

‘VICTIMLESS’ CHEATING IN ATTIC TRAGEDY

A standard definition of ‘cheating’ is ‘acting dishonestly or unfairly in order to gain an advantage’. ‘Cheating’ is also defined as ‘gaining an advantage over or depriving of something by using unfair or deceitful methods’.¹ Both definitions would seem to cover a rich array of acts and patterns of behaviour, no less because ‘acting dishonestly or unfairly’ and ‘gaining an advantage’ may themselves be interpreted quite flexibly. Understood rather more loosely, cheating is often used as synonymous with ‘deceiving’, ‘tricking’ or ‘lying’.

In all relevant definitions and shades of cheating it seems that the cheater standardly has a self-serving motive, but it does not necessarily follow that his act of cheating *aims* to do harm to others. In fact, it might (come to) benefit others, including the very agent who is being cheated, at least in some important respects.

With that in mind, and with the awareness that distinctions and nuances such as these are hardly ever that clear-cut or consistent especially in literary texts, I would like to look into a particular, far less common, type of cheating, which I shall call ‘victimless’ cheating, as represented in Attic tragedy. My aim is to outline how this form of cheating operates in terms of plot and characterization, and to explore whether it bears any significant differences from malevolent, ‘proper’ so to speak, cheating, aside from the bare factor of intentionality. An investigation into such matters, and perhaps the forming of a typology of tragic cheating, would, as I came to realize, require a lengthier study.

Attic tragedy abounds in episodes of cheating and deception (designated by terms such as *δόλος* and *ἀπάτη*),² whether these constitute the basis of the story line or they emerge by way of a sub-theme.³ The plays also feature moralizing statements about cheating and its presumed connection with core values like justice (*δίκη*), shame (*αἰδώς*), honour (*τιμή*), and nobility (*εὐγένεια*). Cheating, mostly in the sense of

¹ Both definitions are from the Oxford dictionary.

² Other relevant terms include the verbs *κλέπτω*, *κρύπτω*, *τεχνάομαι*, and *μηχανάομαι*.

³ On a quite different level, Rosenbloom (2014) 268-269 also reminds us of Gorgias’ remark that *apatē* was integral to the contract between the tragic poet and his audience.

lying, deceiving or scheming, is often spoken of as a practice that is shameful and ‘unheroic’ – suited to either slaves or women.⁴

For all their variety, tragic acts of deception standardly result in criminal or transgressive deeds, or are intended to cover up such deeds. The cheaters’ most common motives are unfair profit and misappropriation (e.g. Polymestor in *Hecuba*, the Atreids in *Agamemnon*, Pelops in Sophocles’ *Electra*) or punishment/revenge (e.g. Hecuba in the eponymous play, Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*). It is clear that these acts constitute either conscious, circumstantial transgressions or, in the case of punishment/revenge, responses to such circumstantial transgressions. It is also clear that these acts either presuppose or consciously create and perpetuate enmity, which usually bears long-lasting consequences that are not necessarily confined to the cheater and the victim.

What I shall call ‘victimless’ cheating thus constitutes the exception rather than the rule – not only in drama but also in ancient myth as a whole. I define ‘victimless’ cheating by using a fair amount of poetic license, as a type of cheating that is well-meant and well-intentioned, expected to promote a greater good or necessity, without actively harming others. As the very words ‘well-meant’ and ‘well-intentioned’ partly imply, the outcome might belie that expectation – the cheating might prove to be not literally victimless after all, contrary to the cheater’s intention.

The instances of ‘victimless’ cheating in tragedy are found in three dramas in which the broader idea or practice of cheating (pertaining to both words and deeds) plays an important part – and embraces both the human and the divine realm, to different degrees. These dramas are: Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis*, Sophocles’ *Ajax*, and Euripides’ *Alcestis*.⁵

In keeping with the plays’ different subject-matter and tone, the relevant instances take on various forms, moral overtones, and degrees of intensity. They also have different outcomes, from downright disastrous for virtually everyone involved (*Women of Trachis*), to partly successful (*Ajax*), to fortunate for everyone involved, if

⁴ See e.g. Soph. *Phil.* 1006 (Philoctetes accuses Odysseus of fostering servile, i.e. ignoble, thoughts, on account of his use of stealth); Soph. *Trach.* 453-454 (it is insulting to freeborn men to have the name of liar).

⁵ A greyer play would be Eur. *Iphig. in Aul.*, but the cheater Agamemnon knowingly, if reluctantly, intends to harm another person.

somewhat enigmatic (*Alcestis*). The instances, moreover, differ with respect to the degree to which they are verbally thematized or problematized.

Despite these differences, all episodes might be understood as a form of well-intended cheating among *friends* (family, comrades, guest-friends) that commonly aims at affirming, strengthening or 'reclaiming' the close bond among the agents involved. As such, the cheating episodes are closely attached to the dramas' distinct, predominant issues that inevitably revolve around human relationships: Heracles' 'disruptive' *eros* and its impact on his family; Ajax's suicide and burial, as these relate to his *heroism* (and its public recognition); Admetus' outstanding, and perhaps problematic, hospitality and generosity towards strangers, and its bearing on broader obligations of friendship, reciprocity, and loyalty/fidelity.

Most of these cheating instances, whether central to the plot or more peripheral, complicate the audience's expectations before ultimately promoting the dramas' (already anticipated or foreshadowed) resolution. From a moral standpoint, and despite the fact that they are thematized to substantially different degrees, the cheating episodes seem to be eventually overlooked, if not openly excused (as acts of cheating *per se*).

Another common thread, which I find more interesting and distinctive, is that most relevant instances come about as a result of the cheaters' need to defend and safeguard (what they perceive as) a basic aspect of their identity, or rather their most substantial identifying feature, which is being suddenly tested or openly threatened (wife who comes to feel scorned and herald/servant who is forced to become the bearer of unsettling news in *Women of Trachis*; valiant warrior, the army's 'second best', whose honour is suddenly damaged in *Ajax*; impeccable host whose reputed and self-defining generosity might be put into question in *Alcestis*).

As such, these episodes also prove significant to characterization, rather than being presented as more circumstantial reactions or urges. Whereas the acts of malevolent, or 'proper', cheating are usually intended to confer a quite concrete, material benefit or advantage to the cheater ('material' even in the form of harming someone in revenge) by actively disturbing the normal state of affairs, the acts of 'victimless' cheating aim at consolidating one of the cheater's permanent character traits or essential attributes that were not expected to have been disturbed in 'normal' circumstances.

1. Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*: The wife.

Cheating, and 'victimless' one at that, drives the action of *Women of Trachis* – if we accept that Deianeira's contrivance might be classified as such.⁶ Still, things get a bit more complicated, since the drama's plot comprises a web of acts of deception – divine and human, past and present, malevolent and well-intentioned – which are associated with the broader interplay between public/open and private/covert, and with the interplay between knowledge and ignorance.

The drama, moreover, verbally brings attention to the moral assessment of the practice of lying, concealing, and cheating. Several maxims connect these practices with deep-rooted values, namely those of justice, shame, and nobility, as well as with the factor of motivation and intentionality.

The play's most spectacular development, Heracles' death, comes about as a result of different acts, and degrees, of cheating or plotting – that involve both alive and dead agents, human and divine. The concrete act that kills the hero is the product of Deianeira's contrivance (*ἀτεχνησάμην*, 534; *μεμηχάνηται*, 586). Having learnt that her husband is smitten with the young slave Iole, daughter of the king of Oechalia, recently sacked by Heracles, Deianeira sends him a robe, which she dyes with (what she believes is) a love charm. This supposed love charm is the blood of Nessus, offered by the Centaur himself as a gift while he was dying by Heracles' arrow (555-587). The heroine's expressed motive for engaging in that secret act is her desire or need to restore herself to the status of the hero's *true* wife (notice especially 550-551), that is, it is integral to her presumed social role and essence.

The women of the Chorus, whom Deianeira goes on to consult, seem to recognize that need as legitimate, since they do not consider their mistress' plan inappropriate or reproachable, even when Deianeira herself lays out serious reservations, practical as well as moral. The heroine views her intended deed as *both* risky and shameful, and is quick to condemn all women who engage in acts of wicked

⁶ Some might find this classification objectionable on two grounds: first, and rather pedantically, what Deianeira does (her knowingly sending the ignorant Heracles a gift with a secret 'power' that will work to her advantage) might not be defined as an act of cheating strictly speaking. Second, and more importantly, her motive(s) for engaging in the particular act might not be as innocent or straightforward as they appear to be, as many scholars believe, hence we cannot speak about well-intended cheating. Still, I am of the opinion that Deianeira's contrivance qualifies as 'victimless cheating', taking into account both the heroine's stated motives and the way in which her act (and its outcome) is eventually assessed by the community. See also n. 8.

daring (*κακὰς δὲ τόλμας ... τὰς τε τολμώσας*, 582-583). Still, she decides to carry out the plan if this is the only way by which she may prevail over the slave-girl; after all, even shameful deeds do not incur disgrace when done in darkness (596-597).⁷ All these admissions and inhibitions, especially the one about the doubtful effects of the love charm, suggest that Deianeira is sufficiently alert and possibly conscious of some wrong-doing, but are not enough to suggest that she might have harmful intentions, in my view.

The heroine's plan, at all events, goes horribly wrong, since it turns out that the love charm was actually a deadly poison. By testing the love charm by herself, after already having sent it to Heracles, Deianeira soon realizes that she has been cheated, actively deceived by the monster, who has been seeking pure and simple revenge. The realization and subsequent revelation of Nessus' *δόλος* has different effects on different agents. On the one hand, it drives the heroine to kill herself; on the other hand, it drives her people to cease from directly blaming *her*. Even though both Hyllus and Heracles at first curse Deianeira and pray for her harsh punishment (e.g. 808-812, 1050 [Heracles calls her *δολῶπις*], 1068-1069), they eventually turn their attention elsewhere, since the woman's error proved to be not only involuntary (*ἤμαρτεν οὐχ ἔκουσία*, 1123) but also well-intentioned (*ἤμαρτε χρηστὰ μωμένη*, 1136), in Hyllus' words.⁸ Hyllus makes a quite emphatic point about his feeling morally obliged to disclose and explain this to his dying father (1035-1040, 1068-1069, 1108-1111, 1116, 1133).

Heracles' death is eventually attributed to various agents, other than Deianeira. The hero himself expresses the realization that he has been killed by the Centaur – and thus Zeus' oracle, mentioned already in the *prologue*, came true (1163-1164; cf. 821-830, 1023). Hyllus refers to Iole as the killer of both of his parents (1233-1237; cf. 893-895), while the Chorus focuses on (divine) *δόλος*. The women mourn over the *δολοποιὸς ἀνάγκα* wrought by Nessus and over his *δολιόμωθα κέντρα* (831-840; 841-

⁷ See Cairns (1993) 360, n. 52; 363, n. 59.

⁸ Heracles, indeed, simply stops referring to his wife altogether. The issue of Deianeira's culpability (and of her overall motivation) is certainly more complex; scholars have long been divided – some view the heroine as an innocent victim, others as a guilty accomplice. Others think that both views are simplistic and substantially problematized in the drama. See suggestively Hester (1980) 3-4; Scott (1997) 33-47; Carawan (2000) 191-237. Although the issue deserves more serious and extensive consideration, my reading is obviously based on the conviction that Deianeira intends no actual harm, regardless of whether she might be at fault in terms of naiveness, 'wishful thinking' or even negligence.

851) – and are furthermore certain that it is Cypris who is silently bringing these deeds to pass (*ἄναυδος ... πράκτωρ*, 860-861).⁹

Heracles' *eros* for Iole motivated Deianeira's innocuous contrivance, through which Nessus managed to carry out and succeed in his deadly *δόλος*. And yet, on the purely human plain, the drama opens with an instance of 'victimless' cheating intended to suppress that fierce *eros* (*δεινὸς ἕμερος*). This instance consists in Lichas' (partially) lying tale, which seems to constitute Sophocles' invention.¹⁰

Lichas, Heracles' herald, persistently tries to mislead Deianeira about his master's reasons for sacking Oechalia and about Iole's identity; to that effect he even verbally attacks the anonymous Messenger, who reveals the truth, by calling him an insane liar (412, 434-435). Lichas' false story gives rise to several moral statements and aphorisms about lying and cheating, in conjunction with the notions of justice and punishment.¹¹ The Chorus quite emphatically curse those who fashion evil secrets (*λαθραῖα ... κακά*, 383-384; cf. 376-377); the Messenger accuses Lichas of being an unjust (*οὐ δίκαιος*) and base (*κακός*) *ἄγγελος* (346-348; cf. 468-469), worthy of punishment (410-411), while Deianeira stresses that lying incurs great shame to freeborn men (453-454).

Upon close interrogation, Lichas eventually admits the truth (472-475), making sure to clarify that Heracles had no involvement in this whatsoever (in response to Deianeira's relevant suspicion [449-452]). Lichas distorted the truth on his own initiative, because he feared lest he grieve his mistress' heart (*δειμαίνων τὸ σὸν | μὴ στέρνον ἀλγύνοιμι*, 481-482). Hence, he admits that he erred, while tempering his admission by hinting that this should not be regarded a real error (*ἥμαρτον, εἴ τι τήνδ' ἁμαρτίαν νέμεις*, 483). Lichas' expressed motive, that is, his compassion or pity for

⁹ In the previous *stasimon* (497-516) the women sung about Aphrodite's unsurpassable power, which has also manifested itself in the goddess' repeated deceptions of the gods (of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades).

¹⁰ See Davies (1984) 480-483. Cf. the false report in Soph. *El.* (about Orestes' death) and in Soph. *Phil.* (about the plan of Phoenix and the sons of Theseus); in both of these cases the audience is informed that the narrators intend to deceive. In *Women of Trachis* there is no such statement, but we can plausibly assume that 'several of the audience would be surprised, and even suspicious, at Iole's convenient absence from Lichas' narrative' (Davies 1984: 483). For scenes of deception in Sophocles as a whole see Parlavantz-Friedrich (1969).

¹¹ Lichas himself moralizes about cheating and scheming with respect to Heracles' supposed conduct. Lichas makes a point about Heracles' injustice and *hybris* when killing Iphytus, since the hero's revenge was not open (*ἐμφανῶς*) but based on guile (*δόλος*). This is what supposedly drove Zeus to punish him, in Lichas' mind (277-280).

his mistress, is partly consistent with his social position, or at least can be partly explained in terms of his social position.¹² More evidently, however, his false reporting serves a particular dramatic effect, in so far as it surprises and perplexes (part of) the audience.

Lichas' cheating is not further thematized. Instead, Deianeira seems to be accepting his advice concerning the proper treatment of Iole and prepares to give him the message and the gifts she wishes to send Heracles – with the well-known consequences.

The drama presents Heracles' death as a product of divine intent, as this is 'materialized' through well-meant (human) acts of cheating that fail miserably. Lichas does not manage to keep Heracles' *eros* for Iole a secret due to (unexpected) human intervention. Deianeira (more expectedly) does not manage to do away with that *eros*, even though she thinks that she might secretly do so without bringing about harm, because she has been deceived by Nessus. Nessus' 'overarching', malevolent deception ultimately brings Zeus' (already disclosed) oracle to pass; what makes the play and the human agents involved much more challenging and intriguing – no less in conjunction with Hyllus' closing exclamation that none of these grievous affairs have been 'without Zeus' (1278) – is precisely the fact that this development is mediated by Deianeira's well-intended contrivance, which Lichas well-intended fabrications did not manage to avert.

2. Sophocles' *Ajax*: The hero.

(Malevolent) cheating in Sophocles' *Ajax* indirectly sets the basis for the unraveling of the plot in so far as the eponymous hero operates on the assumption that he has been cheated and wronged by his comrades with respect to the awarding of Achilles' arms; after engaging in secret voting, the Achaeans awarded the arms to Odysseus. Driven by his conviction that the decision was unjust, which is, interestingly, never

¹² In so far as it is typical of good servants to feel compassion for their masters and to be grieved by their misfortunes. See e.g. *Hel.* 726-733.

verified or belied,¹³ Ajax attempts to kill the leaders of the army and Odysseus himself – by stealth (in a night attack).¹⁴

However horrible and unprecedented, the deed itself is not given much attention in terms of its moral assessment as a criminal act.¹⁵ The play instead opens with the goddess Athena recounting and demonstrating (to Odysseus and the audience) how she averted the attack by driving Ajax temporarily mad, that is, by distorting his eyesight and perception. Upon encountering the still ‘blinded’ and deranged hero, the goddess carries on misleading and taunting him (e.g. 111, 114-115), making his humiliation much graver – irreversible, really. These chain-reactions of, definitely malevolent, cheating (whether real or speculated) ultimately lead to the hero’s suicide.

In this context, two instances of ‘victimless’ cheating, both referring to Ajax’s (past or present) conduct, get interwoven with the drama’s two central crises – the hero’s suicide (which dominates the play’s first part) and the hero’s burial (which dominates the play’s second part), respectively. Both instances are quite subtle or ambiguous.

The first instance consists in the hero’s famous ‘deception’ speech (second *episode*), which has been discussed *ad nauseam*. Leading up to that, the sober Ajax, who has meanwhile come to his senses and realized his humiliating deed – the killing of the herds instead of that of his enemies – considers ending his life or rather implies, in more ways than one, that he is about to do so.¹⁶ The hero’s closest people, the Chorus of Salaminian sailors and his concubine (and mother of his son) Tecmessa, strive to dissuade him from harming himself – and from abandoning them in the hostile land of Troy (first *episode*).

¹³ At least in terms of whether the actual voting was crooked. All that we get in relation to that is Ajax’s and Teucer’s word (445-446, 1135, 1137) against the word of the Atreids (1067-1086, 1242-1249).

¹⁴ Some consider that this type of attack undermines Ajax’s *heroism*, since it also assimilates him with his major rival, Odysseus; the latter is *par excellence* associated with the use of *δόλος*, especially in tragedy and later sources. Cf. n. 19. See e.g. *Ajax* 190, where the Chorus derogatorily refer to Odysseus as the offspring of crafty Sisyphus (cf. 445); *Soph. Phil.* 405-409; *Eur. Hec.* 131-133, 253-259; *Tro.* 285-288; *Iph. in Aul.* 524-531. With respect to the awarding of the arms and Odysseus’ broader conduct in the battlefield, as assessed by Ajax, see especially Antisthenes (fr. 14, 15 Caizzi), Quintus of Smyrna (5.180-317), and Ovid (*Met.* 13.1-381). To return to *Ajax*, the hero’s use of *δόλος* when attacking his comrades seems to be quite necessary, imposed by the circumstances (Garvie 1998: 12). More broadly, resorting to *δόλος* in warfare (and warfare-related enterprises) is not *a priori* considered shameful and unheroic (Kyriakou 2011: 204-205).

¹⁵ The attempted killing is mostly explored in terms of its dire impact on Ajax and his people. Odysseus does not even refer to it. When confronting Teucer, the Atreids do condemn the act, but overall focus on the personal animosity and tension that pervaded their relationship with Ajax even prior to the event.

¹⁶ Culminating in his farewell to his son, Eurysaces, and his instructions to his men (540-582).

Even though Ajax remains unyielding throughout his interaction with his people, in his second appearance on stage he quite unexpectedly declares that he has changed his mind. Having been allegedly softened by the woman's pleas, the hero decided to purify himself and rejoin the community, making peace with gods and mortals (650-660). That unforeseen change of mind relieves Tecmessa and the Chorus immensely (as is especially expressed in the following ode), and at the same time complicates the audience's expectations.

One of the several conflicting interpretations of that speech, which I find the most convincing and which I adopt in this discussion, is that Ajax in effect cheats his loved ones, so that he may commit suicide unobstructed, or/and out of pity and compassion.¹⁷ Upon discovering the hero's body, Tecmessa fleetingly expresses the realization that she has been 'cheated' by him (*ἔγνωκα γὰρ δὴ φωτὸς ἠπατημένη*), while the sailors mourn over their aborted *nostos*.¹⁸

Ajax's act of deception serves his interests and priorities and, at the very least, does not aim at harming his loved ones.¹⁹ It becomes increasingly clear (ever since Athena's 'performance' in the *prologue*) that the only available resource which would not contradict the hero's objectives and considerations, and his very essence, as laid out in his composed *rheseis* of the first *episode*, is the impersonal *πορευτέον* (695).

The second instance of 'victimless' cheating is even subtler and no longer refers to the hero's future acts or plans but to his past (relatively recent) action, as this is appropriated by his people. After Ajax's death, Teucer and the Atreids fight over the burial of the hero's corpse. In the context of his debating strategy Teucer emphatically reminds Agamemnon of his brother's exceptional achievements in the battlefield; Ajax's Iliadic past, as reconstructed by Teucer, is projected as an undeniable proof that the hero should by all means receive a proper burial.

One such achievement was Ajax's single combat with Hector, following the casting of lots – a well-known Iliadic episode. Aside from the bare fact that Ajax was the one who confronted the Trojans' major warrior-defender, Teucer pays due

¹⁷ Without lying in the strict sense of the word, but through the multiple ambiguities of his speech. See suggestively Hesk (2003) 74-103; Finglass (2011) 328-329.

¹⁸ The thought that the dead man abandons and thus harms his loved ones is common. See Alexiou (2002²).

¹⁹ Taplin (1979) 125-127 even claims that Ajax (realizes that he) would put his closest friends in grave danger if he chose to live. Contrast Rosenbloom (2001) 112, who reads Ajax's deception as a (or rather, another) negation of his heroic identity, a sign of feminization, comparable to the hero's use of stealth in his night attack. See also n. 14 above. This presupposes a rather narrow definition of *heroism*.

attention to two aspects that intend to invalidate the Atreids' dismissive view of, and orchestrated attack on, his brother. Both aspects are tightly associated with the moral ramifications of the practice of drawing lots, as these are implied in Teucer's particular way of recollecting the event (1283-1287).²⁰

First, Ajax confronted Hector without being ordered to or coerced (*λαχῶν τε κάκέλευστος*, 1284). The stressing of this point highlights the hero's dedication and spirited fighting ethos, but also might subtly assert that *hierarchically* Ajax was perfectly equal with his peers,²¹ which is one of the basic premises of the practice of drawing lot (as opposed to following orders or submitting to a human master). Teucer's point, by extension, challenges and undermines the Atreids' expressed view of themselves as superior, as leaders who had had unquestionable authority over Ajax (both while he lived and now that he is dead). This alleged greater authority is a key argument or subtext in the Atreids', and especially Menelaus', rhetoric (e.g. 1076-76) concerning the required prohibition of the hero's burial, so that its refutation is not without significance.²²

Second, during the actual drawing of lots, Ajax refrained from cheating so as to skip danger (1285-1870).²³ That aspect is important as well, in so far as it creates a sharp, although implied, contrast between the hero's decency and the Atreids' allegedly fraudulent conduct during the secret voting for Achilles' arms.

What is more, it is presumably implied that Ajax went to the other extreme, taking measures to ensure that his lot would be the one to be selected. If we take Teucer's remark that his brother's lot would be the *first* to leap out from the helmet at face value, Ajax seems to have cheated so as to make sure that he would be the one to be allotted. This 'corrupting' of the process would give the hero the chance to

²⁰ Since in the epic the same procedure is presented quite differently. What seems to determine the outcome in the *Iliad* is divine intent, which simultaneously greatly pleases the, ever eager to fight, hero, as well as his comrades (7.177-192). *Ajax*, on the other hand, brings in the spotlight the hero's own role in (and disposition towards) the process. See further Papadodima (2014) 388-401 and the next note.

²¹ For in terms of fighting merit Ajax *was* superior and exceptional, as Odysseus himself acknowledges (1339-1341). After all, Ajax's own disposition towards the casting of lots implies that he in way rejects the state of equality that the particular practice both presupposes and secures.

²² Aside from the subtle implication relating to the casting of lots, Teucer directly and outspokenly questions Menelaus' jurisdiction and authority. Ajax joined the expedition of his own accord and as his own master – and leader of the Salaminians; Menelaus is entitled to rule only over the Spartans (1097-1117).

²³ The lot that he put in the helmet was not a clod of wet earth, which would most likely sink or dissolve once the helmet would be shaken. See Apollod. 2.8.4 and Paus. 4.3.4-5 about Cresphontes' similar trick.

enhance his own *kleos* and at the same time would (be expected to) benefit his comrades. Hence, it is supposed to come across as not only an acceptable but also a praiseworthy type of cheating.

Both instances of ‘victimless’ cheating in *Ajax* are either quite subtle or ambiguous – and even contested. Nonetheless, they work to the same effect. They aim at safeguarding or restoring Ajax’s honour and *heroism*, his standard major objective (both in the dramatic and in the predramatic time), through their association with the hero’s, necessary as things turned out, suicide and the hero’s burial, respectively. The first instance complicates the audience’s expectations and heightens the suspense. The latter instance reinforces a consistent view – shared by both Ajax’s people and the audience (at least to some extent) – of the hero’s exceptional bravery and courage. By reworking the Iliadic episode of the drawing of lots, and by possibly bringing in the idea of ‘unorthodox’ cheating, Teucer attempts to consolidate and boost that view. Ajax’s burial is indeed achieved largely thanks to Odysseus’ active acknowledgment of the hero’s special, ‘diachronic’ fighting merit.

3. Euripides’ *Alcestis*: The host.

The plot of Euripides’ *Alcestis* is based on a string of exceptional, and variously problematic, exchanges of gifts and services between gods and mortals, in the form of reciprocal actions.²⁴ Aside from blurring the boundaries between human and divine, these exchanges bring out basic complications (and themselves further complicate) the most deep-rooted familial and social bonds (parentage, marriage, friendship). These exchanges are, moreover, associated with some form of cheating, by both gods and mortals, and are all linked to the leading hero’s pivotal, and rather controversial, attribute of being (*ἀγαν*) *φιλόξενος/πολύξεινος* – the *most* hospitable of all Greeks (858-859).

Admetus’ status as an ever generous and open host accounts for the first instance of cheating (not ‘victimless’ narrowly speaking), among divine agents, which

²⁴ See notably Padilla (2000) 179-211.

sets the plot in motion. The god involved in the cheating, Apollo, recounts this instance in the *prologue* (1-14) – in a rather matter-of-fact way. Motivated by his wish to save the pious Admetus from death, thereby repaying him for his virtue and kindness (towards strangers),²⁵ Apollo tricked the Fates (*Μοίρας δολώσας*).²⁶ The deities promised him that the prince could escape an impending death by giving in exchange another corpse to the nether gods. After Admetus' parents refuse to take on that role, his wife, Alcestis, offers to die – and die she does – in his place.

When Thanatos shows up in order to carry the woman off to the Underworld, he directly accuses Apollo for his unjust, deceitful conduct; Apollo not only cheated the Fates in the recent past (*Μοίρας δολίω/σφήλαντι τέχνη*, 33-34) but also even now attempts to deprive Thanatos (as the god himself believes) of his fair share, that is, of Alcestis (*ἀδικεῖς*, 30-31). The quarrel between the two gods is resolved in a rather ambiguous and open-ended way. Thanatos asserts that Alcestis will be shortly brought to the house of Hades; Apollo prophesies that Heracles will arrive as a guest at Admetus' palace and violently rob the heroine from the god of death (65-69).²⁷

On the human plain, Alcestis' death deeply 'disorientates' the grief-stricken Admetus, who, nonetheless, continues to be driven by his long-lasting devotion to the institution of hospitality. The hero's determination to retain that core aspect of his identity and public image, which he identifies with the reputation of his *οἶκος* and of his very *πόλις*,²⁸ even in the midst of a major personal crisis, leads him to 'victimless' cheating.

When the demigod Heracles shows up at the palace unexpectedly, ignorant of Alcestis' passing, Admetus decides to suppress his grief²⁹ so as not to dishonour a guest – and 'lose', even temporarily, a friend (1037-1041).³⁰ The hero thus misleads Heracles about the identity of the deceased woman by resorting to ambiguous language – defining Alcestis as someone closely connected with the family, though

²⁵ Exhibited during the time when the god had been forced to toil in human shape at the prince's palace.

²⁶ Cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 723-724, 727-728, where the Erinyes provide us with a little more information; the deities accuse Apollo of tricking the deities by getting them drunk.

²⁷ See Hamilton (1978) 293-301 about Thanatos' disbelief and its impact on the audience's expectations.

²⁸ Admetus treats the two entities as virtually identical (notice especially 553).

²⁹ Thus breaking his own earlier promises and decrees according to which there should be no more music, banqueters, garlands, and feasts that once filled his halls (342-343).

³⁰ Even though, given his grief, the hero does not have the formal obligation to host a friend.

not related to him by blood (*ὀθνεῖτος ... ἀναγκαία δόμοις*, 533).³¹ In response to the spontaneous objections of not only his community (551-552, 561-562)³² but also the misguided Heracles himself – who readily offers to seek hospitality elsewhere (538, 540-542, 544) – Admetus brings together pragmatic and moral considerations that prove quite effective.

First, Admetus is fully aware that his present misfortune can in no way be lessened given the presumed irreversibility of death and the unbridgeable gulf that separates the living from the dead (555-556)³³ – presuppositions that turn out to be so ambivalent or illusory in this story. On the contrary, it would be an additional, grave ill if his palace were to be called hostile to strangers (557-558; cf. 1039-1041); even more emphatically, Admetus claims that his *οἶκος* does not know how to drive guests away or dishonour them (566-567). Heracles is, after all, an old friend, who has repeatedly offered the hero fine hospitality at Argos (559-560).

Following these arguments, the Chorus quite rapidly change their disposition and fervently praise their master for his generosity and hospitality (569-605; emphatically in 569, *ὦ πολυζείνου καὶ ἐλευθέρου ἀνδρὸς ἀεὶ ποτ' οἶκος*), which they view as a manifestation of the hero's noble birth (*τὸ εὐγενές*), shame (*αἰδῶ*), wisdom (*σοφίας*), and piety (*θεοσεβῆ φῶτα*). This is the very piety for which Admetus had been deemed worthy of being exceptionally honoured and rewarded by a god (570-571; cf. 10 *ὀσίου ... ἀνδρός*).

Things get more complicated when Heracles, who has meanwhile been well entertained, learns the truth by a servant. The demigod first exclaims that he has greatly suffered by Admetus' deceit, since it has made him come across as *κακός*, that is, it has jeopardized his own honour (816 [cf. 1017]; 827, 829-832).³⁴ Straight afterwards, however, Heracles praises Admetus' hospitality, which he moreover presents as a corollary of the hero's nobility and sense of shame or respect (*ἔκρουπτε δ'*

³¹ Heracles' failure to grasp the meaning of Admetus' words, i.e. to comprehend the complexities of language, has been viewed as a manifestation of the demigod's, new for his standards, defeat in the intellectual sphere (Fitzerald 1991: 85-90).

³² The Pherean Elders even accuse Admetus of foolishness (*τί μῶρος εἶ;*), while Admetus himself acknowledges that his decision might seem foolish and reproachable to some (565-566).

³³ As Heracles will *deceptively* do later on (1072-1074), in a scene which largely reverses the present one.

³⁴ The Servant had indeed spoken very insultingly about that utterly crude and base guest, even calling him a wicked thief (749-750, 765-766, 771-772).

ὄν γενναῖος, αἰδεσθεὶς ἐμέ, 857) – just like the Elders (πρὸς αἰδῶ, 601)³⁵ and the Servant (ἤδειτο, 823; contrast ἄγαν ἐκεῖνός ἐστ’ ἄγαν φιλόζενος, 809). Heracles, more importantly, concludes that he is obliged to repay the favour by offering an extraordinary gift in return, that is, by bringing Alcestis back to life, since he does not wish to prove ungrateful (κακός) towards someone who has done him a noble service (840-842, 853-860; cf. 1119-1120).

The closing scene in which the demigod indeed hands the woman over to her husband (with her identity concealed) largely reverses the initial encounter between the two heroes, no less with respect to the use of trickery or deception among friends – and its moral and social implications. This rather enigmatic scene is commonly considered as featuring many comic elements and bitter ironies, especially with respect to the portrayal of aristocratic solidarity.³⁶

Now it is the ignorant and misguided Admetus who poses certain limits to his generosity and hospitality – when refusing to accept the strange woman in his house, mostly out of respect for and eternal devotion to his dead wife (Il. 1042-1069).³⁷ Heracles, on the other hand, whilst criticizing the hero for the ‘excessive’ way in which he formerly exhibited that attribute, urges him to overcome those limits – by precisely deceiving Admetus about the identity of the young woman.

The element of deception is thematized straightaway. Upon encountering each other, Heracles first rebukes Admetus for his former evasiveness (καὶ μέμφομαι μὲν, μέμφομαι, παθῶν τάδε, 1017),³⁸ that is, for his failure to show himself to be ἐλεύθερος, in the sense of ‘frank’, towards his friend. When doing so, the demigod naturally acts out his own ἐλευθερία (here understood mostly as outspokenness in reproach), which he presents as a requirement (or rather one of the basic requirements) of friendship.³⁹

³⁵ For the negative connotations of the verb ἐκφέρεται (το γὰρ εὐγενὲς ἐκφέρεται πρὸς αἰδῶ), supposedly realized by the audience, see Padilla (2000) 196.

³⁶ See Luschnig and Roisman (2003) 201-216; Seidensticker (1982); Padilla (2002) 203.

³⁷ Admetus points out that Heracles has many other guest-friends in the area who could keep the woman (1042-1045), a point already made by Heracles himself when he was trying to decline Admetus’ offer of hospitality (538). Admetus now views the reception of the female guest as a great misfortune (1045), while earlier he had considered turning the guest Heracles away a great misfortune (539).

³⁸ Even though he simultaneously states that he does not wish to grieve his suffering friend too much (1018).

³⁹ For the workings and the significance of the motif of ἐλευθερία, understood both as ‘generosity’ and as ‘frankness’ (as well as in the more technical sense of ‘free birth’), especially in relation to Admetus,

The demigod moralizes that friends should always speak frankly to one another and refrain from silencing their complaints or disapproval (1008-1010).

It is clear that Heracles' problem does not lie in Admetus' 'deceit' as such (as a moral issue in abstract terms), but on its anticipated negative impact on his own sense of virtue and honour. Admetus' deceit, motivated by his 'unconditional' devotion to guest-friendship,⁴⁰ should be criticized to the extent that it might had had resulted in Heracles' own failure to fulfil his obligations as a guest-friend (1010-1011).

By pointing that out, Heracles affirms and restores his status as a proper friend in all respects (*γενναῖος ζένοσ*, 1119-1120), a friend who can be both generous (the form of *ἐλευθερία* that defines Admetus *par excellence*) and frank. Thanks to his extraordinary abilities and very role in the action (his double status as an equal/typical guest-friend and Apollo's divine agent), Heracles is able to combine and successfully uphold these two seemingly irreconcilable duties, by both repaying and speaking frankly to his friend, thereby also warding off the harmful effects of Admetus' failure to do the latter.⁴¹

At the same time, though, the demigod outright lies to his host about the mysterious woman's identity. Heracles claims that he took the young woman as a prize from wrestling and boxing matches (1031-1032) and – while being faced with Admetus' objections – even ironically wishes that he might had had the power to convey Alcestis to the light of day (1072-1074). Heracles goes on to invite Admetus to share in his victory and celebration as a friend should (1103), seemingly 'testing' the loyalty of his peer, and eventually persuades him to accept the woman in his house.

Heracles' trickery, and its possible moral, social, and religious implications, have been interpreted in widely different ways – ranging from its consideration as good-natured, if tactless, teasing to its consideration as an expression of the demigod's reprimanding mood and resentment.⁴² Heracles' lie seems to not only

see Papadodima (2014) 134-151. It is interesting that in his quarrel with his father, Pheres, Admetus figuratively denounces his own *ἐλευθερία*, i.e. his free birth, by bringing in the idea of *δόλος*. Admetus 'infers' that he must had been born from a slave mother, who stealthily gave her baby to Pheres' wife (*ὑπεβλήθην λάθρα*, 637-639). This practice is mentioned as a typical example of female cunning in Aristophanic comedy (e.g. *Thesm.* 339-340).

⁴⁰ For Galinsky (1972) 68 Admetus' 'excessive' hospitality is his major shortcoming. See also *Alc.* 809.

⁴¹ See Padilla (2000) 201 about how Heracles simultaneously mediates both divine and human crises, going beyond the folkloric persona of a *sotēr*. Similarly, Conacher (1988) 33-35.

⁴² For the former view see e.g. Smith (1960) 142; for the latter view, which cannot be easily reconciled

mimic or mirror but also to magnify Admetus' previous 'lie' about the identity of the deceased female relative; and, as was the case with Admetus' service to the demigod, Heracles' own gift to Admetus might endanger the latter's nobility and moral standing (when it comes to his fidelity, though not to, or as opposed to, his hospitality).

What is certain is that Heracles' *δόλος* does not become an issue during the two men's interaction – and Admetus is far from reproaching his friend after the revelation of Alcestis' identity. Instead, the two heroes (once again) acknowledge their mutual benevolent disposition and appreciation. Admetus blesses Heracles and praises him as a noble offspring of Zeus and as his own saviour (1136-1138), while offering to entertain him once more in his palace (1151).

Heracles exhorts Admetus to treat his guests with respect and piety in the future as a just man (1148-1149), which might possibly imply that the hero should reconsider and modify a certain aspect of his behaviour⁴³ (rather than continue to be *φιλόξενος* as he has always been – another possible interpretation). The demigod, however, keeps on referring to Admetus' palace as noble (*γενναίων δόμων*, 1197).

The instances of cheating in *Alcestis*, 'victimless' and otherwise, all lead towards the play's resolution by way of a chain-reaction, but not without raising successive, intriguing questions and doubts about the duties and limits, but also the limitations, of key social relationships. Apollo's cheating saved Admetus from death. Admetus' cheating drove Heracles to reciprocate, for all his (mild) displeasure, as Heracles' cheating did not deter Admetus from eventually receiving the strange woman in his palace, for all his discomfort. Through these idiosyncratic, and in some ways forced, exchanges of gifts and services, based on trickery, secrecy, and concealment, there comes a seemingly happy, anticipated resolution. Alcestis is robbed from Thanatos and restored to the light of day, as Apollo had predicted.

To conclude, the instances of 'victimless' cheating in tragedy, rare as they are, commonly perplex the audience's expectations and heighten the suspense – and are,

with Heracles' overall attitude, see e.g. Padilla (2000) 203-204. Heracles' deceit has also been viewed as: a principle of performative therapy (Segal 1992); an anticipation of 'a second marriage' (Luschnig 1992: 26); a trick at the expense of Alcestis by which two men reconcile (Rabinowitz 1993: 89-93).

⁴³ Thus, Fitzgerald (1991) 88.

most often, overlooked and ‘forgotten’ as instances of cheating and deception *per se*, even when they are briefly spoken of (or criticized) as such.

What I find more interesting is that these episodes, even when they come across as unexpected or surprising, prove integral to the cheaters’ quint-essential attributes and social standing, once these attributes and status happen to be seriously threatened and jeopardized by external agents, developments or forces. This is an additional aspect that differentiates these instances from the episodes of malevolent, or ‘proper’, cheating, as represented in drama. The latter episodes are usually treated as an urge or decision that is intended to confer a quite concrete benefit to the cheater, at the expense of others, through a disturbance of affairs that the cheater himself consciously initiates, but which is not necessarily presented as indicative or constitutive of his basic identity or of his most defining features.

‘Victimless’ cheating, as explored in the plays, seems to be an exceptional channel that sheds light on and at the same time largely consolidates the quintessential image and the most distinct attributes or objectives of the tragic characters who resort to it (and this, I argue, also applies to Ajax, who has widely, and arbitrarily in my view, been labeled as ‘incapable’ of lying or cheating, no matter what). ‘Proper’ cheating, on the other hand, is a much more common channel that could further a variety of goals without necessarily defining the cheater (or help us define him), at least decisively and substantially.

A possible exception to that scheme is Odysseus (though not as represented in *Ajax*) and it would be worth investigating his case as an exceptional ‘proper’ cheater in tragedy.

Efi Papadodima

Researcher, Grade C

Research Centre for Greek and Latin Literature

Academy of Athens

epapadodima@academyofathens.gr

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