

Hour 25: Euripides *Herakles*, and *Best of the Achaeans*, with Professor Gregory Nagy

CLAUDIA FILOS: Good afternoon. This is Claudia Filos. I'm with the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C., and joining remotely from the Boston area, and today I'm so happy to introduce the discussion with Professor Gregory Nagy. He was our leader for the HeroesX project, he's Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature at Harvard University, and he's a Director at the Center for Hellenic Studies. And he's joining some members of our community today, so I hope we're going to have a beautiful discussion, and then at the end we have some news to share. So, Greg, can you say hello.

GREGORY NAGY: Well, hello everybody, and I can see all sorts of wonderful faces in Hollywood Squares format

CLAUDIA FILOS: Great, so can you guys just introduce yourselves and say where you're from? Starting with you, Jack, maybe

JACK VAUGHAN: All right, yes. I'm Jack Vaughan, in Houston, Texas. I consider myself by vocation an attorney and a classics scholar, and of course the long love of my life is ancient Greek, and Latin, and ancient philosophy. And I was educated mostly at the University of Texas, at Austin, and Universität Hamburg, Germany, and I have a Masters from Hamburg in Classics and Philosophy, and my undergraduate major was ancient Greek at University of Texas.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Thanks so much, Jack. Jacqui, can you introduce yourself and just say your name and where you're from?

JACQUI DONLON: Me? The "other Jack"? Yeah, my name is Jacqueline Donlon, originally from New York — I hope you hear the accent — but long time from Boston, and I'm pretty new to classic studies, but love it, so here I am.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Hi, Janet. Can you introduce yourself?

JANET OZSOLAK: OK. I'm Janet Oszolak, hi there, everybody. Hi, Allie, hi Professor Greg Nagy. I'm nervous, right?! I'm originally from Istanbul, Turkey, and live in New York for about twenty years. My first encounter with classics was through HeroesX, and from the first day on I am under the spell! And I love it, I love it.

GREGORY NAGY: Beautiful.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Renan?

RENAN FALCHETI: Yes, hi everyone. I'm from Brazil, I'm licensed and bachelor in History, and now prepare draft to entry in the program of Master in Classical Archaeology, oriented by Professor Maria Beatriz Borba Florenzano, teacher of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo (MAE-USP). I'm studying Hippodamus of Miletus.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Thank you. Hi, Sarah.

SARAH SCOTT: Hello, I'm Sarah Scott, and I live in Scotland, and my original study was in linguistics, and then I came into the Heroes project in version 1, and was a community TA in version 2, and I'm just absolutely loving being here in Hour 25 and having the opportunity to have dialogues about all this wonderful ancient Greek literature — so that's who I am.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Hi Bill. I think you're muted. Can you unmute, Bill, and just introduce yourself?

BILL MOULTON: Hi, I'm Bill Moulton calling from Petersburg, Alaska. The fog hasn't quite burned off yet. That's it from me!

CLAUDIA FILOS: Thanks so much. So, Greg, today we're so excited to see that you're joining us today until a little bit past 12:30, but then again we're going to have another conversation in about a week, right? And we have some exciting news to share about that.

GREGORY NAGY: Exactly, exactly. If all the rest of you can make it we can already say definitely that we'll meet again next week. Here's hoping. So that we can follow up.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Right, and so in the meantime I'd just like to share one other thing with you which is that, you know we have a specific thread in our discussion forum where everyone's going to continue the conversation, in the time in between, and in addition to

that we're creating a special permanent thread in our discussion, just for discussion of *The Best of the Achaeans*, just because it's such a foundational work for our discussions together.

GREGORY NAGY: That's beautiful. I love that. Well, you know, I might just jump in and say that I'm so glad that Claudia gave me the opportunity to talk about Euripides's *Herakles*, because, as you know, it's not officially part of the HeroesX program, and even at Harvard campus I don't officially discuss Euripides's *Herakles* with the general education group that attends physically there at the Harvard campus. And can I just tell you very quickly why I ever even started introducing Euripides's *Herakles* into the discussion. I was so sick and tired of young people—and this is very young people—who were telling me that the hero is somebody that has to be admired, and if there's anything that a hero does that is morally wrong, that means that he or she cannot be a hero any more. So in the late nineties I had this brilliant idea, which really didn't work, of starting the whole class with Euripides's *Herakles*. I figured, OK, here's a case where we see that the hero can do morally questionable things. And you know what happened? Almost ninety percent of the young people who worked with me then said "Come on, Greg, when Herakles killed his wife and his children he was not himself. He was under the influence. That doesn't count. And so there went that experiment! And then I went back to the *Iliad*: I thought "Oh, well, what can you do? I might as well continue starting with the *Iliad* And OK, especially young people will still hate Achilles, but let's give it a go."

I must say, since I want to talk not only about the *Herakles* of Euripides, but also about the book, *Best of the Achaeans*, and to this wonderful group that I'm communicating with here who already have familiarity with everything we talked about, I thought I would say something about how I have changed in addressing this big problem of moral defects in the behaviour of heroes. And especially last year, and really in the context of HeroesX, and the wonderful dialogues we've had, I really came to change my mind, or it made me see things more clearly, I don't know how to describe it, but here it is. And I'd like to have your reactions. I realized especially reading that passage in *Iliad* XIX, which we featured so prominently in the program of Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours, that actually it's not just human society that has all sorts of faults even in the heroic age. It's divine society as well. And I think of the fact that Zeus has to throw Atē out of Olympus in that wonderful story-within-a-story. He has to throw her out! What does that mean? That means that back in the heroic age things were not going well in Olympus either, not just in our earthly existence. In other words, the only time that things really go well is when you and I, in let's say fifth-century Greece, performed ritual. Ritual, in reaction to myth, makes everything all right. And even there, it's all right only because we know that next year we'll do it again, and the year after that, and the year after that, for ever. That's what gives you the *kosmos*, that's what gives you the order of the universe. And another thing: I was reading what some

specialists in Greek on a part in Plato's *Symposium* where one of the characters—it's supposed to be Aristophanes himself—so Aristophanes, the master of comedy who's fictionalized here, is giving a speech about humanity and at one point he makes the crack that the gods simply need humans to give them honor. It's almost like that *Star Trek* episode, and some of you will remember the title, where the starship *Enterprise* lands on a planet and they find the god Apollo there, but he's all alone and isolated, and very unhappy because he doesn't have people worshiping him any more. OK, so that's a funny modern way to say it, but even in a pre-modern sense, the gods need humans to give them the right *tīmai*, to give them the right rituals to remind them of who they are. And it's not just some silly playing of games that we do when we fictionalize those kinds of things in the late twentieth century as in *Star Trek*. It really works.

So, going back to Euripides's *Herakles*, it's, I think, this beautiful meditation by a very sophisticated creator of drama, who knows his myths, and rituals, extremely well, about what a hero really is. And it's starting from scratch. And you know what? Last thing: I'm starting from scratch with Euripides's *Herakles* too, so already today I've been doing a reworking of the translation trying and whipping into shape some of the words that we have used in the previous version. And I'm also revising the commentary. So in order to work for you properly for our next meeting, which will be a week from today, at the same time, I hope, same station—a little bit earlier, we'll start—what I hope to have by then is a new version of both the text and my informal commentary on the text of Euripides's *Herakles*., tying it in with *Best of the Achaeans* and so on.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Wow, that's amazing. That's such exciting news. Thanks, Greg.

GREGORY NAGY: Well, you inspire me, Claudia, you and Allie, and all the wonderful people I am reconnecting with in most cases, and connecting with in some cases for the first time.

CLAUDIA FILOS: And you know, Allie, we didn't get a chance to talk to you. Can you just introduce yourself and say what you're doing at the Center, because that's really important work.

ALLIE MARBRY: OK.

GREGORY NAGY: And can you all see Allie? Let's make sure...

ALLIE MARBRY: So I'm Allie Marbry, I'm a Programs Coordinator here at the CHS in D.C., I work primarily on programs for undergraduates, our internships, study abroad, and things like that. And I did my B.A. in Classics at Rhodes College. That's it.

CLAUDIA FILOS: And she's so a member of the team at CHS.

GREGORY NAGY: A vital member of the team. And by the way, since Sarah Scott did ask a question about the *Herakles*, so shall we just dive into that, maybe? I love the way you say, it Sarah: "What other themes and concepts could you suggest that we look for as close parallels between Herakles and Achilles?" And I think as we go from *Iliad* XIX, that famous story by Agamemnon where Achilles is the hidden referent, we now see how Herakles himself behaves, and I could go through the programmatic three characteristics of the hero, about the unseasonality, the extremeness, and the antagonism with the corresponding god, or goddess, but more generally—and in some ways more specifically—we might also want to just consider why this group here is even engaging with Euripides's *Herakles*. Because it does tell you things that you already know from the *Iliad*, but it gives you a different angle, doesn't it. And I can tell you one of the things—and the person who asked this question is I think not here at the moment— it's Laura Ford's question about antagonism between Hera and Herakles, because it's not direct: it's indirect. But we can explore this further next week, but I'm thinking of all the ways that when Herakles is really experiencing his madness it's regularly expressed in terms of a gigantic storm., and where the *kosmos* is really reacting to something. And given the fact that Hera is really the executive of the universe and you really can't think of Zeus running the universe all by himself, because it's this combination of Zeus and Hera. I think you see a lot of Hera-agenda in the internal storms of ... Herakles, which are then externalized in this very beautiful poetic imagery of a violent storm. So that's just for starters, Sarah, and we can, I hope, go deeper next week on that.

SARAH SCOTT: Oh, that's wonderful, thank you. Yes, I think that will give us plenty of scope for discussion, so thank you very much.

GREGORY NAGY: Thank you.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So maybe Greg if you like, would you like to take some questions from people in the room?

GREGORY NAGY: I would love it.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So does someone have a question they'd like to ask—if you could keep it brief that would be great.

GREGORY NAGY: It doesn't have to be **too** brief!

JACK VAUGHAN: Well, Greg, I was fascinated by your comments comparing Herakles in this play and Herakles's role in the *Alcestis*.

GREGORY NAGY: Yes.

JACK VAUGHAN: The *Alcestis* is I understand an earlier play, and it presents Herakles in a phase of his career when the Labors are not finished. And there, he's the savior. And in this drama, he needs to be saved, and he's saved by Theseus.

GREGORY NAGY: Yes.

JACK VAUGHAN: I thought what you write in the informal commentary was very inspiring,

GREGORY NAGY: Thank you.

JACK VAUGHAN: And I thought you'd like to say more about that.

GREGORY NAGY: Yes, and thank you so much for that, Jack. It's true that when, at the end of the *Alcestis* of Euripides, which as you point out is an earlier play, Herakles has a wrestling match with *Thanatos* himself, Mr. Death incarnate. And that is an act of salvation. He does save somebody from death, whereas—I like the way you said it—he needs to be saved himself. But let me try maybe a little bit a different angle which is that you could say well, he saved himself by coming out of Hādēs, and overcoming the Hound of Hell, Cerberus, so if he's made a return to light and life, isn't that a salvation? And then—I know you know what's coming—you say, but wait a minute: he didn't really die when he went down to Hādēs, just as Odysseus didn't really die when he went down to Hādēs. And so that's cheating. That doesn't count. And so it's a premature salvation. Similarly in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, remember how people are venerating Oedipus as if he were already their savior, but the kind of salvation that is needed hasn't happened yet. Now the reason that I go to *Oedipus Tyrannos* is that when you then switch to *Oedipus at Colonus* you realize that the fact that Oedipus becomes a cult hero is the real key to being the true savior. Only after you die and become a cult hero can you become a savior, if you're a hero. OK? So in a sense I would say that all the Labors of Herakles, and all the people he saved, aren't really adding up to his status as a savior, until he dies. And that's why the *Alcestis* isn't enough: we do need the *Herakles* of Euripides, because at the end, remember, Jack, how ... Herakles does become a cult hero. That is the prophecy in terms of the interaction with Theseus. So, I'm sorry for that long-winded answer, but I really like your question. And this isn't going to work if people ask very nice, short questions, and then I give very, very long answers! So let's go to

another question, and I'll try to give a response that is shorter, and by the way, Jack, this isn't the last word. We have to continue this next time. I'm just getting the ball rolling here, OK? And I want to hear what you say to what I say.

JACK VAUGHAN: That's a wonderful start, I think.

GREGORY NAGY: Thank you.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Thank you. So Greg, actually I'd like to get another question in from people who are in our room right now, but we also have about thirty-three people who are viewing from elsewhere.

GREGORY NAGY: Wow.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So we have a question from Judith Reed. And I'm hoping you could talk about this very briefly. She asks: "I would like to know how Euripides and other Greek tragedians seem to arrange outcomes that are unbearably horrific. Herakles is not only unable to save his family but in a frenzy murders them himself. Why such an extreme end for catharsis?"

GREGORY NAGY: Well, that's a lovely question, and the only way.... OK, quick answer. Quick, and then we can elaborate next week. I would say if the hero is larger than life—and he or she is—then suffering of a hero has to be larger than life too. That's why he has *pathos*, P,A,T,H,O,S. And it's simply an emotion: it happens to you and me as ordinary people. But if the *pathos* happens to a hero, it's a Passion with a capital P. And that's something that Christianity really connects with too, right? If you think of the Passion according to Saint Matthew. That's larger than life. It's larger than ordinary life. Similarly with heroes. When they suffer, they **really** suffer, and it's horrific. And therefore both fear and pity are activated in a larger than life way. Love your question! And again, this is not an answer that precludes further conversation. We're just getting the ball rolling, right?

CLAUDIA FILOS: Exactly, yes, we're just developing conversations, just getting it started. OK, so at this time I'm going to invite someone else in the discussion room to ask a question.

GREGORY NAGY: Or a comment. It doesn't have to be a question.

GREGORY NAGY: Jacqui, you have a question?

JACQUI DONLON: Well, I have a question but it wasn't really about Herakles.

GREGORY NAGY: It's all right.

JACQUI DONLON: OK, my question was about Odysseus, in the Scroll viii, and when he's listening to Demodokos.

GREGORY NAGY: Yes.

JACQUI DONLON: And it was about the role, the interactive role, between the audience and the singer, and when Odysseus comes to hear it, he is no-one, but yet he becomes everyone by the end of the three songs. And my question is, does he cry because he's truly sorry for his transgressions in Troy, or is he crying because he **is** the audience. He is the citizens of Greece, who would find those transgressions against hospitality, and the gods, as really appalling. Cause when he's away from being the audience on the athletic field, he kind of becomes himself again, and then when he's in Ithaka, he's like his evil twin, and so is it that he does truly regret his actions? Or is it just the civilizing influence of being the audience and being everyone?

GREGORY NAGY: I love that, you know, if you develop that into a paper that would be a really fun read, because you have me seeing something that I never said clearly, you said it very clearly just now, that it's the fact that he is the ideal audience. He may not be the ideal person morally, but he's the ideal audience because he's had experience as well as the experience of the poetry. So experience in real life—well, in heroic life— as well as in the poetry, and how all those things come together and make him the perfect way for us to see every angle of the story. Certainly the Phaeacians don't see every angle of the story; that's why Alcinous—Alkinoos—asks a not very with-it question. I mean, it's poetically with-it because it leads to a good answer, but nobody else gets it the way Odysseus gets it. So I love the idea that it's not so much Odysseus's reaction as an idealized audience reaction, enhanced by the participation of the hero who is part of the story. I love it: good formulation.

JACQUI DONLON: Right, so then he's the outlier, you know: when he's in the audience he's the populace, the bell curve, and then outside he's the one who respects neither *dike* or law.

GREGORY NAGY: That's true. Oh, yeah.

JACQUI DONLON: Right, so he's that, and then he's the outlaw.

GREGORY NAGY: And I think even at the end, you get really shocked about the cruelty of how retribution happens. And are we supposed to say “well, in those days that’s the way people had revenge”. No, no. I think it’s supposed to be morally shocking, how he retaliates, even against the suitors. Sure, it’s OK if you think of him as a cult hero coming back from the nether world to exact vengeance, fine. But I’m saying if you try to look at it as an everyday situation, it’s morally very upsetting. So yes, and we shouldn’t make Odysseus a moral litmus test at any given moment, because there are lots of things that go wrong with his actions. But it’s how it all shakes out in the narrative. Thank you.

JACQUI DONLON: Oh, thank you.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So Helene Poulakou who’s in our audience is adding a comment. She says “I think Odysseus cries for all these reasons, both for his transgressions and because he is the audience, and also out of empathy for the victims of the Trojan War. I believe that one answer doesn’t exclude the other.” So thank you.

GREGORY NAGY: Well, I think both Jacqui and I can accept that. I don’t want to speak for Jacqui, but I’m OK with that, and that’s the beauty of a Homeric audience. A Homeric audience is all-inclusive. And could I say that there’s a beautiful new book on the topic of the implied Homeric Audience, by David Elmer, E,L,M,E,R, called *The Poetics of Consent*. It’s just a lovely exercise in showing how the audience that is presupposed by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is something that incorporates heroes’ reactions, and our reactions, across the time, and yet it’s very precise, it’s systematic, it’s like a Swiss watch.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So Greg, actually can I follow up on that because I know that this is something that Janet has been thinking about a little bit in terms of the audience, and one of the words that she was thinking about was this word *ainos*. Janet, can you.....

GREGORY NAGY:..... ask a question, Janet.

JANET OZSOLAK: OK. Hi, I was wondering if we can use *ainos* as an umbrella term to cover previous knowledge of audience before they see the performance. I know in Euripides’s *Herakles* he changed the order of Toils, right? He puts Labors... he is done with his Labors and then he comes back. So do they know that Euripides changed the order in his performance? And this knowledge is I think an absent signifier, so they know and do they understand the signifiers?

GREGORY NAGY: I think they do. And I think you’re right about especially the first part of your question, which is the first part of the question is a beautiful formula, and I can read it

back to you—I have the text here: “Can *ainos* be used as an umbrella term to acknowledge audiences’ understanding and knowledge about the song culture?” Yes, yes, yes. Absolutely. And could I also say that although there are moments in the epic of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* where an *ainos* is embedded, in another sense the embedding of an *ainos* so that you say oh, well, the *ainos* is a part of the bigger picture, is not enough. Because the qualifications we need to understand the *ainos* are not just for understanding what’s embedded, it’s for understanding everything. And that’s what you’re telling me, and I do agree. Could I also say that—this is confessional!—for something like twenty years, after reading a lot of Pindar, you know I came up with my formula that I would be telling students again and again and again for twenty-plus years, that you have three requirements: that you have to be knowledgeable, you have to be moral, you have to be emotionally connected, but I only really found it systematically in Pindar, and then, guess what? There’s a professor at University of California at Berkeley, Martin Schwartz, who found the same three requirements in Avestan traditions. I was the happiest person on earth. So it turns out that what I had kind of intuited on the basis of the poetry of Pindar and working backwards into Homer, somebody else found in a very old Indo-European language that goes back to —the attestation of which goes back to the second millennium. This is the language of the Zoroastrians, which is the sacred texts of the Avesta, and you have a similar mind-set, in fact a cognate mind-set there, that you need to have these three qualifications to understand **anything** you hear. Again, you have to be knowledgeable, you have to be moral, you have to be emotionally connected. Or at least that’s the ideology of what you need. So thank you so much for that.

JANET OZSOLAK: Thank you.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Greg, thank you for this wonderful start of our discussion. We’re just kicking off a week-long event, so we’re going to continue this conversation during the week.

GREGORY NAGY: Great, and let me know if next week works, if we could really cycle back next week, a little bit earlier but roughly the same time, same station. This could be a new tradition! Right?

CLAUDIA FILOS: It’s so beautiful.

GREGORY NAGY: Of just recycling so that whatever anybody mentioned today, this is open-ended. The idea is that we simply started the conversation, and thanks to Claudia and Allie, they won’t let me simply leave the conversation where it ends. We’ll continue it next time.

CLAUDIA FILOS: OK. Well, thank you so much everyone for joining us, and I'm looking forward to our further conversations, both on Hour 25 and on our next Hangout, so stay tuned to Hour 25 for updated details, and to the social media accounts at the Center for Hellenic Studies: we'll let you all know about the upcoming event and how you can join us.

GREGORY NAGY: And I hope that those people in the boxes whom I see, these wonderful faces, those people who haven't spoken, you've got to speak the next time! OK? I mean, everybody introduced themselves, that's good, but even more, OK? So I'll be ready for you. You be ready for me!

CLAUDIA FILOS: Thank you so much.

GREGORY NAGY: Thank you.