelikiotis (2017) Jon Cvack, “‘The Killing of a Sacred Deer’ (2017), Written & Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, by Jon Cvack,” Yellow Barrel, September 16, 2019, <https://www.yellowbarrel.org/films/the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer-2017>.

³⁵ Scharres (2017), Donald Shanahan, “MOVIE REVIEW: The Killing of a Sacred Deer,” Every Movie Has a Lesson, October 27, 2017, <https://everymoviehasalesson.com/blog/2017/10/movie-review-the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer>.

³⁶ Tallerico (2017): ‘alternately terrifying, hysterical, strange, and heartbreaking [sic]’; Ampelikiotis (2017) states that the film is even more terrifying because of its twisted humour.

³⁷ Romney (2017) refers to Lanthimos’ ‘characteristic games with words and surreal logic’.

³⁸ Berardinelli (2017); Thodoros Giahoustidis, “Ο θάνατος του ιερού ελαφιού (the Killing of a Sacred Deer) - Review / Κριτική,” Movies Ltd., November 2, 2017, <https://www.moviesltd.gr/2017/11/killing-of-sacred-deer-review.html>.

³⁹ Romney (2017), Ebiri (2017); David O’Connell (2017).

⁴⁰ Shanahan (2017).

about the film's meaning differ significantly. Some argue that it is a complex narrative with a well-hidden deeper meaning. Referring to the story of Iphigenia, Gavala states that she was not sacrificed because that would have been the pinnacle of hubris; *TK* does go beyond human boundaries by presenting filicide as merely the necessary termination of the family's weakest link.⁴¹ The film's emotionlessness, absurdity, and surrealism manifest as the characters' 'transgression of the rules of behaviour, language, and custom',⁴² which resonates with the behaviour of the tragic characters (Scharres does not make this connection). Besides its connections with *IA*, *TK* is often interpreted as a narrative about humanity versus science or supernatural powers, or as a Christian story. Steven is repeatedly equated with God and Martin with the Devil,⁴³ who teaches Steven that 'all actions, even those of someone who plays God through science [referring to Steven's profession as cardiologist], have consequences'.⁴⁴ Contrastingly, Ampelikiotis considers Martin 'an allegory of God or of any supernatural, law-abiding force' because of his power over Steven's children.⁴⁵ Other biblical references are the Old Testament logic of 'an eye for an eye', Anna kissing Martin's feet as a reference to Mary Magdalene, the *Groundhog Day* scene in which protagonist Phil claims he is a god, and *TK*'s closing music, which is the *Passion of St. John*. Berardinelli connects *TK*'s focus on transaction and debt settlement to 'mysticism and karma – the philosophy that there's a price to be paid in taking a life.'⁴⁶

Other critics are unsure about the film's meaning and connection to *IA* or deny that *TK* has any deeper meaning.⁴⁷ Ganotis states that the film creates the illusion of a hidden meaning (*TK* is too strange to not have a secret message) but has none. There are no connections to Artemis' deer, God's lamb, or 'sanctity in general'.⁴⁸ Cvack only sees one connection between *IA* and *TK*: 'a powerful and successful man who ends up killing one of his children to save the rest of his family.'⁴⁹ On the one hand, these readings are understandable, as the film

⁴¹ Gavala (n.d.).

⁴² Scharres (2017).

⁴³ Tallerico (2017), Berardinelli (2017).

⁴⁴ Christina Kalogeropoulou, "The Killing of a Sacred Deer (Ο θάνατος του ιερού ελαφιού) - Κριτική | Περιοδικό MOVE IT," www.moveitmag.gr, November 2, 2017, <https://www.moveitmag.gr/tainies/killing-sacred-deer/56773>.

⁴⁵ Ampelikiotis (2017). According to him, Martin is responsible for the physical afflictions of Kim and Bob. I will return to this in Chapter 3.

⁴⁶ Berardinelli (2017).

⁴⁷ According to Ampelikiotis (2017), this is especially the case in Greece, where Lanthimos is either praised for his vision or condemned as pretentious director.

⁴⁸ Stavros Ganotis, "Ο Θάνατος του Ιερού Ελαφιού (2017) * Filmy.gr," [Filmy](https://www.filmy.gr/movies-database/the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer/#1532166645875-ffec68f3-deac1dfc-67d110ca-a5db852c-82a5fdfd-b65b9df7-fe1b214d-48b3d3b2-710062fc-932b160b-5280), January 22, 2018, <https://www.filmy.gr/movies-database/the-killing-of-a-sacred-deer/#1532166645875-ffec68f3-deac1dfc-67d110ca-a5db852c-82a5fdfd-b65b9df7-fe1b214d-48b3d3b2-710062fc-932b160b-5280>.

⁴⁹ Cvack (2017).

seems to only superficially engage with the story of Iphigenia (see my own impression above). On the other hand, Lanthimos has often stated that his films require interpretation by the viewer and, moreover, that *TK* has a dialogue with *IA*.⁵⁰ In other words, although the film's meaning and connection to *IA* are difficult to find, they do exist.

⁵⁰ "THE KILLING of a SACRED DEER - Press Conference - EV - Cannes 2017," YouTube, May 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35dRx2MUnIc>.

‘lack of decorum’.⁵² Next, the OM urges Agamemnon to explain his worries to him, ‘a good and trustworthy man’ (45: ἄνδρ’ ἀγαθὸν πιστόν τε⁵³). Agamemnon responds by listing the events leading up to the current situation, glossing over his own involvement in them: Tyndareus’ oath (all Greek men had to swear loyalty to whomever Helen would choose to marry and retrieve her if someone stole her), Helen’s elopement with Paris, the Greek army being held in Aulis, Calchas’ prophecy that Iphigenia would have to be sacrificed to Artemis, and Menelaus convincing Agamemnon to go through with this terrible deed (49-98). Next, Agamemnon reveals the “marriage scheme” (98-107: to lure Iphigenia to Aulis, he told Clytaemnestra their daughter would marry Achilles), the people involved (himself, Calchas, Odysseus, and Menelaus), and the second letter containing the message to not send Iphigenia to Aulis (115-123).

The dialogue between Agamemnon and the OM introduces *aidōs* and its verbal and physical expressions and violations as *IA*’s main theme. Agamemnon is characterised as a man who would have preferred an easy life with less duties and as someone led by emotions instead of reason and rationality,⁵⁴ both traits that are unworthy of a general. Moreover, rather than worrying about his daughter’s fate, Agamemnon laments his own. He does not try to protect Iphigenia (cf. Achilles in 1425-1432⁵⁵) or take responsibility for his current dilemma, but states that various codes of conduct, i.e. different forms of *aidōs*, force him to kill his daughter. There is the moral obligation to comply with Tyndareus’ oath and to fulfil his duty to the army (allowing them to sail to Troy), the social obligation to Menelaus (allowing him to retrieve his wife), and the religious obligation to comply with Artemis’ demand as it was relayed by Calchas. Two other commitments that are developed throughout *IA* are also implied here. First, the retrieval of Helen symbolises the necessity to defend Greece’s honour and her (female) inhabitants against barbarians (1273-1275; cf. Iphigenia in 1378-1382). Second, Agamemnon claims he can only protect himself, his family, and his city from the apparently bellicose Greek army if he ensures their passage to Troy (514, 518, 528-536, 1263-1268; cf. Clytaemnestra in 1012), which in practice means sacrificing Iphigenia.

⁵² Kovacs (2010, 137-138) remarks that some commentators consider this passage to be spurious, because Agamemnon’s behaviour is too hysterical for the ancient Greek stage. However, presenting ‘heroes in a non-heroic state’, i.e. highly emotional, is a feature of Euripidean realism.

⁵³ Throughout the play, the OM repeatedly prides himself on his honour. In 45: ‘You will be speaking to a good and trustworthy man.’; in his quarrel with Menelaus in 302: ‘Your reproach is something good for me’ and 312: ‘Yet, it is glorious to be killed for one’s masters.’, and to Clytaemnestra in 867: ‘You surely know me, who is loyal to you and your children?’. Minority groups (slaves, women) are often eloquent and intelligent in Euripides’ plays, but the OM’s sense of honour also fits well within the *aidōs* theme of *IA* in particular.

⁵⁴ Eirene Visvardi, “Emotion in Euripides,” in *Brill’s Companion to Euripides*, ed. Andreas Markantonatos (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020, 627–628) notes that this is typical of Euripidean characters.

⁵⁵ He offers to stand beside the altar so he can save Iphigenia if she changes her mind at the last moment.

However, throughout the play the actual power of these forms of *aidōs* is questioned. When quarrelling with Menelaus, Agamemnon himself implies that Tyndareus' oath was 'falsely sworn and [sworn] under compulsion' (395). During their argument, Agamemnon also points out that he cannot comply with the oath now that it means murdering his daughter. Yet, he glosses over this when Menelaus returns to make amends (513-536, see below). Furthermore, Artemis, Calchas, and Odysseus do not appear on stage, but are looming presences in the background. Calchas' prophecy and, by extension, Artemis' demand, is not authorised by omens, and considering Agamemnon was elected as general by the army (343), it is unlikely he has no control over the soldiers. Menelaus and Clytaemnestra later present Agamemnon with valid options of how to save Iphigenia. Finally, Euripides criticises the patriotic presentation of the Trojan War and of Greece as a cause worth dying for in the play's many ironic passages (see below).⁵⁶ The dialogue between Agamemnon and the OM, then, lays the groundwork for the rest of the play by presenting its main issue. Humans are not subject to incompatible social, moral, and religious conventions (*aidōs*); they have agency and, as such, accountability, but refer to "inescapable" codes of conduct to avoid facing the consequences of their (faulty) actions.

The *parodos* introduces another form of *aidōs* that returns throughout *IA*. The chorus of young women sing they left their homes eager to see the Greek army (185-188, 232-234):

| | |
|---|-----|
| 'Full of sacrifice I ran through Artemis' | 185 |
| grove, incited, | |
| my cheeks reddening | |
| with youthful frivolity (αἰσχύνα νεοθαλεῖ), | |
| (...) | |
| gazing ineffably, | 232 |
| to fill with greedy pleasure | |
| the female gaze of my eyes.' | |

The meaning of αἰσχύνα νεοθαλεῖ has received critical attention. Αἰσχύνη means 'disgrace, dishonour', but the chorus do not see their behaviour as a serious offence. They are excited about it, and rightfully so; there is little disgrace in gazing at handsome soldiers from a distance. Stockert explains: 'Die jungen Frauen scheuen sich, den Blicken der Soldaten

⁵⁶ Kovacs (2010), 109-122.

ausgesetzt zu sein'.⁵⁷ The German *Scheu* means 'fear' and 'shame', but the chorus are clearly not afraid. Turato translates the phrase as *un rossore da fanciulla* 'a maiden's blush'⁵⁸ and Collard and Morwood as 'youthful bashfulness'⁵⁹, both interpreting the chorus' behaviour as innocent and shy. However, since the chorus blatantly state their excitement, they are neither naïve nor coy. Additionally it is unclear if their husbands, who told them about the Greek army (173), gave them permission to go, nor are they part of an official entourage. In other words, the young women are self-consciously bold and well-aware of female decorum (also in their later songs⁶⁰) and their present "violation" of it. Moreover, their behaviour foreshadows another young woman's conscious "violation" of *aidōs*, viz. Iphigenia's excited greeting of Agamemnon (she knows she should not be too enthusiastic but embraces her father anyway, 631-637). Because of this, I propose to translate 'youthful frivolity'.

The *parodos*, then, introduces another important form of *aidōs*, i.e. gender norms and, more specifically, female virtue. Additionally, the song establishes a connection between the chorus and Iphigenia, a young woman also concerned with upholding her female *aidōs* (I will return to this later). Through its references to physical transgressions of female decorum (excitedly running, blushing, and gazing), the song also resonates with the abovementioned focus on the physical manifestations and violations of *aidōs* throughout the play.

(Mis)using *aidōs*

Like Agamemnon, his brother Menelaus is characterised by physical and verbal transgression of *aidōs*. Upon entering the stage, he tries to steal Agamemnon's second letter from the OM. This violent physical contact with the OM is significant, as it is juxtaposed by Menelaus consoling his brother by extending his hand at the end of this first episode (471-503, 513-

⁵⁷ Stockert (1992b), 244.

⁵⁸ Fabio Turato, *Euripide: Ifigenia in Aulide* (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), 101.

⁵⁹ Collard and Morwood (2017b), 101.

⁶⁰ The first *stasimon* is dedicated to the importance of moderation in love (568-571): 'To chase after virtue is something great, / for women, it lies in the hidden / Cypris, for men in their turn, when complete order / is present within [them], their city grows.' Interestingly, *IA*'s women repeatedly put their decorum aside, e.g. Clytaemnestra when supplicating Achilles (900-916) and Iphigenia when supplicating Agamemnon (1211-1252). Helen, who did not hide her Cypris, and the disastrous consequences of her actions are the topic of the second *stasimon* (751-800). In the third *stasimon*, Shame (*Aidōs*), Virtue (*Aretè*), and Lawlessness (*Anomia*) appear as abstract personifications in connection with the "marriage" (i.e. death) of Iphigenia. This song also implies the perverse erotisation of Iphigenia's sacrifice, making it a physical violation of *aidōs* in the sense of decorum (1080-1084):

'The Greeks will garland your beautiful-haired
head, girl, like a spotted mountain-hind from
rocky mountain-caves
<or> a spotless heifer,
[in their purpose to let blood from a human throat].'

527).⁶¹ Menelaus reproaches the OM for his excessive loyalty to Agamemnon (304), threatens him with death (306, 311), and insults him for being a slave (313, to Agamemnon in 317).⁶² Agamemnon's entrance – (317) 'Ah, what is this noise and disorder of words (θόρυβος καὶ λόγων ἀκοσμία⁶³) at the gates?' – indicates that the men have not just exchanged insults and smart replies but have been shouting at each other. Menelaus immediately turns to Agamemnon, stating he knows 'the bad things' his brother did in secrecy (326: κάκ' (...) λάθρα). Describing Agamemnon's attempt to save his daughter (who is also Menelaus niece) as 'bad things you did in secrecy' is not just cruel and disturbing. With these words, Menelaus also places the restoration of his wounded ego above the well-being of his own family, revealing his extreme arrogance and selfishness. Ironically, he accuses Agamemnon of the same *anaidès* behaviour. He says Agamemnon pretended to be humble so that he was elected general, only to turn his back on the soldiers afterwards (343-348). Even when the army proposed to leave Aulis because of the lack of wind, Agamemnon desperately wanted the expedition against Troy to continue to save his honour and reputation (350-357). When Calchas prophesied that Agamemnon had to sacrifice Iphigenia, he was 'delighted in his heart' and 'promised gladly' to comply (359-360). Menelaus considers Agamemnon's current change of mind disrespectful towards himself and, most importantly, Greece, who is 'mocked' by barbarians 'because of you and your daughter', with καταγελῶντας (372) 'mocking/laughing at someone/-thing' being an 'intolerable humiliation'.⁶⁴

Agamemnon begins his reply by stating he will not 'raise his eyelids too high, lifting them up to shame' (378b-379) because they are brothers and because of common decency. As such, he adheres to *aidōs* in the sense of respect for others both verbally and physically. He also comments on Menelaus' mad 'bloodstained eyes' (381), thereby condemning his conduct as *anaidès*. Next, Agamemnon counters Menelaus' accusations of arrogance and selfishness by pointing out these qualities in him, viz. his willingness to see his niece sacrificed. Additionally, he reproaches Menelaus for being mad and immoral because he believes that retrieving a cheating wife and hurting his family in the process will restore his damaged reputation (382-390). Agamemnon concludes he has realised that he must protect his children by not giving in to Menelaus' personal vendetta against the Trojans. In their concluding

⁶¹ Kovacs (2010), 138-139.

⁶² The OM's responses are smug, saying it is an honour for a slave to die for his masters (305, 312).

⁶³ With these words, Agamemnon strongly condemns Menelaus' behaviour. Ἀκοσμία means literal 'dis-order' and immoral behaviour, and Collard and Morwood (2017b, 322) remark that violence towards someone's slave was illegal according to Athenian law.

⁶⁴ Collard and Morwood (2017b, 340). Cf. Achilles in 849.

stichomythia, the brothers reproach each other for violating *aidōs* in the sense of disrespecting and disregarding their obligations to their family, their fatherland, and their own sense of honour (404-414a).

Menelaus was introduced as physically and verbally abusive, shouting and even threatening the OM. Considering Agamemnon's remark in 378b-379, his disrespectful gestures continued during their quarrel, and the same can be assumed for Menelaus' tone of voice. Agamemnon distances himself from Menelaus' behaviour and gives valid counterarguments, thereby seemingly taking the moral high ground. However, the next two scenes cast a shadow on Agamemnon's honourable behaviour. After Menelaus has stormed off, a messenger announces the arrival of Iphigenia, Clytaemnestra, and Orestes, and calls for wedding preparations to be made (414a-439). The message evokes a desperate response from Agamemnon (442-443): 'Ah me, what do I, wretched me, say? Where do I begin? / What yoke of necessity have I fallen under!' He then repeats the sentiment from 16-17; as a general, he is a 'slave to the masses' (450) and cannot cry, although his current misfortunes demand him to (451-454). Then, Menelaus returns, asking Agamemnon for his right hand to hold (471), which Agamemnon gives him. After conveying mutual respect via this reconciliatory gesture, Menelaus says he has changed his mind because he saw his brother weeping (477).⁶⁵ He admits his misbehaviour, i.e. being foolish in wanting to retrieve Helen, and acknowledges Iphigenia has nothing to do with her (485-494). 'Let the army leave Aulis; I changed my mind, because a good man always does what is best', he concludes (495, 500-503). Surprisingly, Agamemnon is not glad that Menelaus and he now think alike – on the contrary. He explains his aforementioned 'yoke of necessity': the fates force 'the bloody murder of my daughter' (511-512), the Greek army will force him to killing Iphigenia (514), Calchas and Odysseus will share the prophecy with the army, which will then force Agamemnon to go through with it (516-531a), and Odysseus will order the army to murder the entire family if

⁶⁵ Stockert (1992a, 11-12) considers Menelaus' change of heart sincere because Euripides could have easily revealed him as a liar and because it fits well within this "tragedy of reversals". However, Euripides does expose his characters' insincere adherence to *aidōs*, e.g. Iphigenia's change of heart (I will return to this later), and Menelaus' entrance already foreshadowed that true compassion is not in his character. See also Gregory (2020, 402), who argues that Menelaus' change of heart is purely tactical. First, because Menelaus criticised Agamemnon's capriciousness, it would be strange for him to show the same behaviour. Second, Menelaus uses reverse psychology (i.e. suggesting dismantling the fleet) on his brother because he knows him very well, as is indicated by his account of Agamemnon's "rise to fame". Third, Menelaus' example of fraternal love, Pelops and Atreus, cannot be taken seriously. Finally, by threatening to 'turn to other resources and other friends' (413) Menelaus actually refers to his tactical simulated change of heart. Although I do not necessarily agree with all points (notably the second argument, because this was not proposed by Menelaus but demanded by the army, see 352b-353), I do not agree with Stockert's reading but with Gregory's, viz. that Menelaus' newfound empathy is not genuine.

Agamemnon flees to Argos (531b-536). Menelaus provides solutions: sending Iphigenia back to Argos and killing Calchas before he can reveal his oracle to the army. He also reminds Agamemnon to not fear the crowds too much and that Odysseus cannot harm them. This is consistent with his earlier remarks (i.e. that Agamemnon was elected general and that the army itself requested to return home) and shows there is no indication that the soldiers would turn against Agamemnon if he decided not to sacrifice Iphigenia and leave Aulis. Despite Menelaus' remarks, Agamemnon hides behind various forms of *aidōs* (his many "obligations") to obscure the fact that he has not fallen under a yoke of necessity, but rather has placed himself under it.

Gendered *aidōs*

Agamemnon and Menelaus were introduced as physically and verbally violating *aidōs* in the sense of respect for others (the OM, each other, and their daughter/niece) and a sense of honour. The chorus of young women was shown to be well-aware of female decorum, and the other female characters, i.e. Clytaemnestra and Iphigenia, are also established as women highly concerned with upholding female *aidōs*. When arriving in the army camp, Clytaemnestra describes herself as νυμφαγωγός 'a bride's escort' (609), referring to her rightful place within the marriage rituals as Iphigenia's mother, something she will fight for later (see below). Additionally, her greeting of Agamemnon is remarkably formal (633-634): 'My most honourable (σέβας ἐμοὶ μέγιστον) lord Agamemnon, / we came, to not be disobedient of your orders.' Formal greetings are common in *IA*, but σέβας has no parallel in Euripides.⁶⁶ Her overly correct greeting resonates with Iphigenia's (631-632): 'Mother, after running ahead of you – don't be angry with me! – / I will press my breast against the breast of my father.'⁶⁷ Iphigenia considers her excitement a physical violation of a female form of *aidōs*, viz. the 'hidden Cypris' rule of moderation in showing affection, as described by the chorus earlier. Her concern is exaggerated, considering her youthful age, her excitement about getting married, and the fact that she has not seen her father for a long time. This is stressed by Clytaemnestra's response to Iphigenia's 631-632; the queen says she understands her behaviour, remarking she was always 'the most father-loving' of all children (638b). Iphigenia happily turns to Agamemnon (642): 'Greetings; you have done well bringing me to you, father!', to which he responds (643): 'I do not know how to accept and not accept this, child.' Naturally, Clytaemnestra and Iphigenia do not notice Agamemnon's reference to his

⁶⁶ Collard and Morwood (2017b), 408. See Agamemnon's address of Clytaemnestra as Λήδα's γένεθλον 'offspring of Leda' in 686, 1106; the OM in 855; Achilles in 1345.

⁶⁷ 635-637 are indicated as spurious by Collard and Morwood (2017a, 140; 2017b, 409).

‘yoke of necessity’. Iphigenia starts asking questions about her marriage (thereby again “violating” the ‘hidden Cypris’ rule) and Agamemnon replies with hints at her coming death.⁶⁸ After their dialogue filled with dramatic irony, Agamemnon tries to send his daughter away by implicitly referring to the ‘hidden Cypris’ rule (671b: ‘it is not right that girls know such things’). Then, he apologises to Clytaemnestra for his visible *anaidès* behaviour: he cried while embracing Iphigenia (683-684) and ‘lamented too much’ (686). His wife, however, is sympathetic. She is emotional too but will overcome losing her daughter because of ‘custom (νόμος) and time’ (694). Her lack of visible emotion and her remark might seem cold, but, contrary to Agamemnon, she does not yet know Iphigenia’s fate.

After Iphigenia has left, Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra discuss her future husband Achilles (696-714, Agamemnon complimenting his good manners and outstanding education) and the wedding rituals (716-723), during which the tone of their conversation changes. When Agamemnon tells Clytaemnestra the wedding will take place in the army camp, she replies (724): ‘Badly but necessarily’.⁶⁹ Agamemnon, who is still trying to keep the sacrifice hidden from Clytaemnestra, is shocked by her tolerance and quickly adds that she must obey him (725b: *πιθοῦ δέ μοι*⁷⁰). Clytaemnestra asks for clarification, clearly surprised (as an honourable woman, she knows she is to obey her husband) and suspicious. What follows is a stichomythia in which they both try to outsmart each other by pointing out the various gendered forms of *aidōs* they must oblige. Agamemnon tells Clytaemnestra to leave the army camp and return to their other children in Argos, but she counters that the mother must provide during her daughter’s wedding, not the father. When Agamemnon repeats his *πιθοῦ* (738),⁷¹ Clytaemnestra angrily refuses, swearing by Hera (the goddess of marriage) and adding a variation on the ‘hidden Cypris’ rule (739-742): as a man, Agamemnon manages external affairs, whereas she, a woman, manages everything relating to the home, including Iphigenia’s wedding. She leaves a defeated Agamemnon reflecting, once again, on his

⁶⁸ See 651, 661, 667, 669, and the culmination in 673-675:

AG. ‘First, I must make an offer here.’

IPH. ‘Well, it is necessary to regard with rituals what is holy.’

AG. ‘You will know, because you will stand near the basin.’

675

⁶⁹ Clytaemnestra is focussed on her own and her daughter’s *aidōs*, but also knows when to put it aside; here, when supplicating Achilles (900-916, 977-997, 1024-1027), and when urging Iphigenia to do the same (1343-1344).

⁷⁰ This scene is a reversal of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* 943, in which Clytaemnestra tries to keep something hidden from Agamemnon (i.e. her plan to murder him) and tells him to obey her.

⁷¹ Collard and Morwood (2017b, 430) state that the ‘abrupt command (...) marks Ag.’s impatience’. Agamemnon tries to keep Clytaemnestra out of Iphigenia’s “wedding” (he requested Menelaus’ assistance in this in 538-541) so that he could do ‘the bad deed with the least amount of tears’. This remark and his later despair (742-748) convey fear rather than impatience.

supposed helplessness (747-748): ‘I go, to give the goddess [Artemis] what is dear to her, / unfortunate for me, trouble for Greece.’

The meeting between Achilles and Clytaemnestra is another prime example of gendered *aidōs*, mostly in the sense of respect for the opposite sex and self-regarding shame.⁷² When Clytaemnestra comes out of her tent to greet Achilles, he reacts as follows (821-822): ‘Lady Modesty (ᾧ πότνι Αἰδώς), who is this woman I see, / having a comely figure?’ This reaction not only conveys surprise (seeing a beautiful woman in an army camp is strange), but also Achilles’ ‘own instinctive restraint before a lady’.⁷³ Clytaemnestra tries to comfort him, but her amiable behaviour (she refers to herself as a ‘new relative’ and refers to marriage in 839-840) only makes Achilles more uncomfortable. He states it is ‘disgraceful’ (830: αἰσχρὸν) for him to speak to women – a rather uptight remark, especially considering Clytaemnestra’s friendliness. When Clytaemnestra asks him to join hands (an intimate gesture, see above on the *agōn* between Agamemnon and Menelaus) and explicitly refers to him as her future son in law, Achilles’ shock overrides his (exaggerated) politeness. He rudely repeats her words as a question⁷⁴ and asks if Clytaemnestra is ‘out of her mind’ (838). He bluntly adds that he has never courted her daughter (841) and suggests that someone has deceived them both (846).⁷⁵ Clytaemnestra, now realising she has been too friendly to Achilles, tries to take hasty leave (851-852): ‘Goodbye; for I can’t look you in the eyes anymore, / because I have proved to be a liar and have suffered something unworthy.’ Her downcast eyes and her self-description as ‘unworthy’ (because she is a victim of deception⁷⁶) are a visible sign of *aidōs* in the sense of ‘shame’.

Suddenly, the OM enters the stage. He expresses his loyalty to Clytaemnestra (not to Agamemnon; a tactical move, considering the news he is about to convey) and reveals that Agamemnon plans to kill Iphigenia. He mentions their close relationship as father and

⁷² Conacher (1967, 260-261), Cairns (1992, 305-314), and Collard and Morwood (2017b, 34-35) all agree on this reading.

⁷³ Collard and Morwood (2017b), 452. Stockert (1992b, 439) remarks that some scholars wrongly consider Achilles’ reaction to Clytaemnestra (821: ‘Lady Modesty, who is this woman I see,’) to be funny. It is surprising rather than funny to see a queen in an army camp and Achilles’ reaction indicates he acknowledges the impropriety of his surprise.

⁷⁴ Clytaemnestra (835-836a): θέμις μάλιστα, τὴν ἐμὴν ἐπεὶ γαμεῖς / παῖδ’, ‘You *are* allowed, because you will marry my / child.’ Achilles (837): ποίους γάμους φῆς; ‘What marriage are you talking about?’. ποῖος plus the repetition of the speaker’s idea is ‘indignant or disdainful, and colloquial’ (Collard and Morwood 2017b 455).

⁷⁵ Collard and Morwood (2017b, 456) translate 846 to ‘perhaps we were misinterpreting the other’. However, this is a strange toning down of ψεύδω ‘to lie’. Additionally, seeing Clytaemnestra’s response in 847 (‘But have I been terribly treated?’) and Achilles’ in 849 (‘Maybe someone was making a mockery of both me and you,’), it is more likely that Achilles is hinting at actual deception by a third party. Stockert (1992b, 444-445), who argues that it means ‘„wir sprechen vielleicht beide die Wahrheit“ oder „wir lügen wohl beide nicht“’, agrees that it cannot mean ‘misinterpreting’.

⁷⁶ Collard and Morwood (2017b, 457).

daughter (873: πατήρ ὁ φύσας ‘the father who begot her’) and Agamemnon himself as the murderer (idem: αὐτόχειρ ‘with his own hands’⁷⁷), thereby stressing how Agamemnon’s plan (physically) violates *aidōs*. In response, Clytaemnestra first laments her own fate (876a, 888), Agamemnon’s madness (876b, 878), Helen’s homecoming (882), and the false marriage (884). Remarkably, although the OM focusses on Iphigenia (875, 887), Clytaemnestra is more concerned with her own fate. The same goes for Achilles, who is upset by the dishonour done to him and considers his damaged pride worse than the hurt done to Clytaemnestra and Iphigenia.⁷⁸

Achilles’ arrogance contrasts with Clytaemnestra’s next action, i.e. self-degradation via supplication (900-916). She begins by describing the physical *aidōs* part of supplication: ‘I will not be ashamed (οὐκ ἐπαιδεσθήσομαι ‘γὼ) to *fall to your knees*,’ (emphasis added) and repeats this in 911-912: ‘I don’t have another altar to flee to other than your knee, / and no friend near me’. Normally, as a noblewoman it would be shameful for her to supplicate someone, especially a young unmarried man in an army camp. She defends her behaviour by playing into Achilles’ sense of honour by addressing him as a demigod (901). Next, she contrasts Achilles’ obligations to herself and Iphigenia (after all, she thought he was her future son-in-law⁷⁹) with Agamemnon’s ‘cruel and shameless’ acts (913a), again playing into Achilles’ pride. Finally, she admits she is ashamed, not because of her supplication but because she, a noblewoman, finds herself in an army camp (913b-915a).⁸⁰ As mentioned, although Clytaemnestra was introduced as a proud woman concerned with female *aidōs*, she also knows when to push it aside for tactical reasons. Her appeals to Achilles’ pride are successful, as he turns her and Iphigenia’s terrible fate into a matter of his own honour and responsibility.⁸¹ Achilles says his ‘proud heart is raised up highly’ but is controlled because he

⁷⁷ Cf. Clytaemnestra in 1177-1178: : Ἀπόλεσέν σ’, ὃ τέκνον, ὁ φυτεύσας πατήρ, / αὐτὸς κτανὼν, οὐκ ἄλλος οὐδ’ ἄλλη χερί “Child, your father who begot you has destroyed you, / having killed you himself, not someone else nor with another hand?”

⁷⁸ 889: ‘I am also angry with your husband, and I do not simply take it like this.’; 897: ‘I heard that you [Clytaemnestra] are miserable, my own situation I do not take lightly.’

⁷⁹ Stockert (1992b, 456): ‘Klyt. [betont] vorerst ihren *rechtlichen* Anspruch gegenüber Achill: Er galt als Bräutigam Iphigeniens und ist verpflichtet, ihr beizustehen (...); anschließend verweist sie auf ihren *moralischen* Anspruch, aus dieser hoffnungslosen Situation, inmitten einer tobenden Menge, gerettet zu werden’.

⁸⁰ Interestingly, not Clytaemnestra but the chorus refer to the close bond between mother and daughter that makes up for Clytaemnestra’s behaviour (917-918): ‘It is a terrible thing to bare children, and it brings a great love-charm, / and it is normal for everyone to toil for their children.’

⁸¹ According to Collard and Morwood (2017b, 475), Achilles is ‘able to control [his pride], from moral principle’ – but is he really? Clytaemnestra has focussed on stirring his proud heart and the beginning of his response indicates she succeeded. In the rest of his reply, Achilles does not acknowledge the terrible situation Clytaemnestra and Iphigenia find themselves in; what truly stirs him to action is that Agamemnon used his name without his permission. Moreover, his responses to the OM’s story (see 889, 897) convey ‘moral principle’ in the sense of excessive rather than controlled self-importance.

was taught ‘simple [i.e. reasonable] manners’ (919-927). He explains these manners as only following good leadership (828-829), not realising that describing his generals’ willingness to murder a family member as ‘bad leadership’ is a gross understatement. He then connects protecting both women to his own capabilities and decorum (932-939a⁸²), his body’s purity (940-942), and his honour and reputation (944-954⁸³). His concluding remarks are the pinnacle of *anaidēs* behaviour, i.e. arrogance. Achilles says that he is not angry because he was deprived of marriage (960: ‘countless girls hunt for my bed’), but because Agamemnon dishonoured him by using his name without permission; he would have allowed it for the greater good of the army (965-967). He ends by stating that he has shown himself to be ‘the greatest god’ (973-974).⁸⁴

Clytaemnestra resumes her appeal to Achilles’ pride by praising his modesty and simple manners (979-980, 983-984, 990-991). Considering Achilles’ previous behaviour, Clytaemnestra’s words cannot be taken at face value and, as such, reveal Euripides’ ironic criticism of the young hero. Clytaemnestra is not really praising Achilles but rather playing into his arrogance. She augments this by simultaneously putting her self-regarding *aidōs* (self-respect) aside. She does so especially in 981-982: ‘I am ashamed, because I tell a pitiful story, / suffering for myself; and you have no part in my evils’.⁸⁵ Next, Clytaemnestra offers Iphigenia’s *aidōs* to Achilles. She says that, although it is inappropriate for an unmarried girl

⁸² ‘But you, wretched woman, having suffered because of your most beloved, the things that a young man can do, to such an extent, having enwrapped you with pity, I’ll pity you, and your girl will never be slaughtered by her father, because she was betrothed to me; because I will never give myself to go along in your husband’s twists. Because my name, although it has not taken up a sword, my name will murder your child.’

935

⁸³ ‘I was the most evil man of the Greeks, I, a nobody, a Menelaus among men born not of Peleus, but of a vengeful spirit, if my name murders †for your husband†.

945

By Nereus, he who is raised by the sea waves, father of Thetis who bore me, lord Agamemnon will not seize your daughter, nor will the tips of his hand touch her dress; or Sipylus will be great, the stay of the barbarians, from where the race of generals sprouts, and the name of Phthia will be spoken nowhere.’

950

⁸⁴ This statement refers to Clytaemnestra addressing Achilles as a demigod in 900-901. According to Collard and Morwood (2017b, 487), Achilles here ‘suddenly reassures Clyt.’ and ‘at last acknowledges Clyt.’s emphatic hopes from his ancestry’ (cf. 896, 901, 903, 911). However, his words convey arrogance rather than reassurance. Additionally, the chorus’ comment (975-976: ‘You have spoken, child of Peleus, worthy both of you / and of the sea-deity, the holy god.’) further stresses that this scene revolves around Achilles’ honour, not about the fate of Clytaemnestra and Iphigenia.

⁸⁵ However, because of her supplication, she did make Achilles responsible for her and Iphigenia’s well-being!

to do so, Iphigenia will supplicate him if he wants her to (992-997). Achilles declines her offer, not for Iphigenia's sake but for his own; he fears being reproached by the army if he would accept it (999). He urges Clytaemnestra to try and talk sense into Agamemnon; he cannot do this, because it would be disrespectful towards his general and the army would criticise him for it (1011-1021). In her most submissive response to Achilles so far, Clytaemnestra puts aside her sense of honour one last time (1033): 'These things shall be; rule me (ἄρχε·); I must be your servant (σοί με δουλεύειν χρεών)', δουλεύω meaning 'to be a slave'. The characters in this scene sequence, then, seem to value *aidōs*, but ultimately reveal a disconcerting truth. Female *aidōs* is not an objective measure of good behaviour, but a commodity, a way to get something done. Additionally, male *aidōs*, i.e. pride and bravery, is revealed to be a tool to mask one's true *anaidēs* nature, in Achilles' case self-importance.

All is well that ends *aidōs*

The play's last two episodes and the epilogue are the epitome of the abovementioned hypocritical use of *aidōs*, starting with Clytaemnestra pointing out this faulty behaviour in Agamemnon. She brings Iphigenia before him, stressing her obedience (1120: πειθαρχοῦσά σοι). Collard and Morwood wonder if πειθαρχέω, 'only here in Eur., and a rather heavy word', echoes Clytaemnestra's submission to Achilles.⁸⁶ A more plausible interpretation is that Clytaemnestra contrasts Achilles' and Agamemnon's behaviour towards herself and Iphigenia to shame her husband. Achilles, who is not family, has promised to protect them, whereas Agamemnon – *pater familias*, husband, and father – is about to violate his obligations to them in the most gruesome way. By framing Iphigenia's relationship with Agamemnon as one of an obedient supplicant to someone who fails to be a good father and supplicated, Clytaemnestra stresses how immoral Agamemnon's behaviour is. She then contrasts his martial (i.e. male) ambition (1171-1175, 1194-1195⁸⁷) and subsequent treatment of Iphigenia as a commodity (1168b-1169⁸⁸) with herself, the perfect wife and mother adhering to female *aidōs* (1148-1164⁸⁹). Clytaemnestra also points out Agamemnon's physical violation of *aidōs* by stating the following (1177-1178): "Child, the father who begot

⁸⁶ Collard and Morwood (2017b), 520.

⁸⁷ She asks if he expects her to sit idly in an empty home while he is away campaigning.

⁸⁸ 'A fine thing / to pay for a bad woman [Helen] with your children as payment (μισθὸν ἀποτεῖσαι τέκνα)', μισθός meaning 'pay(ment), recompense'. Stockert (1992b, 523) remarks that this is Clytaemnestra's main reproach, i.e. 'die Absurdität dieses Opfers, das nur dem Zweck diene, ein ruchloses Weib zurückzugewinnen'. Translation (1194-1195): 'Have these things crossed your mind yet, or do you only think about / carrying your sceptre and being general (ἢ σκῆπτρά σοι μόνον διαφέρειν καὶ στρατηλατεῖν μέλει)?'

⁸⁹ I.e. showing moderation in love (the 'hidden Cypris' rule), always tending to the household and Agamemnon's needs, and giving him four children.

you (ὃ τέκνον, ὁ φυτεύσας πατήρ) has destroyed you, / having killed you himself, not someone else nor with another hand (οὐκ ἄλλος οὐδ' ἄλλη χερί)".⁹⁰

Although Clytaemnestra rightfully reproaches Agamemnon for his disregard for several forms of *aidōs*, she violates it herself also. She threatens to murder Agamemnon if he kills Iphigenia (1180-1182⁹¹). Furthermore, she sarcastically misuses the traditional language of supplication (1183-1185: 'Do not, by the gods (πρὸς θεῶν), do not force me / to be evil against you, and do not become evil yourself.') and ritual sacrifice (1185-1193). She sneers about what rituals Agamemnon will perform when slaughtering Iphigenia, what he will pray for, and asks if he will embrace his other children upon his return to Argos, which 'wouldn't be right' for him (οὐ θέμις σοι) to do. Collard and Morwood explain that 'as a killer of his own kin Ag. could not supplicate family survivors for purification (...); the phrase οὐ θέμις 'no(t) right' is used of impure persons' being forbidden various actions.⁹² Finally, Clytaemnestra proposes a cruel solution. The Greeks must draw lots to see whose child dies, or Menelaus must kill his daughter Hermione (Helen is her mother; 1198-1202). Clytaemnestra, then, claims to follow *aidōs*, but actually uses it to disguise her harshness resentment towards Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Helen.⁹³ Ironically, the chorus also does not see her immorality (1209-1210): 'Obey her (πιθοῦ); for saving a child is a good thing, / Agamemnon; no one of the mortals can contradict this.'

After Clytaemnestra's aggressive words, Iphigenia appeals to Agamemnon's emotions and fatherly love, stressing her own innocence and again demonstrating a powerful sense of female *aidōs*. She repeatedly calls him 'father' (1211, 1229, 1237, 1245; her and Orestes' father in 1220, 1242). In a perverse variation on the supplication ritual, uses her own body as a substitute for the traditional attributes of a suppliant (1216-1219⁹⁴), thereby physically violating *aidōs*. Like Clytaemnestra, Iphigenia invokes the bond between herself and Agamemnon, but does not criticise him for violating it. Instead, she stresses the love they share, she being his first-born daughter (1220-1230), the terrible pain Clytaemnestra should

⁹⁰ See also the chorus' perversely eroticised description of Iphigenia's sacrifice in 1080-1084.

⁹¹ 'Because there is need for only a slight pretext (βραχείας προφάσεως), / and I and the children you left behind / will you give you the welcome that you deserve to get.' Stockert (1992b, 532) interprets this as an indication of the inevitability of Iphigenia's sacrifice and Clytaemnestra's subsequent revenge, and as an ironic statement. The irony is not explained, but I think Stockert means the following: by referring to Agamemnon murdering their daughter as 'a slight pretext', Clytaemnestra mocks his willingness to kill Iphigenia.

⁹² Collard and Morwood (2017b), 538.

⁹³ Vellacott (1975, 47) remarks that she is 'so unconscious of her unconscionable perversity that she can add: "Now if anything I've said / Is untrue or irrelevant, tell me."' in 1206-1207.

⁹⁴ I.e. an olive brand with white wool (Collard and Morwood 2017b, 543).

not endure a second time (1233-1235⁹⁵), and the crying pleas of baby Orestes (1241-1248). Iphigenia concludes by asking him for two physical “tokens”, a final glance and kiss, so she can remember him in Hades (1237-1239). Interwoven with this emotional appeal is a second argument, one already made by Agamemnon (396-399) and Menelaus (491-494), viz. that she should not suffer because of Helen’s unfaithfulness.

Agamemnon replies with a variation on his ‘yoke of necessity’ statement (1255-1258):

‘I am sensible regarding pitiful things [Iphigenia’s speech] and [things that are] not 1255
 [Clytaemnestra’s speech],
 and I love my own children; because I would be mad [if I didn’t].
 I have this terrible thing to do, lady,
 and [it is] a terrible thing also to not do it; because I must accomplish the same.’

He then turns to Iphigenia, repeating the above and adding two other obligations: their duty to protect Greece and the honour of Greek women from ‘plundering barbarians’ (1269-1275⁹⁶). Ironically, Agamemnon not only equates Helen and Paris with all Greek women/Greece and a barbarian invasion, which is absurd, but also uses the same arguments he reproached Menelaus for earlier (382-390, 396-399). Lastly, because Iphigenia will echo these words later (1377-1382, see below) their hollowness is retrospectively stressed here.

In her monody (1283-1335), Iphigenia expands on her supplication to Agamemnon, but she is more admonishing. She acknowledges the fame her sacrifice will bring her (1309, also in 1376, 1383, 1398-1399, 1446, 1468, 1474, 1502; the chorus in 1504; glory for Clytaemnestra in 1440) but also strongly condemns her father and once again stresses their bond (1312-1318⁹⁷). Collard and Morwood suggest that Iphigenia’s ‘unexpected and bitter

⁹⁵ ‘Don’t, by Pelops and by your father / and by the mother, who, suffering pains when she gave birth to me before, / is now in great pain for a second time.’

⁹⁶ ‘Not Menelaus has enslaved me, child,
 nor have I gone with his wish; 1270
 but Greece, for her I must, whether I want it or not,
 sacrifice you; that is the necessity that masters me.
 For she must be free, as far as is in your power, child,
 and in mine, and we, being Greeks, mustn’t have our wives
 be forcefully plundered by barbarians.’ 1275

⁹⁷ ‘He who begot me (ὁ δὲ τεκὼν με), wretched,
 mother, mother,
 goes off, having handed me over to abandonment.
 I, most wretched, having seen the bitter, 1315
 bitter Helen-of-woe [Δυσσελέναν, a play on Δύσπαρις, see *Iliad* 3.39]
 am murdered, utterly destroyed (φονεύομαι διόλλυμαι)
 in unholy slaughter by my unholy father (σφαγαῖσιν ἀνοσίοισιν ἀνοσίου πατρός).’
 Note the strong words φονεύομαι, σφαγαῖσιν ἀνοσίοισιν, and ἀνοσίου πατρός.

denunciation of her father' is one phase of the internal turmoil, caused by Agamemnon abandoning and Achilles promising to save her (1358-1368a), that leads to 'her resolve to die voluntarily'.⁹⁸ In my opinion, her harsh words are not unexpected. Iphigenia's emotional plea has been unsuccessful, and she has seen her own mother insulted and heard her more combative words. Consequently, it is not strange that Iphigenia now expresses herself more fiercely. Moreover, Iphigenia does not die voluntarily. This 'bitter denunciation' of Agamemnon and the fact that she later merely echoes his reasons rather than providing her own (see above) indicate that she too uses *aidōs* to hide her true feelings, viz. anger, fear, and grief.⁹⁹

After her monody, Iphigenia alerts Clytaemnestra to a crowd of men approaching, including Achilles. She tries to hide in a tent; she is 'ashamed to look at Achilles' (1341b: Ἀχιλλέα τόνδ' ἰδεῖν αἰσχύνομαι), because the 'ill fortune of [her] marriage brings [her] shame' (1342b: αἰδῶ φέρει). Clytaemnestra dismisses her fastidiousness and states they do not have that luxury in their position (1343-1344). Stockert considers Iphigenia's *aidōs* regarding herself (shame) and Achilles (respect) appropriate, whereas Collard and Morwood remark that her shame 'may override' her fear of being taken away to sacrifice.¹⁰⁰ This is highly unlikely, considering Iphigenia's monody. Moreover, her remark is in line with the abovementioned, i.e. Iphigenia using *aidōs* to mask her true feelings, in this case fear.

After Achilles has reiterated his promise to protect both women, again being more preoccupied with his own honour and reputation than the women's fate, Iphigenia begins her famous change of heart speech. She first urges Clytaemnestra not be angry with Agamemnon, reminding her of her duties as a wife and a Greek queen (1369-1370). Next, she acknowledges the importance of Achilles' reputation; he should not be involved with their fate, because the army would 'slander' him (1371-1373¹⁰¹). She then moves on to self-regarding (sense of and pursuit of honour) and other regarding (Greece, its female inhabitants,

⁹⁸ Collard and Morwood (2017b), 566.

⁹⁹ Also consider her final words (1330-1335):

'How full of suffering is the race of mortals, how full of suffering,
and what must be done is something unlucky
for men to find out. 1330

Ah, ah!

great sufferings, and great pains

the daughter of Tyndareus [Helen] has placed upon the children of Danaus.' 1335

¹⁰⁰ Stockert (1992b, 575); Collard and Morwood (2017b, 574).

¹⁰¹ Collard and Morwood (2017b, 586) wonder if she is understating or euphemizing the army's threat to Achilles (according to 1349-1353, the army and the Myrmidons threatened to stone Achilles if he would save Iphigenia). However, it seems unlikely that Achilles' explicit account of the army's threat can be misunderstood. Instead, Iphigenia uses a euphemism out of *aidōs* (i.e. respect) for Achilles. Also Stockert (1992b, 584).

and men in general) *aidōs* to justify her self-sacrifice. She echoes Agamemnon's 1269-1275 (1378-1386¹⁰²), states that Achilles' life is more valuable than hers – than all women's lives, in fact – (1392-1394), and frames her death as female virtues in an ironic, grim twist of a girl's traditional *aidōs* (1398-1399): 'Sacrifice me, destroy Troy; because these things [will be] my long-lived / memorial and *my children* and *my marriage* and *my reputation*' (emphasis added). Iphigenia then turns to Clytaemnestra, who is crying. She forbids her to do so; they will both be renowned throughout Greece, so there is no reason to cry (1433-1466).¹⁰³ Stockert and Collard and Morwood argue that this passage shows Iphigenia's moral strength. Given the emptiness of her words (see above), I disagree. Moreover, there are two lines in this passage that validate an ironic rather than a sincere reading. First, in 1435 Iphigenia forbids Clytaemnestra to cry: 'don't make me a coward!' In other words, Iphigenia does not really stand by her death, as she admits that her mother's tears could change her mind. Second, when Clytaemnestra asks why she cannot cry Iphigenia answers (1440b): 'I have been saved, and because of me, you will be renowned.' Again, she gives no personal reason for her self-sacrifice, but echoes her father's references to *aidōs*¹⁰⁴ to hide her own feelings (doubt, according to 1435). Iphigenia, then, echoes male *aidōs* and presents her self-sacrifice, a male act, as the ultimate female virtue. In doing so, she unconsciously demonstrates that *aidōs* approves of extreme and unjust violence and is inherently meaningless. Like Stockert and Collard and Morwood, Achilles compliments Iphigenia's supposed brave patriotism (1404-1405).¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² '[T]he whole of mighty Greece looks at me now,
and the passage of the ships and the destruction of the Phrygians depends on me,
and regarding the future women, if the barbarians do something, 1380
to no longer allow them to snatch them from blessed Greece,
because they have paid for the loss of Helen, whom Paris seized.
All these things I will deliver, after I have died, and my fame,
as I've set free Greece, will be blessed. [continues on the next page]
And I must not love [my] life too much; 1385
because you bore me for all the Greeks in common, not for you alone.'

¹⁰³ Stockert (1992b, 590) considers Iphigenia's words to be 'visionary' because they transcend the traditional view that it is 'sad and inglorious' for women to die unmarried and childless. Collard and Morwood (2017b, 584) provide an overview of where Iphigenia's speech echoes Agamemnon's patriotic arguments. 1380-1381, 1400-1401 correspond to 1266, 1275: 'stop the barbarians'; 1384, 1401 correspond to 1273: 'freedom for Greeks'; 1386-1389 correspond to 1269-73: 'the cause of Greece is overriding'. Despite the many echoes, they consider Iphigenia's speech as 'emphatically her own' because she says it is (1375), because she uses more than twenty first person verbs, pronouns, and possessives, and because she is 'determined and confident'. The first and third argument are demonstrably questionable. Additionally, it is logical that Iphigenia speaks in first person; she is talking about herself. This does not mean that her self-sacrifice is voluntary, and it does not detract from the fact that she does not use her own words, but those of her father.

¹⁰⁴ See also 1475-1509, in which Iphigenia (and the chorus in 1504b) reiterates her duty to Greece, her fame, and her obedience to Artemis' wish – which has still not been authorised.

¹⁰⁵ He still tries to connect her rescue to his own honour (1412-1415, 1430).

IA's epilogue begins with a messenger describing Iphigenia's sacrifice to a grieving Clytaemnestra. All the Greeks were gathered, Agamemnon 'groaned aloud and, having turned his head backwards, / sent forth tears, having held his garment before his eyes' (1549-1550), gestures and sounds indicating shame. The messenger relays the sacrificial rituals and Iphigenia's last words (again echoes of Agamemnon's *aidōs* arguments), which left a deep impression on everyone (1552-1555¹⁰⁶). He concludes by recounting how Iphigenia was replaced by a hind, adding that her fame will be everlasting throughout all of Greece (1605-1606). Clytaemnestra's desperate cry for her daughter (1615-1618¹⁰⁷) clash with Agamemnon's proud joy. He tells Clytaemnestra that they are blessed because their daughter now dwells among the gods (1621-1622¹⁰⁸). He then sends her back to Argos to resume care of the household and bids her 'a perfunctory and cold farewell'¹⁰⁹ (1623-1626).

With Iphigenia being saved, Agamemnon's predicament has been resolved better than he could have imagined. Yet, *IA*'s end is a wry one. Agamemnon hides behind *aidōs* one last time, so he does not have to acknowledge the loss of his daughter nor his wife's grief. Rather than reflecting on the terrible present and future (the Trojan War will be a long, arduous battle), Agamemnon is happy to uphold his nobleman's pride, pursue his *aristeia* in Troy, and continue with his life. He and Achilles have played by the rules of *aidōs*, so he does not have to acknowledge the terrible consequences of their actions and indecisiveness or arrogance, respectively. Iphigenia has successfully hidden her fear by clinging to *aidōs* even in her last moments. Clytaemnestra remains, heartbroken and with her mind set on a future violation of *aidōs*: murdering her husband.

Context: *IA* and Euripidean drama

As mentioned in Chapter 1, critics have interpreted *IA* both literally and ironically, notably regarding its characters' volatility, patriotism, and Panhellenic ideals (all various forms of *aidōs*). In the following, I will contextualise these and *IA*'s other main *aidōs* elements (i.e. the characters' obsession with social, moral, religious and gender norms) in Euripides' oeuvre to further support an ironic reading.

¹⁰⁶ "“Father, I am here for you;
I give my body for my fatherland
and the whole of the Greek earth to
sacrifice, while [your men] lead me, willingly, to the goddess' altar,
if this is the oracle.”

1555

¹⁰⁷ 'Child, which of the gods has stolen you? / How can I speak to you? How do I not say / that these words are false comforts, so as to stop me in / my mournful grief for you?'

¹⁰⁸ The chorus express the same sentiment in 1613-1614.

¹⁰⁹ Collard and Morwood (2017b), 643.

Aristotle describes *IA* as an example of ‘inconsistency (...); because the girl who supplicates does not at all resemble her later self.’ (*Poetics* 1454a32-33) This comment has long been interpreted as a negative assessment of the play, but modern scholars have nuanced this view. Michelakis points out that Aristotle refers to *IA* as an example of ‘consistent inconsistency’, which is the best kind of inconsistency.¹¹⁰ Gregory remarks that not just Iphigenia is volatile, but also Agamemnon and Menelaus. Moreover, this character trait is a feature of their literary tradition¹¹¹ and a common element used by all tragedians to create suspense.¹¹² Finally, although the characters’ volatility is not realistic in the sense of life-like, it is characteristic of Euripidean realism, which features changes of mind as an aspect of human nature.¹¹³ Another element of Euripidean realism is the expression of intense emotions. As has been demonstrated, *IA*’s characters frequently refer to the expressive and performative value of their actions, i.e. the many descriptions of their weeping, groaning, silence, and the affective gestures they make (e.g. Clytaemnestra when supplicating Achilles and Iphigenia when doing so in front of Agamemnon).¹¹⁴ This also resonates with another remark by Aristotle about Euripides’ plays: ‘Sophocles said he created characters as they ought to be (οἷους δεῖ ποιεῖν), Euripides as they really are (οἷοι εἰσίν).’ (*Poetics* 1460b32-35). In other words, Sophocles holds up a mirror by showing how people ought to behave, whereas Euripides’ criticism revolves around showing people’s immoral behaviour, including *IA*’s characters’ volatility and opportunism.

This critique on people clinging to moral touchstones and reason to justify their behaviour is typical of Euripidean drama, notably its female characters. Although the audience pities Euripides’ heroines (Phaedra, Medea, Electra, Clytaemnestra) because of their terrible situation and admires their strength, their crimes are not glossed over. Scodel connects this interest in the causes of moral errors and critique of people who use ethical terminology without understanding it to Socratic thought, more specifically to the Socratic paradox.¹¹⁵ According to this paradox, people always want to do the right thing and only make mistakes out of ignorance. Scodel refers to Phaedra’s statement in *Hippolytus* 428, where she remarks

¹¹⁰ Michelakis (2006), 114-115.

¹¹¹ Gregory (2020), 400-402.

¹¹² Justina Gregory, “Euripidean Tragedy,” in *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. Justina Gregory (Malden (MA), Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 251–270.

¹¹³ Michael Lloyd, “Realism in Euripides,” in *Brill’s Companion to Euripides Volume I*, ed. Andreas Markantonatos (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 605–626.

¹¹⁴ Iphigenia uses a highly affective “physical” memory, viz. she being the first one to sit on her father’s lap and embracing him (1220-1230).

¹¹⁵ Ruth Scodel, “Euripides and Ancient Greek Philosophy,” in *Brill’s Companion to Euripides Volume II*, ed. Andreas Markantonatos (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 966–987.

that people know what is good, but do not ‘work through it’ (ἐκπονοῦμεν¹¹⁶) out of laziness or hedonism. Phaedra includes *aidōs* in the various pleasures and states that, if people knew bad from good *aidōs*, there would be two different words for it (375-389). Scodel concludes that Euripides neither refutes nor endorses the Socratic paradox, but I argue for Vellacott’s decidedly critical and ironic reading of Euripidean drama. Regarding Phaedra, he argues that she ‘is not whitewashed; she does long for her stepson’s love, and when she destroys herself she does her best to destroy him too.’¹¹⁷ The other heroines are also aware of their *anaidēs* behaviour. Clytaemnestra knowingly degrades herself when supplicating Achilles, Phaedra knows her love is forbidden, and Medea and Electra gloat over their excessive revenge. They do this precisely because they know that what they are doing is wrong and use their knowledge of *aidōs* to justify their behaviour. Euripides criticises his heroines through irony, showing how they actively empty virtues such as ‘honour’, ‘restraint’, and ‘(self-)respect’ by using them at their convenience.

Another behaviour related to the hypocritical use of *aidōs* is the patriotism and Panhellenism of Euripidean characters. Vellacott discusses Euripides’ engagement with the theme of war in detail. First, the so-called political plays, *The Children of Heracles* and *The Suppliant Women*, present war as just and necessary. However, these narratives also show that, once victory is achieved, people are painfully quick to forget their own and others’ suffering caused by the war.¹¹⁸ Euripides is more negative in *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, *The Women of Troy*, and *Helen*. In these plays, he foregrounds ‘the nature of war and its effect on human lives’, viz. the destruction of the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals, notably women, children, and the elderly. Ironically, war’s devastating impact is made even more painful by the fact that it is time and again resignedly accepted as something necessary and out of human control.¹¹⁹ *The Phoenician Women*, *Orestes*, and *IA* are Euripides’ strongest denunciations of war.¹²⁰ The tragedian shows how people wrongly justify war and ignore its destructive impact on people, not just individuals (the tragic protagonists) but on entire communities. The delusion of *IA*’s Agamemnon, Menelaus, Iphigenia, and Achilles (and, to a certain extent, the second messenger) and its consequences have already been discussed. Another example of cruelty justified by “principles” and subsequent moral corruption is the chorus in *Orestes*. The final part of the play revolves around Orestes’ and Electra’s plan to

¹¹⁶ LSJ s.v. πονέω: ‘I. to work hard, do work, suffer toil’.

¹¹⁷ Vellacott (1975), 120.

¹¹⁸ Vellacott (1975), 156-160.

¹¹⁹ Vellacott (1975), 160-167.

¹²⁰ Vellacott (1975), 167-176.

save themselves from capital punishment by kidnapping Hermione and murdering Helen. The chorus of Greek women is easily persuaded to aid them in their terrible scheme. Within sixty lines, their hesitation changes into an enthusiastic ‘Slay, slay, smite destroy her [Helen] / (...) / slay the betrayer of country and husband!’ (1303-1305).

The last two themes to be contextualised in Euripides’ oeuvre are religious customs, more specifically human sacrifice, and gender norms. Regarding the first, Kovacs states that, since Euripides often dramatizes the death of young people by sacrifice for their community – e.g. Iphigenia in *IA*, Menoeceus in *The Phoenician Women*, and Macaria in *The Children of Heracles* – ‘there is no indication that [their] death (...) [is] intended as anything but an affective remedy, calling forth wholehearted admiration.’¹²¹ However, Rehm notes that human sacrifice before war was a perversion of the traditional ritual animal slaughter. Although various plays feature the death of humans, shedding innocent blood was not required nor condoned by Greek religion.¹²² Moreover, Vellacott argues for a different reading of the sacrifices referred to by Kovacs. However selfless Menoeceus’ death might be, its necessity is never made explicated (cf. the “reasons” for Iphigenia’s death). Additionally, the futility of his death is underlined by the play’s grim ending. Thebes is invaded, Oedipus and Antigone are banished, and both of her brothers are dead. In *The Children of Heracles*, it is prophesied that Persephone demands the death of a noble virgin in the upcoming battle against king Eurystheus. Macaria’s self-sacrifice is not one of piety but a ‘contemptuous challenge’ of the cowardly king Demophon, who tries to avoid battle. Irony also colours king Iolaus’ final salute to Macaria (600-601): ‘Farewell! Reverence prevents me from speaking ill of Demeter’s daughter, / the goddess to whom your body is devoted.’ The king knows it is a mortal sin to sacrifice a human, but because a goddess demands it, he cannot go against it.

Gregory notes that Euripides often (implicitly) challenges the gods’ behaviour, whether they are actively involved in human lives or treat them with indifference.¹²³ This is not meant as criticism of the divine, but points to shared humanity as a place to look for help. However, in Euripides’ plays people often fail in this regard because of their own behaviour and because of their collective habits/institutions, e.g. women’s position in society. In *IA*, Iphigenia is used as a commodity by her own father; in *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, she is a woman mentally destroyed by Agamemnon’s cruelty, the subsequent murders in her family,

¹²¹ Kovacs (2003), 162.

¹²² Rush Rehm, “Ritual in Euripides,” in *Brill’s Companion to Euripides Volume II* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 841–862.

¹²³ Gregory (2005), 264.

and men's martial ambition. Hecuba in the eponymous play is insane with grief and anger, but also excessive in her revenge due to her mental state caused by war. Additionally, four out of five victims of human sacrifice are women.¹²⁴ Euripides' portrayal of women, then, is not misogynous, but meant to criticise men's treatment of them, especially during war. A final example of ironic criticism of this theme is the women's speech in Euripides' plays. The irony and criticism of Agamemnon that shines through Iphigenia echoing his words has already been discussed. Battezzato provides another example.¹²⁵ In the case of Medea (*Medea* 214-265), traditional blame speech against women becomes self-blame, a *captatio benevolentiae* in front of the chorus of Corinthian women. Medea also circumvents male accusations of female cowardice by indirectly praising women's ability to bare children, which she presents as more courageous than the bravery of soldiers.¹²⁶ Although in Euripides' plays a woman's well-being, however good her position, is ultimately dependent on 'the will, the good opinion, and the activities of men'¹²⁷, it is precisely this attitude that the heroines criticise by either echoing (Iphigenia in *IA*) or appropriating it (Medea in *Medea*).

In conclusion, Euripides uses *IA*'s tragic characters to criticise not the notion of *aidōs* itself, but its foundations. By placing them in, in Karl Reinhardt's words, 'das Feld der Kämpfe, Irrungen, Täuschungsmanöver und Paradoxien der Psyche',¹²⁸ Euripides shows that people define moral concepts and then wrongly cling to these fallible (because manmade) "virtues". This resonates with the rest of Euripides' oeuvre. In his other tragedies, he does not criticise people, but the institutions (war, power dynamics between men and women in society as a whole) that they corrupt with their incorrect understandings of morals.

¹²⁴ Vellacott (1075), 201.

¹²⁵ Luigi Battezzato, "The Language of Euripides," in *Brill's Companion to Euripides Volume I*, ed. Andreas Markantonatos (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 561-564.

¹²⁶ Cf. also Iphigenia's remark that 'It is better that one man sees the light than countless women' (1394) and Andromache's remark that 'It is natural for women to get pleasure from their present misfortunes, by constantly having them on their lips.' (*Andromache* 93b-95).

¹²⁷ Vellacott (1975), 126.

¹²⁸ Karl Reinhardt, "Die Sinnkrise bei Euripides'," in *Tradition und Geist* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 235.

Chapter 3. The “perfect” world: close reading and contextualising the film

In this chapter, I argue for an ironic reading of *TK* through close reading and contextualisation. I discuss scenes by focussing on the characters’ speech, deliverance, and physicality, and point out echoes from *IA*. The filmic characters are obsessed with the notions of ‘perfection’ – i.e. control, achievements/successes, visible wealth and beauty, and being and continuing to be the perfect modern family – and ‘debt’, defined as paying off debts and framing everything, including relationships, as a transaction. These traits, the characters’ detached behaviour, and the film’s absurdity echo *IA*’s characters hiding behind *aidōs* to avoid responsibility.

Establishing ‘perfection’ and ‘debt’

TK starts with a black screen, accompanied by Schubert’s *Stabat Mater in F Minor*, a grave liturgical hymn that tells about Jesus’ death on the cross.¹²⁹ Since Jesus died for the sins of mankind, the non-diegetic music evokes the concepts of guilt, in the sense of being guilty of something (a sin), and of debt and balance (to compensate for sinful mankind, the son of God, free from sin, had to die). There is a cut to an open-heart surgery: we see a surgical cloth and multiple pairs of hands operating with precise movements.¹³⁰ A second black screen is followed by a cut to the surgeon, Steven Murphy, removing his bloodied gloves and apron above an open bin. His clean hands and well-groomed appearance clash with the dirty clothes, filmed in close-up and while zooming in. The next scene shows a hospital hallway with Steven and his colleague, anaesthesiologist Matthew, walking towards the camera, which starts backtracking and keeps them in a long shot. They discuss their watches’ water resistance and Matthew offers to get Steven a discount on his next watch. Although the camera is at some distance, we hear their voices clearly. They are strangely monotone, and the men barely look at each other. Matthew walks a few feet behind Steven, who suddenly grabs his wrist to look at his watch. Like the back-tracking camera, this gesture feels intrusive and awkward. Then, there is a cut to Steven sitting alone in a diner, his back turned to the camera that slowly creeps up on him.¹³¹ He is joined by a teenage boy (Martin), whose grubby clothes

¹²⁹ ‘Jesus Christus schwebet am Kreuze / Blutig sank sein Haupt herunter / Blutig in des Todes Nacht.’

¹³⁰ Later in the film, we learn that Martin’s father died when Steven was performing heart surgery on him. As such, it is very likely that the patient we see is Martin’s father. Nepomuk Zettl (“Consider the Absurd: Uneasy Proximity in *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*, and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*,” in *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*, ed. Eddie Falvey (New York, London, Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2022, 134-135) provides a different reading of this scene. Because the heart is normally ‘a symbol for affection and thus (...) heavily guarded’, showing it unprotected in the hands of a surgeon evokes uneasiness (‘the proximal relations are that of a hunter to its prey’).

¹³¹ The wooden panels on the wall of the diner show forest scenes, including pictures of deer. This is the first visual nudge to *IA*.

and uncontrolled movements contrast with Steven's neat suit and motionless upright posture. Martin sloppily eats his meal while staring at Steven, who avoids his gaze. The scene is accompanied by haunting high-pitched non-melodic violin tones, a non-diegetic indication of Steven's uncomfortableness in Martin's presence. Next, Martin and Steven sit on the hood of a car at a deserted look-out place near a city. They are filmed in an extreme long shot slightly above ground-level with a slow, circular movement. Steven gives Martin a gift, which prompts an extreme close-up of Martin's hands revealing an expensive watch.¹³² Martin thanks and embraces Steven; his face is obscured by shadows, while the sunlight reveals Steven's blank expression and the hand he places on Martin's arm by way of an uncomfortable hug.

These first scenes establish the importance of perfection and debt in *TK*. As mentioned, the *Stabat mater* evokes the idea of guilt and debt, making it the first echo of *aidōs*. Moreover, it prompts the question which filmic character corresponds with Iphigenia, i.e. who must suffer for someone else's sins. The shot of Steven taking off his gloves makes us wonder whose blood is on his hands and serves as the starting point for some of *TK*'s main themes: the focus on bodies/body parts and its characters' obsession with perfection in the sense of cold precision and cleanliness. The dry second scene clashes with the first, making it oddly comic. Steven and Matthew make seemingly regular small talk about their watches, but their deliverance and physicality are "off". Their movements, which lack spontaneity, the representation of their bodies (they look like miniature figures, but are still clearly audible), and dry monotonous voices convey emotional detachment. The "watch dialogue" also builds on the underlying meaning of Steven's well-groomed appearance that was introduced by his hands and appearance in the first scene. Steven and his family value success and the material opulence, e.g. expensive watches, that comes with it (I will return to this later). The final scenes establish a bond between Steven and Martin. Steven's attire, posture, the expensive gift, and Martin's appearance stress the former's penchant for perfection and establish the latter as an outsider. Additionally, this scene builds on the watch dialogue between Steven and Matthew that established Steven's penchant for visible wealth. Martin's watch has a metal strap because it is more durable than leather and 'it's more expensive'. In retrospect, this scene (and the other instances where Steven gives Martin something or indulges him, see below) indicate that the surgeon is trying to right his past mistake of accidentally killing

¹³² While opening the gift, Martin repeatedly asks what it is. Wanting to know the contexts of gifts beforehand and spoiling surprises himself is not only a habit of Martin but also relates to perfection in the sense of balance and control. I will return to this later.

Martin's father. Owing someone something means that the other person has some kind of power over you. They may expect things from you ((im)material gifts, such as watches or frequent meetings) until you have repaid your debt. This scene, then, introduces *TK*'s second main theme, debt, by showing that relationships are based on transaction and reciprocity.

In conclusion, these scenes lay the groundwork for the rest *TK*. On the one hand, throughout the film its characters (and viewers) are confronted with extremities (such as the surgery in the first scene), which evoke strong feelings of uncomfortableness, disgust, and suspense. On the other hand, the characters are emotionless, self-centred, and matter-of-factly, which adds to the uncomfortable and unclear viewing experience. Their detached behaviour makes their suffering seem pointless, which is typical of the absurdist humour often attributed to *TK* (see Chapter 1). However, instead of showing the apparent meaninglessness of human existence as a whole,¹³³ the film reveals the emptiness of what people cling to and hide behind throughout their existence: perfection and balance.

An obsession with perfection

After Steven has given Martin an expensive watch, there is a cut to outside the house of Steven and his family. The camera slowly creeps up on the stately mansion and then cuts to inside a richly decorated dining room, hovering above the family as if it watches them. Present are Steven, his wife Anna, an elegant middle-aged woman and ophthalmologist with her own clinic, their daughter Kim, her younger brother Bob, and a sleeping Golden Retriever. The tense atmosphere from the previous scenes continues, as the family make remarkably stiff small talk (cf. the abovementioned "watch dialogue"). Anna says she wants to renovate her clinic before urging the children to sit up straight. Steven gruffly remarks that Bob still has not gotten a haircut, to which Anna responds that she likes his long hair. 'What about mine?' Kim asks. Anna adds that they 'all have lovely hair'.

The following evening, Kim does singing exercises in her room. Steven sits beside her on her bed, looking proud. Bob stands in front of a mirror brushing his hair. Despite Kim's voice being weak and unpitched, Steven applauds and asks if her director has given her a more prominent spot in the choir already. He then turns to Bob and asks if he has done his chores. Bob responds that his mother would do it. Anna softly confirms this while Steven is lecturing his son about pulling his weight in the household: 'Your mother works very hard. That's why we said it would be nice to help out all that we can, and we agreed that Kim

¹³³ Will Noonan, "Absurdism," in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346175.n8>.

would take care of walking the dog and you would take care of the plants.’¹³⁴ Steven and Anna are dressed up, which is explained by the next scene sequence that takes place in an extravagant conference hall. Steven speeches as Anna watches him, glowing with pride. Afterwards, they have a chat with Steven’s colleague Matthew, who asks about the children. Anna responds that Bob is very talented on the piano and that she will buy one for him once she is done renovating her clinic. After a quick glance at Anna, Steven interrupts and says that Kim started menstruating. ‘Great,’ Matthew murmurs after a brief pause.

These scenes show that the Murphy’s façade of perfection disguises their obsession with it and the tensions it causes within the family. When asked about her day at work, Anna merely responds that she wants to improve the clinic’s and her children’s image. Steven is also concerned about appearance, considering his remark about Bob’s haircut. Kim is insulted when her mother only compliments Bob, but instead of acknowledging this, Anna expands the compliment to the entire family. The characters’ focus on self-improvement, then, leads to strained interactions between Steven and Bob, and Anna and Kim. This favouritism, which is reminiscent of the close bond between Iphigenia and Agamemnon in *IA*, is developed throughout *TK*, and I will return to it later. The adults’ focus on perfection in the sense of achievements is further demonstrated by their approach to the children’s musical education. It is not just a hobby; Kim’s singing and Bob’s piano lessons and their chores are a way for them to improve themselves, and their success also reflects on their parents. Similarly, during Steven’s speech Anna is not only proud of him, but also happy that she can bask in his success.

Finally, Steven’s remark about Kim’s first menstruation resonates with an earlier scene. In their bedroom, Anna shows herself to be the perfect wife. She has bought a dress because Steven liked it on her, she announces that she will bake a cake only for him, and she indulges his fetish. In the well-lit room, she pretends to be under general anaesthesia, while Steven kisses and undresses her motionless body. This scene shows the power dynamics of a man controlling a woman’s body as a commodity. In this scene, Anna does this herself, and Steven using his daughter’s menstruation to impress a colleague turns Kim’s body into an object and something to be proud of as a father. Many reviewers consider the “bedroom scene” to be quite disturbing, but Haylett Bryan anchors it within *TK* by explaining how it

¹³⁴ Steven’s response is typical of his and his family’s focus on work. Bob will use his chore (and a haircut) to bargain for his life, to which I will return later.

shows character motivation.¹³⁵ Because of Steven's God-complex, what I call his obsession with perfection in the sense of control, Steven enjoys this kind of lovemaking, a character trait drives him throughout *TK* (see below). The scene also foreshadows Anna and Kim later offering their bodies to men (Steven, Matthew, and Martin) to get what they want: protection, information, and honour for themselves or for the man (see below). The bedroom scene and Steven's remark also contain echoes of *IA*. Anna verbalising her achievements as the homemaker echoes Clytaemnestra listing her virtues as a wife to Agamemnon (1148-1164). Additionally, the scene's power dynamics correspond with those in *IA*, more specifically with men controlling women's bodies. Agamemnon uses Iphigenia's body as a commodity and Clytaemnestra voluntarily offers herself (and her daughter) to Achilles when supplicating him. Finally, the scene evokes the perverse erotic elements in *IA*, viz. Iphigenia using her body to substitute a supplicant's attributes (1216-1219) and the chorus' description of her sacrifice (1080-1084).

Whereas the Murphy's try to maintain their image as the ideal nuclear family, Martin is obsessed with another kind of perfection. As mentioned, his father died on Steven's operating table, leaving him alone with his mother. At times, Martin assumes a husband role; he does not want to leave his mother alone at night and sleeps in her bed. Of course, he cannot be both a son and a father/husband, so he tries to restore his broken family by integrating Steven into it. After he has visited Steven's family (I will return to this later), he invites Steven over for dinner. Contrary to the Murphy's, Martin and his mother live 'in a not so nice neighbourhood in a not so nice house'.¹³⁶ His mother has clearly prepared for Steven's visit: 'She is dressed rather formally and heavily made up.'¹³⁷ After dinner, Martin and his mother convince Steven to watch Martin's father's favourite film, *Groundhog Day*. Steven and the mother sit together on a small couch, while Martin sits in a separate chair. When he goes to bed, he leans over and gives Steven a tight hug, which is met with an awkwardly raised arm from Steven, but not an actual hug. Martin's mother watches them, smiling. After Martin leaves, the noise of the film fades out. Steven is silent and turned away from the mother, who stares at him longingly. They are alternately filmed in longshots slightly above ground level with zoom-ins and

¹³⁵ Alice Haylett Bryan, "The 'Weird' Sex Scenes of Yorgos Lanthimos," in *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Forms, Philosophy*, ed. Eddie Falvey (New York, London, Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2022), 249-250.

¹³⁶ This is how Martin, while visiting the Murphy mansion, describes his own living situation. As mentioned, Martin's appearance clashes with the good-looking and well-groomed Murphy family members, thereby underlining the Murphy's penchant for perfection and establishing himself as an outsider.

¹³⁷ *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*. Screenplay. Curzon Artificial Eye, 2017, 24.

(medium) close-ups. The tension and Steven's uncomfortableness are palpable. Martin's mother offers him dessert (she made a caramel tart), but Steven politely declines. Then, she starts flirting with him, complimenting his 'lovely hands, so white and soft and clean', and asks if he finds her attractive. Steven, still motionless and trying to avoid her eyes, gives polite yet evading answers. He slightly jumps when she asks to see his hands. When she starts passionately kissing and sucking his fingers, Steven jumps up and starts to leave. She tries to convince him that she and Martin 'want this', adding: 'I won't let you leave until you've tried my tart.'

This episode is a prime example of the film's silly comedy (the mother's innuendo) and its dark significance. The intimate physical behaviours of both Martin and his mother reveal their plan to "acquire" Steven as a new husband/father. Additionally, their watching of *Groundhog Day* is telling. The film features the aloof weatherman Phill who lives the same day over and over again. After initially spending his time seducing women, he starts doing good and learning new skills. His colleague Rita, who first was merely a conquest for Phill, eventually falls in love with him. When they wake up together, it finally is the next day. Phill lives all options before deciding on the best one and finding a happy end. Contrastingly, like Agamemnon Steven refuses to choose. Agamemnon could have saved Iphigenia by quitting the expedition to Troy, Steven could have saved his family by leaving them and becoming Martin's new father – no easy choice, but a choice nonetheless.¹³⁸ In an ironic reversal, Agamemnon and Steven both make the same fateful choice, the former by staying and the latter by leaving.

Steven leaving Martin's house marks a turning point in *TK*. His choice has made him responsible for the future death of a family member, but from now on he will hide behind perfection in the sense of control to avoid acknowledging this. A scene sequence that perfectly illustrates this is Bob's paralysis. One morning, Bob is late for breakfast and Steven, clearly annoyed (again perfection causes tensions in the family dynamics) walks into his room. He finds his son sitting on the edge of his bed, whispering he cannot move his legs, which he must repeat two times before Steven believes him.¹³⁹ Naturally, Bob looks 'pale'

¹³⁸ A question arises: could Agamemnon and Steven have sacrificed themselves? As mentioned, Calchas' oracle about Iphigenia was never authorised, and although Martin does not mention this option, since it is a matter of equilibrium to him there is no clear indication that Steven's death would not balance things out. However, the tragedy and the film revolve around people having to take responsibility for their actions (although they do not do so), which could mean that self-sacrifice is not an option for Agamemnon or Steven.

¹³⁹ Another indication of the strained relationship between father and son. Additionally, this scene contains a visual nudge to *IA* like the one in the diner where Steven and Martin meet, as a picture of two deer hangs above Bob's bed.

and ‘a little frightened’¹⁴⁰ because of his paralysis, but the next shot suggests he is also shocked by Steven’s reaction. Filmed from a low angle with a slow zoom-in, he stands in the doorway motionlessly and completely silent, his eyes staring at Bob without blinking. Steven does not look scared or worried, but powerful. This is stressed by the next scenes, in which Bob undergoes numerous tests at the hospital. Instead of admitting the gravity of the situation (see also Steven’s explanation for Bob’s paralysis below), Steven places Bob in an environment that he, a surgeon, completely controls. Moreover, by getting Bob tested, Steven tries to control his son’s body. After the tests, Bob can walk again, which prompts Steven to tell Anna their son probably tried to skip an exam. However, Bob drops to the floor only moments later and is hospitalised. Again, Steven takes control of the situation by dismissing Anna’s concerned request for another scan, saying that ‘[t]omorrow he’ll [Bob] be well enough to walk all the way home.’

Anna’s concerns prove justified, although she does not yet know it. That night, she meets Kim coming home late. She lies about being with a friend; the previous scene showed her riding a motorcycle with Martin. After inquiring after Bob, Kim (her back to the camera) asks Anna how she is feeling. Anna confusedly answers that she is ‘completely fine’ and asks what Kim means. Her suspicion seems strange until we see Kim’s face. She looks worriedly at her mother, her eyes quickly shooting down to her legs. Anna repeats her answer and tersely sends Kim inside. As mentioned, Kim was shown riding a motorcycle with Martin, a close-up of her face revealing that she was crying. Kim’s speech, deliverance, and physicality in the following scene suggest that she was not crying because of the wind (she was not wearing a helmet), but because she knew Bob’s paralysis was connected to Martin – and, moreover, that she and her mother are the next possible victims.

Martin’s involvement in Bob’s affliction is confirmed by a meeting with Steven in the hospital cafeteria. After giving Steven a Swiss army knife by means of repaying Steven for all his gifts¹⁴¹, Martin reveals wait awaits him. Without catching a breath, filmed from a low-angled close-up highlighting his emotionless expression, Martin says:

‘Yes, it’s exactly what you think. Just like you killed a member of my family, now you have to kill a member of your family. To balance things out, understand? I can’t tell you who to kill

¹⁴⁰ Screenplay (2017), 35.

¹⁴¹ Martin “ruins” the surprise by telling Steven what his gift is beforehand. This scene is indicative of *TK*’s characters’, in this case Martin’s, obsession with balance and repaying debts (see below). Filippaki (2019, 146) remarks that it is ‘a metaphor signalling neoliberal nostalgia as well as the constant reinvention and many hats one must wear within neoliberalism’, pointing to the knife’s status and its many functions.

of course, that's for you to decide. But if you don't do it, they will all get sick and die. Bob will die. Kim will die. Your wife will die. They will all get sick and die. One: paralysis of the limbs, two: refusal of food to the point of starvation, three: bleeding from the eyes, four: death. One, two, three, four. Don't worry, you won't get sick. You just gotta stay calm, that's all.'

Steven remains silent and does not express any emotion. He does not acknowledge Martin's words or their meaning but keeps clinging to control. He storms to his son's room, where Anna keeps him company. Without breaking eye-contact, Steven tries to force feed Bob a donut; he almost chokes, and Anna must shove Steven aside. From then on, Steven desperately tries to control his son's body. After Bob has been hospitalised for quite some time, we see Steven pushing his son in a wheelchair through the hospital to various unpleasant tests¹⁴² with a blank expression on his face.¹⁴³ When they enter an empty corridor, the camera switches between long shots on ground- and slightly below eye-level, making Steven and Bob look extremely small and vulnerable. Steven drags Bob's paralysed body along the hallway, dropping him to the floor in an attempt to make him walk. Eventually, Steven kneels beside his son, smiles nervously, and suggests they play a game: they each tell the other a secret and whoever has the best secret wins. Without blinking, Steven whispers how he once gave his sleeping father a hand job when he was Bob's age; worried about his own bodily functions, he wanted to see proper ejaculation. Bob listens, a blank expression on his face. When it is his turn to tell a secret, he thinks for a moment and then concludes he does not have one. Steven, naturally hoping Bob would admit to faking his paralysis, without breaking eye-contact threatens to punish Bob by making him eat his own hair.

As mentioned, Steven's response to Martin's "prophecy" was not to admit his fault and try to save his family. Instead, he tries to control Bob's body, because curing his paralysis would negate Martin's words and, by extension, Steven's responsibility for his father's death and him having to kill a family member 'to balance things out'. Steven's need for control results in disturbing physicality. He abuses Bob by force feeding him, physically abusing him by putting him through countless tests and trying to force him to walk, telling him a

¹⁴² Including a lumbar puncture, a very painful neurological examination.

¹⁴³ In between the test scenes, there are cuts to Steven rushing Bob through the hospital and to a staff meeting, where Anna is also present. When she states in a calm, deep voice that Bob probably suffers from a psychosomatic disorder and the other doctors agree with her, Steven again dismisses her concerns, this time visibly angry. Without looking at Anna and in a trembling yet pedantic tone (as if he is explaining something to a child), Steven says that Anna would be the first person he would consult if Bob had an eye problem, but because their son is paralysed and refuses to eat, he is not 'remotely interested' in her medical opinion. Again, Steven tries to be authoritative to not admit his responsibility for the current situation.

disturbing secret to get information about his son's body (viz. that he is faking it), and finally by threatening him to make him eat his own hair. Again, the perverse (ab)use and representation of Iphigenia's body in *IA* are evoked.

Then, Kim collapses during choir practice and is hospitalised. That night, Anna interrogates Steven in front of the hospital while he tries to keep up appearances. She asks him about his meetings with Martin. Steven deflects her questions, saying that Martin has 'serious psychological issues' and that they should go to the police to take 'precautionary measures'. Anna responds that there is no point in doing so and asks if he had been drinking before operating on Martin's father. She speaks in a soft yet firm voice, standing behind him and smoking a cigarette; he sits on a bench, nervously smoking also and avoiding her gaze. Steven admits he drank, but quickly adds it did not cause the patient's death: 'A surgeon never kills a patient. An anaesthesiologist can kill a patient, but a surgeon never can.'¹⁴⁴ He adds that Bob looked better and says he pitied Martin because his mother is out of work and spent some time with him. Anna does not respond. There is a cut to Steven taking a shower at home, his head hanging down. Next, he is seated in a bedroom chair, naked and his wet hair sticking to his forehead. He sits hunched over, his head hanging low and an empty look in his eyes. The room is messy, there are sheets on the floor and the bed is not neatly made. The physicality in the scene outside the hospital and in the Murphy's house is significant. First, Steven is losing control over his wife, his home, and the current situation, which is reflected by his surroundings. The bedroom, where Steven previously had full control over Anna's body, is now in chaos. Zetl discusses other examples of this phenomenon throughout *TK*.¹⁴⁵ The characters pass through various inhospitable spaces, i.e. places that they have no emotional connection with, such as the hospital. Steven's body height is initially represented normally, so it feels like he belongs to that space. However, after both his children are paralysed and his colleagues fail to explain their condition, he is 'engulfed by the spaces of the hospital's oversized rooms'. Second, Anna's physicality when interrogating Steven about his meetings with Martin show that Steven is not just losing control over her, but that she is actively moving away from him. She towers over him, looking down on her husband, and realises that, behind his façade of authority and good intentions, her husband is scared to admit that he has caused their current situation. In *IA*, Clytaemnestra stops being the perfect mild and meek wife when she grows suspicious of Agamemnon trying to keep her away from her daughter's "wedding". As a result, she takes matters into her own hands by seeking

¹⁴⁴ These words are later reversed by Matthew, to which I will return later.

¹⁴⁵ Zetl (2022), 139.

Achilles' help. Like her tragic counterpart, Anna is no longer the dutiful wife when she sees that her husband is no longer the successful man she could be proud of. And like Clytaemnestra, she tries to protect herself and her children by uncovering what her husband does not tell her: his debt to Martin.

An obsession with debt

Steven has given Martin many gifts, but the teenager will not return the favour until later, when he gives Steven a Swiss army knife in the hospital cafeteria. Instead, Martin ensures that Anna, Bob, and Kim owe him something. Steven has invited Martin to his home. Anna answers the door and Martin promptly hands her a bouquet of orchids. When he is introduced to Kim and Bob, he gives them presents too, saying what they are before they have opened them: a treble clef keychain for Kim and one with a smiley face for Bob. Kim stares at Martin before the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of her hands gently stroking the gift. The scene is visually reminiscent of Martin's hands holding the watch Steven gave him. Consequently, it evokes the connotations of that first exchange, i.e. debt and a remarkable power dynamic in which Martin has the upper hand. Steven cannot pay off his debt to Martin just by spending time with and money on him, and Kim will not be able to escape the physical afflictions Martin prophesied to Steven, although she desperately tries to. When the three children are in Kim's room, she and Martin discuss her being in a choir. Bob interrupts by asking if Martin has hair under his arms already, and he lifts his shirt in response. Bob is unimpressed, but Kim murmurs: 'You've got a great body.' Martin and Kim for a stroll around the neighbourhood – without the dog; Kim is wilfully neglecting her chance at self-improvement, i.e. her chore – during which she agrees to share a cigarette with him and sing (she refused to sing when Bob was present). Later, in an eerie echo of Steven's and Anna's lovemaking, she undresses herself in front of Martin and lays down motionlessly on her bed, but Martin declines. When she is paralysed, she still holds on to their "relationship" (she tells Bob they will run away together). Finally, after Steven has kidnapped Martin and tied him up in the cellar, Kim crawls down, gives him a cigarette, and again offers herself to Martin under the condition he cures her. Again, Martin does not accept her offer but just looks down on her, a blank expression on his face.

As mentioned, Martin does not give Steven a gift in return until right before telling him that his family will die a terrible death if he does not sacrifice one of them. Martin explains the gift by saying that it is rude of him to not give Steven something, since he has given him so much. However, there is a darker underlying meaning, which is also connected

to the gift-giving at Steven's house. Martin giving Steven a gift shows he understands the meaning of the former's presents, i.e. (weak) attempts to pay off his debt. Martin's gift to Steven followed by the announcement that he must kill a family member indicates that the teenager permanently rejects Steven's attempts at reconciliation. This is very confronting for Steven, as he lied to himself that he could appease Martin by indulging him. Moreover, Martin asserts his power over Steven and his family by demanding one of their lives, which he already demonstrated when giving Anna, Kim, and Bob but not Steven a gift.

Kim's reaction to Martin's gift shows that his grip on her is the strongest, and their "relationship" is developed throughout the film.¹⁴⁶ Another prime example is a scene that takes place at the hospital. Kim and Bob lie in the same room. Anna sits besides Bob and softly talks to him. When Kim asks her to turn her on her side, Anna does so without speaking and turns Kim so that her back is towards Bob and her, a gesture that shows their strained relationship. Suddenly, Kim gets a call from Martin, who based on her answers tells her to walk over to the window. Looking on in shock, Anna sees how Kim is able to get up, walk, and stand in front of the window. After she ends the call, she drops to the floor again. Anna tries to help her into bed, but then Bob falls; he also wanted to walk. In a deep, furious voice, Anna forbids Kim from ever talking to 'that boy' again, to which she contemptuously rolls her eyes and whispers an insult. Anna promptly grabs Kim's wrist so hard she leaves marks on her skin. She looks down on her now scared daughter with a blank expression: 'I'm not like your father.' She grabs Kim's phone and walks away, but Kim stops her in her tracks by monotonously saying: 'Don't be scared, mum. Don't get hysterical. It's not that tragic. (...) You won't be able to move either. But you'll get used to it.' Anna stares at her as 'her anger morphs into fear.'¹⁴⁷

Like Steven tried to control Bob's body by force feeding him, Anna tries to get a grip literally and figuratively on her daughter by grabbing her and trying to break her connection with Martin. Contrastingly, Anna does acknowledge Martin's involvement in the situation and tries to find out what Steven is hiding from her. She first pays a visit to Martin while he is home alone. She tries to be calm and collected, but Martin clearly upsets her. While Anna explains the reason for her visit, he hardly acknowledges her as he devours a plate of spaghetti. He insinuates that Steven has been flirting with his mother since his father's death

¹⁴⁶ Clauss (2022, 187) interprets their relationship as an echo of Iphigenia's budding affection for Achilles. However, there are no feelings of love between the two couples. Martin has control over Kim's body; Achilles wants to marry Iphigenia because he is impressed by (what he considers is) her bravery, and she respects but does not love him.

¹⁴⁷ Screenplay (2017), 61.

and even adds he has no problem with it, because Steven seems ‘a very nice guy’. After a brief pause, Anna (in extreme close-up) softly asks why she and her children must suffer for Steven’s mistake. Martin replies with an anecdote. People always told him he ate spaghetti just like his father, viz. by twirling a fork in it. When he learned everyone ate that way, he was even more upset than when he heard his father died. Anna listens in silence, confusion and fear in her eyes. As the camera switches to a medium close-up with zoom-in on Martin, he adds: ‘I don’t know if what is happening is fair, but it’s the only thing I can think of that’s close to justice.’ In a cheerful voice, he says he must get to class and wishes Anna, who now has tears in her eyes, a good day. The next day, she arranges a meeting with Matthew in a shabby cafeteria on the outskirts of the city.¹⁴⁸ Again in extreme close-up, she asks Matthew to give her Martin’s father’s medical file. Matthew initially refuses, but then says he can tell her about the case – ‘But what do I get in return?’ Anna responds: ‘What you didn’t get that day when we came for lunch at your house.’ The next scene takes place in a deserted parking lot. While Anna gives Matthew a hand job, he confirms that Steven had been drinking before the operation and that he is responsible for Martin’s father’s death. He states that not the anaesthesiologist, but the surgeon is to blame when a patient dies. When Matthew stops talking, the camera cuts to inside the car. We can only see Anna’s face; there is no music but only ‘sticky pumping sounds’ and Matthew’s loud breathing.¹⁴⁹ The physicality of this scene is remarkable in two ways. First, this is one of the scenes in which Anna uses her body to obtain something. A similar scene occurs in *The Favourite* and Haylett Bryan’s remark also applies to *TK*: ‘The hand job she is giving (...) is just that, a job that must be done to placate him so that she can get on with more pressing concerns.’¹⁵⁰ Second, the locations (the cafeteria and the parking lot) the characters place themselves in have an underlying meaning. They are places outside appropriate territory (the home, hospital, or bustling city), places outside Anna’s normally perfect world.¹⁵¹ As such, they reflect the emotionlessness and impropriety of Anna’s actions that she willingly commits. The “spaghetti scene” is also telling. Like his conversation with Steven in the hospital cafeteria, Martin verbally shows he is in control by saying he allows his mother to seduce Steven and stating that the current

¹⁴⁸ Screenplay (2017, 66): ‘It doesn’t seem like the kind of place where Anna would normally choose to go.’

¹⁴⁹ Haylett Bryan (2022), 249.

¹⁵⁰ Haylett Bryan (2022), 252.

¹⁵¹ Another reading is provided by Clauss (2022, 184), who states that this scene is reminiscent of Clytaemnestra’s affair with Aegisthus. However, the context of the two situations is completely different (cheating in exchange for information versus cheating out of revenge) and as such only superficially similar. See James J. Clauss, “Myth and Mythopoeia in the Films of Yorgos Lanthimos,” in *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*, ed. Eddie Falvey (New York, London, Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2022), 183–198.

situation is the closest to justice. Moreover, the anecdote and his flat deliverance of it convey his pragmatic stance. His father's death is not an emotional matter but an abstract equation; Steven was responsible for it, so he must pay his dues by killing one of his own family members.

Shortly after, Kim and Bob return home in hospital beds with feeding tubes. That evening, when Steven and Anna have dinner in the kitchen (Anna sits on the countertop, staring at him), he compliments her cooking and suggests they go for a short vacation, it might do them good. Then, he adds that he has been craving mashed potatoes and asks Anna if she can make some tomorrow. Without blinking, filmed from a low angle with a slow zoom-in on her face, Anna blurts out that Steven has lovely hands. However, they are lifeless, so who cares if they are lovely? She insults him for trying to keep up appearances – ‘Sometimes, Steven, you’re just an incompetent man who goes on and on saying stupid things (...) Our two children are dying in the other room, but yes, I can make you mashed potatoes.’ – and adds he should go live with Martin’s mother if he does not like her words. When she directly blames him for their current misfortune, Steven jumps up and starts turning the kitchen upside down, pretending to frantically search for the ingredients to a nonsense ritual that will resolve everything.¹⁵² Falvey explains Steven’s outburst in terms of acknowledging Martin’s involvement in the matter and an ‘apathy towards suffering’, his own and his family’s.¹⁵³ Steven does not own up to Anna’s legitimate criticism and confronting ‘the reality of his (in)humanity’ but claims to be trapped in a system with a divine/supernatural power he cannot escape from¹⁵⁴, a clear echo of Agamemnon. The following day, Steven’s self-deception culminates; he kidnaps Martin and locks him up in his cellar. What follows is a conspicuous interaction between the two. Martin says that, although Steven should be an intelligent ‘man of science’, he is an idiot. Steven strikes Martin across his face, to which Martin responds that he will explain the current situation by showing Steven ‘an example’. He bites Steven in his arm, leaving a bloodied mark in his skin. While Steven stumbles back, looking at Martin in horror, Martin bites his own arm until he starts bleeding. With a bloodied mouth, Martin looks up at Steven, asking if he understands the metaphor. Steven does not respond, but his next

¹⁵² ‘There is a way we can put a stop to all this. All we need to do is find the tooth of a baby crocodile, the blood of a pigeon, and the pubes of a virgin and then we just have to burn them all before sunset.’ After the entire kitchen is destroyed, he concludes: ‘We don’t have any of the things we need.’

¹⁵³ Eddie Falvey, “Notes toward a Cinema of Apathy in the Films of Yorgos Lanthimos,” in *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*, ed. Eddie Falvey (New York, London, Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2022), 94.

¹⁵⁴ Falvey (2022), 94.

action indicates he does understand what Martin means – and is terrified by it. There is a gunshot, and, when Anna rushes into the cellar, she sees that Steven shot Martin in his leg. Steven, in a skipping voice and with a terrified expression, threatens to kill Martin, who replies: ‘You won’t understand how it could’ve happened. You’ll say: “But I only killed one person, how come four people are dead? I only shot one.” So if you’re gonna dig a hole in the yard, better make it a big one.’ Besides showing to which lengths Steven will go to feel like he controls the situation (the perfection theme), this scene is a prime example of the debt/transaction notion that frames every interaction in *TK* and strips them of any emotion.

This is continued in a series of scenes in which Kim, Bob, and Anna try to save themselves from being sacrificed by Steven. After hearing the shot in the cellar, Kim and Bob have an eerie conversation. Kim sits in a wheelchair smoking a cigarette, Bob lies in bed. She flatly remarks Steven did not kill Martin, because that would be like ‘killing four people with a single shot. Now, wouldn’t that be tragic?’ Then, she says that their dad loves Bob very much, but that he ‘doesn’t have much of a choice’, implying that Bob will be murdered. After a brief pause, Bob responds that their parents bought him a piano; they did not tell Kim so she would not be scared. She takes a long drag from her cigarette and then turns to Bob. Monotonously and without blinking, she says something terrible happened: she lost Martin’s MP3-player. Kim asks if she can have Bob’s after he dies. The children’s speech and deliverance are emotionless; they show no love or worry for their sibling, nor for themselves. Kim’s request is heartless, as is Bob’s earlier remark, but it fits well within the film’s transactional framework. In the following scene, we see Bob crawling over the floor with difficulty. He is filmed from a high angle, which stresses his vulnerability; the stomping, squeaking sounds from his hands echo through the room, making the whole scene highly uncomfortable to watch. Bob drags himself to a cabinet, takes out a pair of scissors, and cuts his hair. Cut to the kitchen, where Steven stares at his hands. They are still clean and well-groomed, but by now, it is clear that these hands are violent, cruel, even murderous. He starts frantically washing them, as if he wants to wash his guilt away. Bob interrupts him, announcing he got a haircut, that he will do his chores now, and that he wants to be a cardiologist just like his father. Steven kneels beside him, softly stroking his head and clearly emotional – his first and only expression of fatherly love for Bob. As Steven carries Bob back to bed, Kim watches in silence. The next shot shows Steven sitting alone in the garden at night, his home in the background. He has his arms around his knees, bows his head, and starts sobbing uncontrollably. The camera zooms out, making Steven seem increasingly small and powerless while the house towers over him. He accepts that his formerly perfect world,

where he held the cards, is completely gone and that there is only one thing left to do: choose a victim.

Despite this genuine emotional outburst, the next day Steven asks his children's schoolmaster which of his offspring is 'the best'. Steven either wants to know which child is worth saving, but another, darker interpretation is that he wants to choose the best sacrifice to ensure that he can pay off his debt to Martin. It turns out, however, that Kim and Bob are equally talented students. Bob excels in beta subjects, whereas Kim has a talent for history, music, and literature; she wrote a 'brilliant essay on the tragedy on Iphigenia'. Anna also tries to save herself. In an echo of Clytaemnestra's self-degrading supplication to Achilles, Anna, after tending to Martin's shot wound, kneels before him and kisses his dirty feet. Achilles made the empty promise to save Clytaemnestra and Iphigenia, but Martin just silently looks down on Anna. That night, Anna tries to seduce Steven. She enters their bedroom in a sheer nightgown, grabs Steven's hand and starts kissing it. Considering her earlier remark about Martin's mother, who also kissed Steven's hand, it is a remarkable gesture. He does not respond, not even when she undresses and lies down on the bed in the general anaesthetic pose. Steven turns off the light. Anna curls up beside him and whispers: 'I believe the most logical thing, no matter how harsh this may sound, is to kill a child. Because we can have another child, I still can and you can. And if you can't, we would try IVF – but I'm sure we can.' She looks up at Steven, but he just stares into the dark.

Kim's "supplication" to Martin has already been discussed, but there is another scene that strongly recalls Iphigenia's change of heart speech:

'I was only thinking about myself, no one else. That was wrong of me. I was frightened. I shouldn't have been.¹⁵⁵ Let me be the one who atones for your sins, Dad. (...) Kill me right here in front of you and leave me with the ultimate joy of saving my own mother and beloved brother from certain death. (...) I would do anything for you [to Steven], I would even die for you. And here's my chance to prove it. You have me life and you, only you have the right to take my life away. That makes perfect sense. You are my lords, my masters and I am just someone who lives to obey your wishes. (...) I love you more than anything in the world, you and my brother.'

Like her tragic counterpart, Kim says she must not love her life too much, that the well-being of her family depends on her, and that she gives her life/body to her father. Moreover, despite

¹⁵⁵ Kim refers to her escape attempt after Martin refused to help her. She crawled out of the house and along the pavement until Steven and Anna found her, her knees and palms bruised and bloodied.

her escape attempt minutes earlier she now frames her self-sacrifice as honourable/joyful. Like Euripides, Lanthimos shows the absurdity of a young girl stating these things – this time not in echo of her father, but in an echo of the tragedy Kim studied herself.

Shortly after, Kim alerts Steven that Bob's eyes have started bleeding.¹⁵⁶ Steven goes upstairs to get Anna, who is frantically making their bed. He tells her to come to the living room; the children are already there. After a brief pause, Anna says she is going to wear that dress that Steven likes. Anna, then, is now doing what she criticised Steven for earlier: keeping up appearances. Once everyone is gathered in the living room, bound and their mouths covered with tape, Steven covers their heads with pillowcases. He loads a shotgun, pulls a balaclava over his face, and starts spinning around. The first two shots miss, the third one hits Bob in his chest. When Steven sees his dead son, he breaths out audibly, like a sigh of relief. As the camera zooms in on Bob, blood streaming down his chest, the opening chorus of Bach's *St. John Passion* starts. It has a solemn air but is not as dark as the *Stabat Mater*. Moreover, the lyrics is jubilant: 'Even in greatest lowliness [Niedrigkeit], / [You] have been glorified!' The music continues as the next scene starts. Martin walks into the diner where Steven and he used to meet, still limping from his shot wound. He looks at the Murphy family, who are having dinner. Anna briefly looks at him, Steven ignores him. Kim loads her fries with ketchup and starts eating, her wrists and palms wrapped in bandages. She makes eye-contact with Martin, who has sat down at the bar. When the family leaves, she turns around to look at Martin, casting him a faint smile. Martin watched them leave, a blank expression on his face. The music ends, the screen goes black. The lyrics to Bach's composition evoke the messenger's speech in *IA*. Like Iphigenia's self-sacrifice, Bob's death is glorious, because he saved his family and 'balanced things out'. Additionally, *TK*'s final scene echoes Agamemnon's parting words to Clytaemnestra. As mentioned, he is clearly glad to forget all that has happened and continue with his life. The Murphy family having dinner where Steven and Martin rendezvoused, Kim's smile, and everyone's silence indicate they are all happy to hide behind perfection and debt. Steven's debt has been paid off and the world of perfection and balance restored.

Context: *TK* and Lanthimos' films

As mentioned, the impressions of *TK* show that it is considered as either pretentious or provocative and critical. This also goes for Lanthimos' other films. For example, one critic

¹⁵⁶ The scene is a dark comic one. Bob is sitting in a wheelchair, listening to music. Suddenly, his eyes start bleeding, but he does not say anything. Kim, still in her wheelchair at the window, rolls over to Bob, takes one look at him and then rolls out the room, while shouting in an almost jubilant voice: 'Dad, quick! Bob's dying!'

describes the film *Alpeis* (2011) as ‘unforgettably powerful’¹⁵⁷, whereas another review is titled ‘*Une sublime idée... et c’est à peu près tout*’¹⁵⁸. In this chapter, I argued that, like Euripides, Lanthimos does not want his audience to take his characters seriously nor to sympathise with them. Instead, *TK* is meant to explore a particular aspect of human behaviour, viz. clinging to perfection and debt to avoid having to face one’s own mistakes and responsibility. In the following, I expand this argument by showing that highlighting (aspects of) humanity is inherent to Lanthimos’ oeuvre.

Lanthimos is one of the directors that is often included in the so-called Greek Weird Wave cinema. In his seminal work on this wave and its engagement with biopolitics, Papanikolaou notes that all its films convey ‘a deep unease with the modern politics of surveillance, austerity management, control over life, state of exception and moral panic.’¹⁵⁹ Psaras opts for ‘the re-appropriation of the term ‘weird’ as metonymic with ‘queer’’, not only because the former has derogatory connotations but also because past and present movements in Greek cinema express a strong ‘queer sensibility’,¹⁶⁰ i.e. the ‘destabilization and demythologization’ of Greece’s traditional societal pillars of Fatherland, Religion, and Family.¹⁶¹ This reading is more in line with my interpretation of Lanthimos’ films. Instead of directly criticising the abstract elements of modern socio-political, economic, and religious reality (Papanikolaou’s reading), Lanthimos first zooms in on the individuals and communities, such as dysfunctional families, that knowingly maintain these institutions and abstract concepts to then reveal how people corrupt them. However, contrary to Euripides, he refrains from judging the matters he discusses in his films, i.e. (abuse of) power and bodies, language, and what it means to be ‘human’ in the modern world.

Dogtooth (2009) features a family even more dysfunctional than the Murphy’s. The parents, mostly the dictatorial father, control every aspect of their three teenage children’s lives, including their bodies. The children have strict daily exercise routines and are rewarded with stickers (the son always wins from his sisters). Insubordination is severely punished, e.g. when the father beats his eldest daughter with a video tape she was not supposed to watch (see

¹⁵⁷ Christopher McQuain, “DVD Talk,” www.dvdtalk.com, December 28, 2012, <https://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/59113/alps/>.

¹⁵⁸ Olivier Bachelard, “ALPS,” *Abus de Ciné*, March 27, 2013, <https://www.abusdecine.com/critique/alps/>. The title means: ‘A sublime idea... and that’s about it’.

¹⁵⁹ Papanikolaou, Dimitris, *Greek Weird Wave: A Cinema of Biopolitics*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 15. The term ‘weird wave’ was coined by Steve Rose in his article “Attenberg, Dogtooth and the Weird Wave of Greek Cinema,” *The Guardian*, August 26, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/aug/27/attenberg-dogtooth-greece-cinema>.

¹⁶⁰ Marios Psaras, *Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethics, Politics and the Crisis of Meaning*. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 26.

¹⁶¹ Psaras (2018), 4-22, quoted from pg. 22.

below). Consequently, the children are abusive, too. The youngest daughter cuts off a doll's hands while screaming as if she is in pain, she stabs her brother for taking away a toy, and their games all involve pain.¹⁶² The father also controls his children's sexual activities. He pays a female security guard at his company to have sex with his son; she later gets the eldest daughter to give her cunnilingus in exchange for a headband. When the security guard stops coming to the house, the eldest daughter is tasked with satisfying her brother. Only the father is allowed to leave the house, which is presented as the ultimate safe haven.¹⁶³ The children can leave once they lose their dogtooth, which is physically impossible for adults. Besides controlling their children's bodies, the parents also indoctrinate them. They "teach" them new words via a tape recorder, but the words get different meanings. For example, *thalassa* (the Greek word for 'sea') is defined as a leather chair with wooden armrests, 'similar to the one in our living room'. Another film that connects sex, physical abuse, and power is *The Favourite* (2018), set in early 18th-century Britain during a war with France. The first scene shows the middle-aged and overweight Queen Anne asking Sarah, a Duchess at her court and a beautiful young woman, asking if she spoke with a lisp and demanding she greets 'the little ones', pointing to cages full of rabbits. These later turn out to be substitutes for her deceased children. Despite saying she loves Anne, Sarah refuses, to which Anne responds love should not have limits. This is an allusion to the film's main theme (see above). Sarah's does not love Anne, but the political power she has through her and which she fiercely protects by using her own, Anne's, and others' bodies. The same goes for Abigail, Sarah's cousin who lost her title and seeks employment at court. During her travel, a soldier masturbates in front of her; Haylett Bryan acutely remarks that this scene 'removes any sense of romance or tenderness' from physical intimacy in the film.¹⁶⁴ Sarah and Abigail are beautiful, young, and smart, whereas Anne is older, overweight, and physically and mentally afflicted by the loss of her children. Nonetheless, Sarah and Abigail use their bodies to manipulate Queen Anne, who in turn demands their complete physical and emotional devotion. All three women are married, but these men are either background characters or they are used by their wives (notably Abigail) to advance their careers. Haylett Bryan states that, instead of relating to love and family bonds, 'sex becomes only about the pleasure and power achieved from it in its

¹⁶² The film opens with the teens discussing a "game" to see who can hold their hand under boiling water the longest. Another scene shows the son and eldest daughter fighting each other with sticks. It does not look like a play fight, but rather as if they are trying to hurt each other.

¹⁶³ Not only through the parents' dictatorial control over their children, but also in terms of visuals. The house itself is a bright white colour, the large garden is too green to be natural, and the house's rooms are quaintly decorated.

¹⁶⁴ Haylett Bryan (2022), 252.

exchange'.¹⁶⁵ This resonates with the presentation of sex in *TK* and *Dogtooth*. Finally, *The Lobster* (2015) is the only film that shows both transactional or forced and genuine intimacy. Its world consists of three strictly segregated parts: the normal world, the hotel, and the “wild” where the Loners live (they escaped from the hotel). In the hotel, people must find love within 45 days, or they will be transformed into an animal of their choosing. Protagonist David chooses a lobster.¹⁶⁶ Everything pertaining to physicality is strictly regulated. Everyone wears the same clothes, relationships must be based on physical similarities (e.g. a lisp or eye problems), and only homo- or heterosexual relations are allowed. To stimulate people to find a partner, they are shown the advantages of having a partner¹⁶⁷ and punished for masturbation; a guest who was caught masturbating gets his hand publicly burned in a toaster. People can extend their stay at the hotel by capturing Loners during an event called ‘the hunt’. David falls in love with a Loner, a short-sighted woman, and he decides to join them. Contrastingly, in their society physical relationships are strictly forbidden (also punished by physical abuse) and masturbation is encouraged. Nonetheless, David and the woman find time to listen to music together, dance together, and even develop their own sign language.

The films revolving around power dynamics in families/communities are often interpreted as critical engagement with Greece’s financial crisis and the country’s ‘conventional notions and interactions of men, women, family, and society at large’¹⁶⁸, especially when placed within the Weird Wave framework. However, Lanthimos anchors his films not in a certain critical framework, but within the exploration of humanity itself. The family in *Dogtooth* is not directly inspired by traditional patriarchal Greek family structures, it is Lanthimos’ answer to the question how far people can and will go to control others.¹⁶⁹ *The Lobster* revolves around the meaning of love and relationships.¹⁷⁰ And during an interview about *The Favourite*, a journalist asked why power dynamics are such a recurrent theme. Lanthimos’ responded:

‘Because there is nothing else? Power is essential in our interaction with others, this is a given for all people. What fascinates me about this kind of individual or royal power is how

¹⁶⁵ Haylett Bryan (2022), 253.

¹⁶⁶ His reasoning: ‘Lobsters live for over one hundred years, are blue-blooded like aristocrats, and stay fertile all their life. I also like the sea very much. I water ski and swim quite well, since I was a teenager.’

¹⁶⁷ The hotel staff play out scenarios in the hotel’s auditorium in an oddly comic deadpan fashion. For example, the hotel manager’s husband pretends to choke during a sketch called ‘Man Eating Alone’. The next sketch, ‘Man Eats with Woman’, shows the maid saving him with the Heimlich manoeuvre.

¹⁶⁸ Stamos Metzidakis, “No Bones to Pick with Lanthimos’s Film *Dogtooth*,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 32, no. 2 (2014): 367–392, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mgs.2014.0046>. Quoted from pg. 386.

¹⁶⁹ Maron (2019).

¹⁷⁰ Maron (2019).

someone's temper can change in an instant, and then affect the lives of millions of people. That is absolutely insane.'¹⁷¹

As discussed above, this insanity is caused by the presentation of language and the body. Verbal language is often substituted by body language, despite the characters' deadpan demeanour. Conventional utterances often have a second layer of meaning in Lanthimos' films. In *TK*, it is a manifestation of the characters' obsession with perfection and debt. In *Dogtooth*, normal words get completely different meanings and become a tool of indoctrination. Contrastingly, in *The Lobster* (sign) language is used as an act of resistance against a totalitarian community. *The Favourite* also features conspicuous language, viz. the characters' many anachronisms ('nope' and 'fuck'). Lykidis explains that these and other modern elements, such as vogue dancing, are indicative of how *The Favourite* criticises the British heritage and gothic genre, more specifically its 'passive, uncritical, and pretentious' portrayal of absolute and grotesque court culture.¹⁷² The second concept that is analysed is the body and how it is affected by power. Across Lanthimos' oeuvre, it is degraded, mutilated, or valued *ad absurdum*. The physical abuse and uncomfortable sex scenes in *TK* and the abovementioned films reveal the cruelty of (dysfunctional) manmade power structures, ranging from the family to society at large. Additionally, these scenes and the presentation of bodies as commodities (*TK*, *The Favourite*) or as the basis of relationships (*The Lobster*) also show the irrationality inherent to these power structures.

Besides examining aspects of human interactions in small (families, court) and larger communities (societies), Lanthimos frequently explores the meaning of humanity itself. In *TK*, the characters hide behind perfection and debt and pretend to not have any responsibility. Consequently, the film can be read as an investigation into what it means to be human if self-reflection and agency are denied. Karkani concludes her analysis of *The Lobster* by stating the film does not provide a clear definition of what the modern person or animal is.¹⁷³ Both categories are 'transmogrified', i.e. the conventional notions of 'human' and 'animal' are altered in a grotesque way. Humans are turned into animals in the hotel's Transformation

¹⁷¹ Bor Beekman, "The Favourite zet het kostuumdrama op zijn pop – een interview met de regisseur en de cast," de Volkskrant, January 2, 2019, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/the-favourite-zet-het-kostuumdrama-op-zijn-kop-een-interview-met-de-regisseur-en-de-cast~b9c2f5f8/>.

¹⁷² Alex Lykidis, "Rethinking the Heritage Film: Gothic Critique in the Favourite," in *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*, ed. Eddie Falvey (New York, London, Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2022), 199–220. Quoted from pg. 200.

¹⁷³ Ina Karkani, "Bodies out of Place: Ontological *Adriftness* in *The Lobster*," in *The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*, ed. Eddie Falvey (New York, London, Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2022), 67–80.

Room via a bizarre process.¹⁷⁴ Consequently, all “animals” were once people – or still are, since people’s vital organs and their consciousness¹⁷⁵ are transplanted into their animal body of choosing. *The Lobster*, then, presents the current meaning of ‘humanity’, viz. being ‘endlessly caught up in the mist of modern-day uncertainties’ caused by parallel societies that provide no ontological, spatial, or temporal clarity.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, *Alps* revolves around identity. Instead of turning into animals, the protagonists act out the lives of deceased loved ones. They adopt their body language and manner of speech. For example, the nurse impersonates the late daughter of one of her clients. Since the girl was a tennis player, she starts wearing sweatbands, carrying a tennis racket, and recites lines about tennis matches “she” played. However, the negation of her own identity, albeit voluntary, takes its toll on her mental health, which becomes clear when she tries to masturbate her father to impersonate her deceased mother. The uncomfortable absurdity of a random body functioning as the highly inadequate substitute for another person’s entire identity is also featured in Lanthimos’ Greek film *Kinetta* (2005) and his English short film *Nimic*. In the former, three people (‘a police officer out of uniform with a thing for German luxury cars and Russian women, an eccentric photographer, and a hotel chambermaid’¹⁷⁷) act out murders, blurring the boundaries between the victims’ and their own lives. In the latter, a cellist is followed home by a woman impersonating him. His wife and children cannot tell the difference and the man is eventually replaced by the nameless woman. As mentioned, Lanthimos is often seen as (one of) the main representative(s) of the politically informed Greek Weird Wave. However, Psaras’ reading of the queer but not necessarily critical destabilization of every aspect of humanity in the modern world, from verbal/body language to the human body as different from the animal body and to notions of ‘identity’, is a more appropriate description of Lanthimos’ oeuvre.

¹⁷⁴ A hotel guest explains: after thoroughly washing a person’s hair, they peel off the skin (this is easy, since the water and soap have made it soft). Next, all vital organs are removed, after which the procedure differs according to what animal the person had chosen to become. David responds: ‘That makes total sense. I mean, I suppose that mammals demand a different kind of work than fowls, for instance.’

¹⁷⁵ This is indicated for example by the interactions between David and his dog/brother Bob. When one of David’s hands is tied behind his back to remind him how much easier things are when there is two of them (another example of the hotel’s “couples propaganda”), the dog whines and barks loudly, showing he understands what is happening to his brother.

¹⁷⁶ Karkani (2022), 77.

¹⁷⁷ Nick Riganas, “Kinetta (2005) - Plot - IMDb,” [www.imdb.com, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0477991/plotsummary/?ref=tt_ov_pl](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0477991/plotsummary/?ref=tt_ov_pl).

Chapter 4. Willingly bearing the yoke: interpreting the tragedy and the film

In this chapter, I build on the echoes of *IA* in *TK* already pointed out in Chapter 3. Since the film is not a direct adaptation of the tragedy but rather its “conversation partner” in a conceptual dialogue (see below), I focus on the correspondences and differences between *IA* and *TK* in the echoes rather than addressing all differences between the two works.¹⁷⁸ After interpreting the echoes, correspondences, and differences, I explain how both works inform each other. The main correspondence between *IA* and *TK* is based on the point of convergence between the notions of *aidōs*, perfection, and debt. The characters pretend these concepts are external forces from which they cannot escape. However, Euripides and Lanthimos show that the characters voluntarily submit to these “forces” so they can avoid bearing the responsibility of their actions and, most importantly, their terrible consequences.

The first clear echo of *IA* in *TK* is the bedroom scene. After showing herself to be the perfect (house)wife (see Chapter 3), Anna pretends to be completely sedated while Steven makes love to her. The scene evokes Clytaemnestra listing her virtues as a wife before Agamemnon and her supplicating Achilles, an act that has both verbal and physical conventions (see Chapter 2). Additionally, the scene recalls Iphigenia supplicating her father and the chorus’ disturbingly erotic description of her body as she is prepared for the sacrifice. Clytaemnestra’s and Iphigenia’s actions stem from specific forms of *aidōs*, viz. self-respect and pride in their statuses as queen, mother, and daughter of a king, and abandoning it as supplicants out of self-preservation. This voluntary verbal and physical self-degradation of the two women and the chorus’ description of Iphigenia not only perversely eroticise the women’s actions but also the unequal power dynamics between men and women. All this is echoed in the uncomfortable bedroom scene, which creates multiple correspondences. Both Clytaemnestra and Anna try to obtain control by establishing themselves as the perfect women and by offering their bodies. Similarly, Iphigenia (and later Kim, see below) offers herself as a supplicant to her father and stresses how perfect she has been as his daughter. Clytaemnestra offering her body is also echoed in Anna masturbating Matthew in a car, her kissing Martin’s feet in the cellar, and by Kim offering her body to Martin in the same way as her mother did in the abovementioned bedroom scene. Again, the echoes reveal a correspondence between the perverse erotisation of the unequal power dynamics between men and women, and how women resort to using their bodies to get what they want (in these cases: protection and information). There is, however, a difference between Euripides and Lanthimos regarding their presentation of these

¹⁷⁸ Complete analyses of both works can be found in Chapter 2 and 3.

themes. Euripides is critical of Clytaemnestra's behaviour during her supplication of Achilles; before pleading for Iphigenia, she tries to move him by playing into his arrogance and focusses more on her own misery than her daughter's future death. Euripides also condemns Iphigenia's apparent bravery and patriotism as naïve mimicry of heroic speech. Contrastingly, there is no critique from Lanthimos in *TK*. His characters show no emotion; Anna and Kim allow themselves to be used by men but have no problem with it as it is purely transactional to them. Consequently, they do not have the hypocrisy of Euripides' characters. They do not pretend to conform to social, moral or religious conventions (*aidōs*), but shamelessly perform their unconventional actions, leaving it to the viewer to judge them.

Another important echo is Steven's visit to Martin and his mother. Just as Steven's departure means he is now responsible for the future death of a family member, Agamemnon's indecisiveness makes him guilty of Iphigenia's death. Agamemnon justifies this by referring to various forms of *aidōs*: respect for Artemis/Calchas, his duty to the army as their general (yet he is actually afraid of them), and his duty to Greece. Steven leaves because he does not want to leave his wife and kids; although he has been unsuccessfully trying to pay of his debt to Martin by spending time with and money on him, becoming his father goes too far. The correspondence between these situations is that both men justify their choice to sacrifice a family member by their obligations to and the expectations of others. They maintain that these external factors are inescapable, but both Euripides and Lanthimos show they had other options. Agamemnon could have left Aulis and Steven could have given in to Martin. Of course, both options are dire, but they are options nonetheless; moreover, since these would have saved their entire family, both men could have made better choices. A difference between the corresponding scenes in *IA* and *TK* is that Agamemnon's resort to *aidōs* is criticised, while Steven's resort to perfection is not. In *IA*, Euripides shows Agamemnon's sense of honour is based solely on his own weakness. With much ado, he acts as if his only choice is to sacrifice Iphigenia. However, the tragedian makes clear that Agamemnon knows what he should and could have done to save her. The army and Menelaus proposed to cease the expedition to Troy and return home. Calchas' prophecy was never authorised by omens. In *TK*, Lanthimos only shows that Steven actively denounces the option to save his family by walking out on Martin and his mother. He does not do this because he is a loving husband and father; like all people in *TK*, he rarely shows any emotion, and he even becomes violent with his wife and son out of frustration and fear. Steven leaves, because he refuses to abandon the family in which he has invested so much time and money to make it the perfect household (see Filippaki on the neoliberal family as a project). Additionally, since

he prefers Anna to be submissive, he is thrown off by the forwardness of Martin's mother. Although his behaviour is disturbing by conventional standards, it fits well within the impersonal "perfect" world Lanthimos has created in *TK*. Consequently, the director does not approve of nor condemn Steven. He merely shows it to his audience, which is then left to judge his and the other's actions.

The same goes for the disturbing interaction between Steven and Bob in the empty hospital hallway. The way Steven drags his son's motionless body and repeatedly drops him to the floor with a loud thud evokes the abovementioned control and subsequent abuse of another person's body by Steven. Consequently, it echoes Agamemnon using his daughter's body as a commodity, the only difference being he never laid a hand on Iphigenia. Another correspondence between these two scenes is that both men try to take charge of their terrible dilemma through someone else's body. Agamemnon clings to various forms of *aidōs* to justify Iphigenia's sacrifice, Steven holds on to his authority as Bob's father and a talented surgeon to deny the fact that Martin is now in control of both himself and his son. The only difference is the presentation of these actions. In *IA*, Agamemnon's actions are framed as him wrongly showing or pretending to show respect for others (see above). He acts as if sacrificing Iphigenia is something he must do. Steven, by contrast, still denies that he must perform a similar act (the sacrifice of a family member) for Martin.

Eventually, Agamemnon's deceit and indecisiveness are discovered by Clytaemnestra. Similarly, Anna finds out that Steven has kept it from her that for months he has been in contact with Martin, the teenager who now is exerting a terrible supernatural influence on their children. A difference between the two men is that Agamemnon verbally admits this to his wife (1140): 'I am ruined; my secrets have been revealed.' When Anna interrogates Steven about his rendezvous with Martin and his alcohol consumption before he operated on the boy's father, Steven does not admit his mistakes. However, his uncomfortable body language – he is sitting down in a huddled position with his back towards Anna, looking down to avoid her gaze and talking hurriedly – conveys the same feeling of guilt as Agamemnon's words. After Clytaemnestra and Anna have discovered their husbands' lies, both women start investigating the matter on their own. They turn to other men for help; Clytaemnestra supplicates Achilles, Anna visits Martin to ask why she and her children must suffer for Steven's mistake (somewhat reminiscent of a supplication) and later meets with Matthew for more confirmation. Achilles promises to help Clytaemnestra and Iphigenia but does so in vain and for the wrong reasons, viz. out of arrogance and to protect his own reputation. Martin merely tells Anna that what is happening is probably not fair, but it is just,

and does not give her any indication that he can or will change the situation. Euripides, then, criticises Achilles' *aidōs*, here in the sense of respect for a supplicant, because it is based on hubris rather than helpfulness. Contrastingly, Martin's demeanour is cold but honest, and Lanthimos again leaves it to the audience to form an opinion. The same goes for the echo of Iphigenia's change of heart speech, i.e. Kim pleading to Steven to kill her, so she can save the family. Rather than criticising her words as Euripides does, Lanthimos merely shows the absurdity of a young girl blurting out heroic speech she heard from others to justify her self-sacrifice. As such, this scene illuminates the corresponding passage in the tragedy, making it even more difficult to interpret Iphigenia's words as sincere.

The final correspondences occur at the end of the film. Euripides ends his tragedy by showing people, viz. the messenger and Agamemnon (and, to a certain extent, the chorus), who pretend nothing bad has happened. On the contrary, Iphigenia's sacrifice is described as a great blessing for the girl herself and her family. Lanthimos does something similar in *TK*'s final scene. Of all places, the Murphy family is having dinner where Steven and Martin used to meet. No one says a word as Martin comes in, although Kim and he still bear the marks of everything that has happened (Martin limps, Kim's hands are bandaged). Their silence and Steven not acknowledging Martin allow them to pretend they can just go on with life. Balance is restored, so there is no reason to reflect on everything that has happened. The non-diegetic lyrics of *St. John's Passion* – 'Even in greatest lowliness, / [You] have been glorified!' – refer to Bob, who, like Iphigenia, is glorified because his death saved his family. Additionally, they also echo the jubilant words of the messenger and Agamemnon, which indicates that Steven's silence is not one of shock or anger, but of denial.

One significant difference between the tragedy and the film remains to be discussed. The ancient and modern audiences of *IA* knew/know beforehand that Iphigenia will be sacrificed. In *TK*, there are three possible victims. There are visual nudges to Bob (see Chapter 3), and his "supplication" to Steven (him cutting his hair, saying he wants to be a cardiologist too, and offering to do his chores despite being paralysed) echoes Iphigenia begging Agamemnon not to kill her. Yet, who will be murdered remains unclear until the final scene, in which Steven leaves the killing up to chance. Moreover, throughout the film the viewer is led to believe that Kim will be the victim. Like Iphigenia, she is closest to her father, has a younger brother, and has a dramatic change of heart; there is also her 'brilliant essay on the tragedy of Iphigenia'. Kim also resembles Anna – both are pragmatic, cold, and calculated – making her unsympathetic. Contrastingly, we pity Bob because of Steven's clear favouritism towards his sister and because, after a movingly innocent plea, he is murdered by

his own father, who then denies any responsibility. Kim is like the Iphigenia whose “patriotic” words we cannot trust, whereas Bob is like the genuine, childish, and frightened girl at the beginning of *IA*. By having not the later but the earlier Iphigenia killed, Lanthimos makes the sacrifice in his film more emotionally intense for a modern audience than that of Euripides. This resonates with the overall aim of his work, viz. providing the viewers with an affective experience, but it also pertains to the overall interpretation of the dialogue between *IA* and *TK*. When read together, these works show that it does not matter whether a victim dies “voluntarily” or not, or how (un)justified or cruel the murder is. People find a way to live on, and one of those ways, however immoral, is to pretend that this is what is expected of them. Agamemnon still must go to Troy to fulfil his *aidōs* obligations, Steven still must be the successful cardiologist to maintain the perfect picture. It is easier to keep living under the self-imposed yoke of necessity than to acknowledge mistakes, their consequences, and the meaninglessness of all past suffering.

Conclusions and discussion

Conclusions

The methodology used for this thesis is corresponsive reading, which consists of four phases. First, I determined the impressions of *IA* and *TK* by combining my own initial thoughts with reviews of the film. Second, I close read both works and contextualised them within the oeuvres of Euripides and Lanthimos, respectively. Finally, I combined the echoes, correspondences, and differences to interpret the tragedy and the film together.

Due to a lack of “reviews” of the tragedy, I have kept to my own impression. After reading *IA*, several things stood out to me. I had noticed the characters’ fixation on social and moral (gender) norms and their volatility. Additionally, it struck me that at times they were extremely emotional and at other times distant, as if they did not actually care that much about the rules or each other. Because of this and the play’s many ironic passages, I got the impression that Euripides wrote *IA* to criticise a too zealous adherence to *aidōs*. Regarding *TK*, I combined my own impression with those of critics. The camera work features tracking shots and zoom-ins, making it feel intrusive and voyeuristic. The characters’ demeanour, in terms of both their verbal and their body language, is remarkably stiff. Critics interpreted these elements as either an artificial or a hyper-realistic style. The film also combined outright disturbing scenes with silly jokes and below-the-belt sexual humour, which was considered absurdist, perverse, and highly uncomfortable. After watching *TK* for the first time, I did not understand its meaning or how it was connected to *IA*. The critics proposed various readings, ranging from a simply pretentious and meaningless film to ‘the deconstruction of the myth of the perfect suburban family’ or allegories revolving around Christianity or the struggle of humans and science/supernatural forces. Like Lanthimos’ other works, *TK* was also interpreted as a film designed to shock its audiences. Finally, many critics pointed out general thematic similarities between the tragedy and the film, but none provided an in-depth analysis of the connection between the two, although Lanthimos himself described this connection as a ‘dialogue’.

To close-read *IA*, I used emotion studies in ancient literature as described by Cairns. This method entails analysing three elements: emotion words, emotions as expressed by language, and descriptions of the physical manifestation(s) of emotions. I first determined the emotion to be studied. This became *aidōs*, which comprises (self-)respect, honour, and shame for oneself or others. Following Cairns’ method, I first mapped out all instances of *aidōs* and related words, passages in which the characters referred to social, moral, or religious rules,

and descriptions of their own and others' physicality that conveyed an emotion comprised by *aidōs*, such as shame. Then, I used this information to establish the different manifestations of *aidōs* in the tragedy. I found that the characters incessantly refer to various forms of (self-)respect, (dis)honour, and (the violation of) gender norms to justify their own actions and condemn those of others. The female characters repeatedly put aside their *aidōs*, here in the sense of self-respect, out of self-preservation, while the male characters referred to various forms of *aidōs* (piety, patriotism, obligation to the army) to defend their faulty decisions. I concluded that in *IA*, the characters hide behind *aidōs* to avoid having to face responsibility for the horrible consequences of their decisions – or, in Agamemnon's case, indecisiveness. Therefore, Euripides uses the characters not to criticize the concept of *aidōs*, but its underlying principles. The characters quarrel, deceive themselves and each other, and are hypocritical. As a result, they have a flawed and corrupt understanding of virtues, which corrupts society as a whole. This theme is also present in the rest of Euripides works. In his other tragedies, he critiques not people, but the institutions (war, power dynamics between men and women) that are contaminated by their faulty understanding of morality.

To close-read *TK*, I used another method of emotion studies, viz. the filmic mood-cue approach developed by Smith. Smith explains that in a film, so-called emotive cues (all audiovisual signs in a film, ranging from the actors' facial expressions to editing choices) construct its overall mood, i.e. a predisposition to a certain (set of) emotion(s). My film analysis revolved around three emotive cues: the characters' physicality (body language and, incidentally, the representation of bodies in space through camera work), their speech (what is said), and their deliverance (how it is said). Lanthimos has repeatedly stated the importance of these elements in his oeuvre. Additionally, these cues are similar to what Cairns describes as 'physical manifestations of emotions' and 'expression of emotion through language'. To analyse the characters' speech and deliverance, I combined (re)watching the film with reading the screenplay. The screenplay also contained some information about physicality, mostly the characters' facial expressions and their environments (for example the restaurant where Anna met with Matthew). In some cases, speech related to the characters' body or specific body parts, such as Martin's mother complementing Steven's 'lovely hands', but the film also features "silent" scenes that display the (ab)use of bodies, e.g. Steven's and Anna's bedroom scene. I concluded that the characters' stiff, emotionless demeanour was a manifestation of their obsession with two concepts: 'perfection' and 'debt'. In *TK*, 'perfection' entails the fixation on achievements/successes of oneself and others, visible wealth and beauty, and being the picture-perfect suburban family. 'Debt' is defined as paying off debts, mostly

Steven trying to make up for accidentally murdering Martin's father, and framing everything, including affective bonds, as impersonal transactions. I concluded that Lanthimos presents us with characters whose behaviour is like that of their tragic counterparts. They hide behind self-imposed external forces, not *aidōs* but perfection and debt, to avoid having to face the gruesome implications and consequences of their actions. A difference between the tragedy and the film is that in the latter, the characters show barely any emotions. Another more significant difference is that Lanthimos does not critique his characters' behaviour, nor is *TK* meant as an attack on the neoliberal modern world. Rather, he presents his audience with an exploration of an aspect of humanity in this world, i.e. avoiding a self-created reality that is too painful to face by keeping up appearances and paying off debt, and then leaves it to the audience judge the outcome. Examining instead of interpreting is a feature of Lanthimos' oeuvre. In his films, he analyses aspects of human life (e.g. the meaning of love/relationships), human institutions (the family, society at large), and the essence of humanity itself. The mood of *TK* and Lanthimos' oeuvre, then, is best described as 'perpetual suspense', the mental uncertainty and anxiety of awaiting a decision or outcome that ultimately is not provided and, consequently, urges the viewer to continue their engagement with the film after it has ended.

The final phase of corresponsive reading, interpretation, provided an answer to the research question: how does the characters' approach to the supposed external factors of *aidōs*, 'perfection', and 'debt' connect the tragic narratives of *Iphigenia at Aulis* and its reception *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*? In both works, the characters use the structure and rules of their respective worlds – social and religious traditions, socio-moral obligations to others and the country, and the neoliberal modern world with its emphasis on perfection, debt, and transaction – to justify their actions, absolving themselves from guilt. However, Euripides and Lanthimos reveal that these rules are not imposed on the characters from the outside, but are self-imposed, and that they always have a choice, even if the choices are difficult. Therefore, *IA* and *TK* raise questions that revolve around the essence of morals and virtues, who or what determines their meaning, and the role of humans in the world. Are we subject to external forces beyond our control, or do we possess agency and the ability to make our own choices – and if so, can we bear the responsibility that comes with it?

Discussion: methods and future research

Reception theory, the overarching framework of this thesis was introduced by Hans Robert Jauss in the 1960s, with classical reception theory emerging approximately thirty years later,

making it a relatively new field of study. The main difference between the study of the classical tradition and classical reception studies is that the former analyses the “journey” of an ancient text, image, etc. through the ages up until a certain point in time, whereas the latter revolves around the perception of said text, image, etc. There are two strands within reception studies: one proposes that only the receiving culture is influenced by antiquity, the other that both inform each other. The notion that antiquity and modernity have a reciprocal relationship has recently grown in popularity, as can be seen from the development of new interpretative frameworks such as Brooke Holmes’ ‘liquid antiquity’¹⁷⁹.

At first glance, Heynders’ four-phase method seems to align more with the first category of classical reception studies. However, in practice it resembles what Lorna Hardwick calls “fuzzy connections”. Such connections ‘contribute to creating for the reader a simultaneity of experience that brings together the ancient and the new. The ancient image or referent can actually be made into a connector, even if the reader does not have detailed knowledge of its associations.’¹⁸⁰ Heynders’ foregrounding of the reader’s personal experience with a text (the impression) resonates with Hardwick’s statement that the reader does not need extensive knowledge of the classics to notice references to antiquity. The echoes of an ancient text in a modern text (here in the broadest sense of the word) bring them together and reveal correspondences, which can provide new insights into the meaning of both texts. Despite their similarity, the two interpretative frameworks have not been connected until now, as far as I know. The same goes for the two ways of emotion studies used in this thesis. In a film, speech can be an emotive cue (Smith), but in ancient tragedy, it would be called emotion words (Cairns). Likewise, deliverance corresponds to language as an expression of emotion, and physicality with descriptions of the physical manifestations of emotions. A suggestion for future research, then, is to map, compare, and contrast the different methods of classical reception studies and specifically the different interdisciplinary methods of emotion studies. A caveat here is that both fields are still developing. However, an overview of the existing methods gives practical substance to abstract concepts such as liquid antiquity, besides which it also contributes to opening up classical reception studies to other non-classical disciplines. This is important because researchers with other disciplinary skills can offer new insights. Moreover, when multiple disciplines can engage with a classical

¹⁷⁹ Brooke Holmes, Karen Marta, and Dakis Joannou, *Liquid Antiquity* (Geneva, Switzerland: Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, 2017).

¹⁸⁰ Lorna Hardwick, “Fuzzy Connections: Classical Texts and Modern Poetry in English,” in *Tradition, Translation, Trauma: The Classic and the Modern*, ed. Jan Parker and Timothy Mathews (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 56.

reception studies/classics in general, it becomes embedded in different scholarly and societal debates, enriching it and making it more sustainable.

Besides future research on the methods of classical reception studies, the case studies themselves must be discussed. Regarding classical reception in films, research up until now has mostly investigated ‘films which engage openly with narrative and performative aspects of Greek tragedy’¹⁸¹. Much research can still be done on the echoes, correspondences, and differences between ancient texts and films that are not direct adaptations. By way of sustaining antiquity and making it accessible, it would be interesting if these studies were conducted according to the reciprocal classical reception studies type. This thesis is an example of this approach. Other possibilities include a reading of the Coen Brothers’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), a film that reveals the comic road movie potentials of the *Odyssey*, or research into how an animated series like *Blood of Zeus*, which combines well-known elements of ancient mythology (i.a. the Gigantomachy) with the modern world (its protagonist, demi-god Heron, practices his fighting skills on animatronics), uses antiquity as a reference culture.

Self-evaluation

During my second research master year, the idea arose to write my thesis on the reception of Greek tragedy in modern film. I had previously researched a classic story on the silver screen, namely the *Odyssey* in the aforementioned Coen Brothers’ film, and wanted to learn more about film studies. Once I had seen Lanthimos’ film, it became clear that for this research I not only needed to find a different approach from my usual method of reception studies, i.e. focusing on narrative similarity. Lanthimos’ film was not a standard film, i.e. a film with a clear beginning, middle and end. Moreover, apart from some narrative elements, there were no similarities between the film and Euripides’ tragedy. What struck me most was the emotionlessness of the characters in the film, so I started reading up on emotion studies. It was easier to determine the right classical reception studies method because I already had some experience in this field and knew what secondary literature could be useful. I took a considerable amount of time reading about emotion and film studies and worked through a teaching method independently to gain more experience in the latter. On the one hand, I gained a lot of theoretical and practical knowledge by doing so; on the other hand, it would have been better to start analysing the tragedy and the film sooner. This would have allowed

¹⁸¹ This is how Michelakis’ book *Greek Tragedy on Screen* is described. Pantelis Michelakis, *Greek Tragedy on Screen*, Oxford University Press (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/greek-tragedy-on-screen-9780199239078?cc=nl&lang=en&#>.

me to conduct a more focused search for relevant secondary literature and write a thesis outline faster. The research and writing process has alerted me to these pitfalls, which will allow me to be more aware of them in the future.

During the writing process, I each time submitted a separate chapter to my supervisor and Dr. Michelakis for checking, after which I received feedback via e-mail. The feedback and other issues such as content questions or points for improvement were then discussed during (online) meetings. Personally, I find this a very pleasant working method. Through feedback via email, I was able to prepare well for the discussions, after which I could improve the chapter with specific instructions. Regularly discussing my progress also ensured that I could adjust the structure of my thesis in a timely manner to better align it with the responsive reading method I used. Because meetings were mostly scheduled in advance, I was able to work towards something specific each time. Overall, I think that I have processed the feedback well. The final versions of each chapter have significantly improved compared to the drafts and I was able to bring a clear structure to the thesis as a whole.

Like any large project, conducting the research for and writing this thesis had its difficulties. Due to my lack of experience with emotion and film studies, it was at times challenging to find relevant literature and keep an overview of the sources. Nonetheless, I enjoyed learning new skills, such as film analysis, and theories. In conclusion, I have learned where my strengths and weaknesses lie regarding conducting research and have been able to deepen and broaden my knowledge of my main research interest, i.e. classical reception studies. I plan to return more often to the conceptual dialogue between Greek tragedy and modern non-adaptation films in future projects.

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