

**The Tragic Error of Progeny-eating
in Ancient Greek and Chinese Tradition**

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Declaration

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how progeny-eating is narratively shaped into an extreme ethical transgression in ancient Greek and Chinese traditions. It asks why some Greek narratives routinely stage progeny-eating in close conjunction with incest within a self-reinforcing cyclical structure of kinship violation and retaliatory justice, whereas Chinese accounts detach progeny-eating from the idiom of impurity and instead rationalise it within political ethics and sovereign legitimacy.

Employing a comparative framework that integrates semantic analysis, narratology, and intellectual history, this study traces how progeny-eating is conceptualised and made intelligible within distinct moral vocabularies and narrative structures. Rather than treating *hamartia* as a cross-cultural category, it is examined as a specifically Greek term whose tragic purchase can be set against Chinese idioms of fault and accountability.

Chapter One analyzes Greek error terms (e.g. *hamartia*, *adikia*), outlining a layered account of agency and responsibility. Chapter Two examines Chinese terms (*cuo*, *wu*, *guo*, *sheng*, *shi*, *jiu*), and situates them within Confucian, Legalist, and Daoist approaches to normative failure. Chapter Three examines the ritual-narrative logic that couples progeny-eating with incest in Greek tragedy, with *miasma* functioning as a structural hinge. Chapter Four reconstructs the reception of Wenwang's progeny-eating and its ideological transformation within Confucian ethics. Chapter Five offers a comparative synthesis on impurity, the body, normativity, and heroism.

Ultimately, the dissertation argues that ethical extremity is managed through divergent cultural mechanisms, and that treating "tragic error" as a universal template risks imposing a Eurocentric grid on non-Greek materials. By juxtaposing Thyestes' *hamartia* with Chinese cannibalism narratives, it shows that Greek tragedy frames progeny-eating through a logic of transgressive kinship and retaliatory justice, anchoring extreme violations in sustained moral–ethical tension; whereas Chinese texts more often detach such acts from moral decline and re-situate them within secular historiography, political order, and sovereign virtue. The study thus clarifies how different traditions delineate—and narratively stabilise—the limits of ethical imagination.

Acknowledgements

Confucius once said: “If one does not understand Fate, one cannot be a gentleman.” Yet what is Fate, and how is one to know it? Every heart offers its own answer. Mine is: acceptance.

To transition from a doctorate to a master’s degree is no easy matter. Even if one learns to accept one’s own limits and failures with serenity, how much courage and resolve can one truly have in asking those who once offered help to reach what Zhuangzi calls the state of “mutual forgetting” (兼忘)? At such a moment, Pyrrho’s *ἄστοργος*—his cool capacity to step beyond his teacher Anaxarchus—seems almost enviable.

My five years in Ireland were a season of beauty and grace. Together with my wife and dear friends, I wandered through ruins and relics, conversing across time. Following Wilde’s prose, I arrived at his hometown, his college, his ghost. And now, perhaps, I carry something of his breath myself, at times letting the stirrings of the soul unfold as verse. On this emerald isle, it seems the trees and grasses breathe with spirit. Sometimes, I merely wished to stand and watch—how the grass seeded, how the wind stirred the leaves—and in that silence, feel a quiet, wordless joy.

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Grateful to my students: though I now graduate with a master's title, it has never dulled my passion for teaching. Mencius spoke of the three joys in life—mine has been to teach and learn alongside you, and in that, I have known a joy that makes this life truly worthwhile.

To accept life, to enjoy suffering, to taste joy—this is the most precious lesson I have learned while writing this dissertation.

Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ Θεῷ· καθαρὰ ἔστω ἡ καρδία μου,

临城惶恐不胜

乙巳年余春

荣臻

名豈隨風起
夜闌無靜心
世事逝於是
無物焉有污

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Abbreviation and Keynotes

Ap.B	Apollodorus, <i>Bibliotheca</i>
Ap.E	Apollodorus, <i>Epitome</i>
Cook, Zeus	A. B. Cook, <i>Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion</i> , vol. 2. Cambridge, 1925.
GEF	M. L. West (ed.), <i>Greek Epic Fragments</i> . Cambridge, MA, 2003.
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz (eds.), <i>Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> . Berlin, 6 th edn. 1952.
FGrH	F. Jacoby (ed.), <i>Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> . Leiden, 1923–.
Fr.	“Fragment”
HJ	Guo-Moruo and Hu-Houxuan (eds.), <i>Jiagu Wen Heji</i> . (甲骨文合集, <i>Oracle Bone Script Collection</i>). Peking, 1978–1982.
KRS	G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield (eds.), <i>The Presocratic Philosophers</i> . Cambridge, 2007.
IACASS	Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
IG	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i> . Berlin, 1873–.
IK C.P.	G. H. R. Horsley and S. Mitchell (eds.), <i>The Inscriptions of Central Pisidia</i> . In <i>Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien</i> , vol. 57. Bonn 2000.
IK Perge	S. Şahin (ed.), <i>Die Inschriften von Perge</i> . In <i>Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien</i> , vol. 54 and 61. Bonn 1999, 2004.
PCG	R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.), <i>Poetae Comici Graeci</i> . Berlin, 1983–2022.
PMGF	M. Davies (ed.), <i>Poetarum Melicorum Graecorum Fragmenta</i> . Oxford, 1991.
Σ.	Scholia/scholion
Shuihudi Slips	Qin Compilation Group of Shuihudi Qin Bamboo Slips (ed.), <i>Shuihudi Qinmu Zhujian</i> . Peking, 1990.
Shisanjing zhushu	Li-Xueqin (ed.), <i>Thirteen Classics Commentaries</i> . Peking, 2000.
Suda	A. Adler (ed.), <i>Suidae Lexicon</i> . Stuttgart, 1928–1938.
s.v.	“under the word/entry”
SVF	H. von Arnim (ed.), <i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> . Stuttgart, 1903–1924.
TrGF	B. Snell, R. Kannicht, S. Radt (eds.), <i>Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta</i> . Göttingen, 1971–2004.
Wenwang	Zhou Wen Wang (周文王, ‘King Wen of Zhou’)
Yuelu Qin Slips	Chen-Songchang (ed.), <i>Yuelu Shuyuan Cang Qinjian vol. 1–5</i> . Shanghai, 2010–.
Zhangjiashan Han Slips	Compilation Group of the Zhangjiashan Han Bamboo Slips No. 247 (ed.), <i>Zhangjiashan Hanmu Zhujian No. 247</i> . Peking, 2006.

1. All translations of original texts cited in this dissertation, if not attributed to a specific translator, are the author’s own work.

2. Throughout this thesis, Chinese names follow the convention of “Family Name - Given Name”, such as, Liu-Zhiji (劉知幾), Sima-Qian (司馬遷), and Xiang-Yu (項羽). Nonetheless, established English translations are directly employed, such as Confucius (孔子). In cases of invented names (like honorifics, posthumous titles), the Pinyin transliteration is primarily used without an additional hyphen “-”, such as Zhuangzi (莊子), Xibo (西伯), and Zhouwenwang (周文王). N. B. “x” in Chinese *Pinyin* is pronounced [ɛ], as in “*ship*”.
3. The original text citations are presented in double quotation marks “”, while the English translations appear in single quotation marks within brackets (‘’), such as: “ἐπιφανεῖς ἄνδρες” (‘Remarkable men’); “受賜茲醢, 西伯上告” (‘Receiving this granted minced meat, Xibo protests to the upper’). Or present the English translation in double quotation marks “”, followed by the original words and *italicized Pinyin* transliterations in brackets. For instance: “shame” (αἰδώς); “pass over” (舍, *she*).
4. The Chinese classical texts mentioned have their titles presented in *italicized pinyin* transliterations, followed by the original Chinese title and the English translation (if necessary). For example: *Shiji* (史記, *Records of the Grand Historian*); *Diwang Shiji* (帝王世紀, *Record of Reigns of Emperors and Kings*). In Chinese classical literature citations, a concise format, “Work Name, Chapter, Paragraph Number” (e.g. *Shiji, Annals of Zhou (chap. 04), 4*), is employed within the main text or footnotes. For details of author and translator, see Bibliography.
5. Citations from bamboo slips, manuscript, and inscriptions are presented with “[……]” indicating multiple missing characters (words) in the original text, and “[□]” indicating a single missing character (word). The revised characters are enclosed in brackets within double quotation marks “(“”)”, for example, “[……]质子于殷, 周文王使伯邑巧(“考”)[……]”; “[……]死, 有诏必王食其肉, [□]免其血. 文王食其肉, [□]免其[……]”.
6. In Chinese ancient texts, terms like “卷二、卷三” are translated as ‘chapter 2, chapter 3,’ as their purpose is to divide chapters. For example, “殷本纪卷三” is translated as ‘Annals of Yin (chap. 3)’; “柳宗元集校注 (第十四卷)” is translated as ‘The Commentary of the Complete Works of Liu-Zongyuan, chap. 14’ In modern books appearing in separated volumes, they are translated as ‘volume 2, volume 3’ such as “闻一多全集 (卷五)” translated as ‘The Complete Works of Wen-Yiduo. Vol. 5’; “文渊阁四库全书 (第372卷)” translated as ‘Wenyuange Siku Quanshu. Vol. 372’.

Introduction

ὁ μεταξὺ ἄρα τούτων λοιπός. ἔστι δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά, τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ δόξῃ ὄντων καὶ εὐτυχία, οἷον Οἰδίπους καὶ Θυέστης καὶ οἱ ἐκ τῶν τοιούτων γενῶν ἐπιφανεῖς ἄνδρες. ἀνάγκη ἄρα τὸν καλῶς ἔχοντα μῦθον ἀπλοῦν εἶναι μᾶλλον ἢ διπλοῦν, ὥσπερ τινὲς φασι, καὶ μεταβάλλειν οὐκ εἰς εὐτυχίαν ἐκ δυστυχίας ἀλλὰ τὸναντίον ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν μὴ διὰ μοχθηρίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν μεγάλῃν ἢ οἷον εἴρηται ἢ βελτίονος μᾶλλον ἢ χειρόνος. σημεῖον δὲ καὶ τὸ γιγνόμενον· πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ οἱ ποιηταὶ τοὺς τυχόντας μύθους ἀπηρίθμουν, νῦν δὲ περὶ ὀλίγας οἰκίας αἱ κάλλιστα τραγωδίαί συντίθενται, οἷον περὶ Ἀλκμέωνα καὶ Οἰδίπου καὶ Ὀρέστην καὶ Μελέαγρον καὶ Θυέστην καὶ Τηλέφον καὶ ὅσοις ἄλλοις συμβέβηκεν ἢ παθεῖν δεῖν ἢ ποιῆσαι.

The remaining type, then, is the one that lies between these two. Such a person is one who is neither outstanding in virtue and justice, nor one who falls into misfortune through wickedness and depravity, but rather someone who changes to misfortune because of **some error** (δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά)—one of those who enjoy great reputation and good fortune, such as **Oedipus and Thyestes** and other eminent men from such lineages. It follows, then, that a well-constructed plot must be simple rather than double, as some maintain, and must effect a change not from misfortune to good fortune but the opposite—from good fortune to misfortune—not because of depravity, but because of **a great error** (δι' ἁμαρτίαν μεγάλῃν) in a person of the kind described, or in one who is rather better than worse. A further sign is what actually happens: in earlier times poets would string together whatever stories came to hand, whereas now the finest tragedies are composed around a few houses—for example those of Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, **Thyestes, Telephus**, and any others to whom it has happened either to suffer terrible things or to do them.

— Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453a9–24.

Taboo marks the outermost edge of morality and custom, and in tragic narrative it often emerges with particular prominence as an extreme form of “error”. The taboo of sex—incest; the taboo of food—cannibalism; the taboo of killing—kin-slaying: these transgressions are not merely sensational horrors devised for plot, but narrative foundations through which Greek tragedy

constructs conflict, allocates responsibility, and compels its audience to rethink “justice” and “order”. They become structural pivots precisely because their ethical intensity can tear apart established norms, yet still demands some mode of intelligibility: whose fault is it? Does the fault arise from ignorance, desire, fate, or divine agency? And by what means can it be “repaid” and “restored”? It is at this point that taboo drives tragedy to the very limits of its philosophical intensity.

When Plato, in *Laws* 838c, considers transgressive acts that are “hated by the gods” (θεομισήες), the examples that come first to mind are Thyestes, Oedipus, and Macareus. Such acts, he observes, are rarely made the object of deliberate abstract discussion; yet from childhood almost everyone is already thoroughly familiar with these stories—as though they were not the product of rational debate but had long been lodged in a community’s ethical memory through narrative and report. Plato’s remark illustrates a crucial point: taboo does not derive its force from being argued about; it endures by being told. Tragedy is the form in which this telling reaches its highest intensity.

Aristotle, writing after Plato, further develops this line of thought in *Poetics* 1453a: in his discussion of “the finest tragedies” (αἱ κάλλισται τραγωδίαι), he twice invokes Thyestes and Oedipus as canonical instances of tragic error (ἁμαρτία). Yet the treatise seems to have circulated only to a relatively limited extent in antiquity. It was perhaps an internal text, intended primarily for students of the Lyceum. For much of its early reception history it was rarely mentioned or cited, especially during the long period from the decline of the Peripatetic school until the seventh century A.D.¹ This restricted transmission, however, does not diminish the *Poetics*’ theoretical and critical importance for understanding Greek literature, and Greek tragedy in particular. As the only extant ancient Greek work to offer a systematic account of tragic theory, it provides later readers with an indispensable window into how at least some Greeks conceptualised and evaluated tragedy.

In *Poetics* 1450b, Aristotle identifies plot (μῦθος) as the soul of tragedy, it operates through narrative devices like reversal (περιπέτεια) and recognition (ἀναγνώρισις), enhanced by suffering (πάθος). Aristotle insists that the tragic protagonist must neither be morally flawless nor

¹ Regarding the transmission of the *Poetics*, cf. Lucas 1968, pp. ix–xxv; Halliwell 1987, pp. 1–30. A good comprehensive examination to date is the work done by Tarán and Gutas, who explored the transmission of *Poetics* from Aristotle’s time to the present from both the Greek-Latin and Syriac-Arabic perspectives. They argued, based on the grammatical tense of Aristotle’s wording in *Poetics*, that its composition falls between *Politics* and *Rhetoric*, Tarán and Gutas 2012, esp. p. 20.

irredeemably depraved, but rather a figure of repute who falls through a “significant tragic error” (*ἁμαρτίαν μεγάλην*. 1453a16).

The interpretation of *ἁμαρτία* in *Poetics* 1453a remains contested, above all whether Aristotle means a culpable moral flaw in the protagonist or an intellectual error of judgement that need not imply blame. Modern scholarship has oscillated between these poles, while also recognizing a diachronic semantic shift: etymologically, it is cognate with the verb *ἁμαρτάνειν*, which in Homer is used of “missing the mark”.² Over time this evolved into a metaphorical “failure to achieve a goal”, and, in ethical contexts, was associated with “offense” or “sin”.³

Reconstructing the exact meaning of *ἁμαρτία* in *Poetics* 1453a is challenging, since the term is embedded in Aristotle’s broader account of what counts as “the finest tragedies” (*αἱ κάλλιστα τραγωδίαί*), a process that inevitably invites subjective interpretations of what constitutes the “perfect tragedy”. Yet a perfect definition is not required to grasp the core of his tragic theory. What matters is that *ἁμαρτία*, across Aristotle’s usage, remains anchored in the semantic field of “missing the mark”, even when particular contexts draw it toward moral or cognitive registers. Aristotle’s deployment of the term is also frequent enough to suggest that it functions as a flexible analytic category rather than a technical term with a single fixed sense.⁴ and their meanings consistently fall within the category of “error”. In some extents, whether this *ἁμαρτία* is moral or cognitive, it retains the broad meaning of “missing the mark”.

Scholarly debates around *ἁμαρτία* often overlook Aristotle’s nuanced modifiers:

² e.g. *Il.* 4.490, 8.311, 13.517, 23.865. *Od.* 6.115, 21.421, 425. The non-moral semantic characteristics of *ἁμαρτία* are discussed below in the discussion of *ἀτυχία* (*ἀτύχημα*).

³ For the two main interpretative lines—*ἁμαρτία* as moral flaw vs. as intellectual error of judgement—see Else 1957, pp. 378–99, Dodds 1966, pp. 38f, Lucas 1968, pp. 143f, Dawe 1968, p. 90, Stinton 1975, pp. 221–54, Golden 1978, pp. 10–2, Arieti 1983, pp. 1–5, Halliwell 1987, p. 128, Whalley 1997, pp. 26–7, 96, Ahrens Dorf 2009, p. 175, Kim 2010, pp. 33–52. On the semantic history and scholarly reception of the term, including the progression “miss/err/offend” and the shift from predominantly literal to predominantly metaphorical usage, see Bremer 1969, pp. 31–56. For a recent defence of the “moral flaw” reading (understood as a qualified *akrasia*), see, Vinje 2021, pp. 582–600, cf. van Braam 1912, pp. 266–72, Hey 1928, p. 160, Ostwald 1958, pp. 93–108, Padel 1995, pp. 197f, Young 2013, pp. 35–8.

⁴ Bremer records 30 occurrences of the noun *ἁμαρτία* in the Aristotelian works he surveys (1969. p. 56). A broader list contains 56 occurrences when one also includes texts transmitted under Aristotle’s name whose authenticity is disputed (notably *Magna Moralia* and *Problemata*): *Arist. Eth. Eud.* 1226a36, 1230b7, 1231a25; *Eth. Nic.* 1110b29, 1115b15, 1119a34, 1142a21, 1142b11, 1148a2; *Mag. mor.* 1189b22, 24, 25, 26, 30, 1190a2, 8, 1201b31, 35, 1202a27; *Metaph.* 1083b5, 1084b25, 1088a22; *Ph.* 199a34; *Poet.* 1453a10, 16, 1454b35, 1460b15, 17; *Pol.* 1269a17, 1270a10, 1272b3, 1310b7, 1320b37, 39, 1336a2, 1338b13; *Pr.* 919a39, 919b25, 922a18, 35, 952b14; *Rh.* 1375b23, 1405a32; *Soph. el.* 179b19, 181b7; *Top.* 109a28, 111a16, 18, 134a28, 139b10, 147b11, 148a6, 149a5, 159a23, 162a24, 163a26.

- *δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά* (*Poetics* 1453a10): The indefinite “**a kind of error**” implies variable manifestations, from minor lapses to catastrophic missteps.

- *δι' ἁμαρτίαν μεγάλην* (*Poetics* 1453a16): “**A great error**” underscores extreme moral transgressions violating social taboos, such as incest, cannibalism, and parricide—central to tragedies like *Oedipus Rex* and the lost *Thyestes* plays.

Compared with Oedipus, the tragic figure that has long dominated scholarship, Thyestes has drawn far less sustained attention, largely because so few of the relevant plays survive. Yet the Thyestean tradition is central to Greek tragedy: it is not only repeatedly invoked by classical authors as a paradigmatic instance of familial catastrophe, but, through its intensely condensed ethical shock and explosive narrative force, continues to serve as an extreme testing ground for the tragic imagination.⁵ This dissertation therefore takes Thyestes’ tragic error as its point of departure and examines how the taboo of progeny-eating is structured within literary narrative as an ethically intelligible and imputable event: how, through the distortion of kinship relations, the progressive logic of revenge, and the convergence of symbolic registers, it is incorporated into a self-reinforcing tragic cycle. It further shows how, in Greek tragedy, progeny-eating mirrors incest and related kinship transgressions within a self-reinforcing cycle that drives retaliatory justice and the restoration of order. Finally, it sets this Greek mechanism of “error” against Chinese traditions that rationalise progeny-eating within political ethics, thereby clarifying how different civilizations domesticate ethical extremes through distinct normative frameworks and narrative techniques.

The first and second chapters of this dissertation will respectively analyse the differences in terminology related to the concept of “error” in ancient Greece and ancient China, exploring how cultural contexts shape the understanding of this concept.

The third chapter will examine the portrayal of cannibalism in Greek tragedy, focusing on its thematic significance, narrative function, and varying interpretations from the 5th to the 3rd centuries B.C. By comparing Thyestes’ cannibalism with other extreme taboo cases in Greek narratives, such as Tereus and Cronos, the chapter aims to clarify the causal and symbolic structure

⁵ For information on the Greek dramas about Thyestes, see Appendix A. Plato, in *Laws* 838c, recalled Thyestes as the quintessential example of actions “abhorred by gods” (*θεομισῆς*), asserting the ubiquity of these narratives in public education since childhood.

through which cannibalism generates retaliation and organizes the pursuit of justice in Greek narratives, reveal the mutual relationship between cannibalism and incest, and further explain how it serves as a driving force for the narrative of justice in Greek literature.

The fourth chapter will expand the discussion to ancient Chinese literature, investigating how cannibalism is represented and its cultural meanings. Using texts from the Qin and Han periods, along with excavated bamboo slips, the section will explore how cannibalism is represented in Chinese literature, how it evolved in political, social, and ethical contexts, and how it bears specific symbolic significance.

Finally, by analysing these cases within their respective cultural frameworks and conducting a cross-cultural comparison, this section will clarify the narrative patterns of cannibalism in both Greek and Chinese literature and examine the distinct functions it serves in each cultural context. By juxtaposing Thyestes' *ἀμαρτία* with Chinese cannibalism narratives, this study challenges Eurocentric models of tragic error. Greek tragic error anchors extreme violations in moral-ethical tension, whereas Chinese texts frame them within secular historiography without moral decline. These divergent approaches illuminate how cultural priorities (justice vs. hierarchy, individual culpability vs. collective accountability) sculpt narrative constructions of "error."

This analysis advances not only classical studies but also comparative literary and cultural studies, offering a schema for dissecting how cultures codify, narrativise, and negotiate their most profound ethical anxieties.

I. Greek Terminology of Error

ἡμῖν δὲ οὐκ ἔστι τὰ νῦν ὀνομάτων περὶ δύσεως λόγος.

For us, however, there is no present need for a contentious argument about names.

— Plato, *Laws*, 864a

In this dissertation, “error” is used not as the direct equivalent of any single Greek term, but as a provisional analytical category for a range of actions and conditions that Greek texts mark as forms of deviation, misjudgment, or wrongdoing. Its function is heuristic rather than lexical: it provides a common frame for examining phenomena that are variously articulated in different authors and genres, without assuming a single unified Greek concept.

This section focuses on analysing the core differences among six key Greek terms: *ἁμαρτία*, *ἁμαρτημα*, *ἀδικία*, *ἀτυχία*, *ἀνομία*, and *ἄτη*. These terms belong to a shared lexical field of failure and wrongdoing and are frequently deployed side by side in epic, tragedy, and philosophical texts; nevertheless, each carries distinct nuances. This section asks three key questions: First, how can we identify, in specific genres and contexts, what each Greek term is doing—semantically, rhetorically, and conceptually—when authors describe failure, wrongdoing, or misfortune? Second, how do Plato and Aristotle differentiate these Greek categories (and their cognate forms), and to what extent does Aristotle appropriate and systematise distinctions already at work in Plato? Third, how does the *ἁμαρτ*- word-group sustain a semantic continuum from concrete mis-aiming (as in archery) to more abstract forms of failure in deliberation and action—whether cognitive (error through ignorance or misjudgement) or ethical (wrongdoing that attracts responsibility)—as the tragic tradition foregrounds in figures such as Oedipus?

This section addresses these questions from three perspectives. First, by examining etymology and Thucydides’ historical accounts of warfare, I argue that *ἁμαρτημα* (e.g. tactical errors in battle) and *ἁμαρτία* (e.g. systemic flaws) are not interchangeable but mark a movement from particular acts of error to the broader conditions that make such errors possible or recurrent. Second, a comparative analysis of the *Minos* (a dialogue transmitted under Plato’s name) and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* shows how Aristotle systematises distinctions already at work in the Platonic tradition between *ἀδικία* (‘a violation of natural justice’) and *ἀνομία* (‘a transgression of codified law or custom’)—the former concerns fundamental human nature, while the latter depends solely on social

conventions. Third, by examining epic poetry, such as the *Iliad*, and tragedies like Sophocles' *Ajax*, I argue that *ἄτη* is best understood not as a simple “divine assault” upon an otherwise innocent agent, but as a complex model of ruin in which divine agency and human disposition intersect; importantly, epic tradition itself recognises *ἄτη* as a force that can overtake even the gods, as Zeus claims in *Iliad* 19.91–4. Ultimately, the Greek conceptualization of “error” reflects a broader effort to impose order through language. By framing unpredictable misfortunes—such as an errant javelin strike—as ethical problems, the Greeks constructed a rational framework for negotiating the limits of free will and social responsibility.

1. *ἁμαρτία*: From Ordinary Failure to Tragic Accountability

First, it is important to clarify that *ἁμαρτία* is not a specialized ethical term or concept. Strictly speaking, at least in ancient Greece, it encompasses everything from logical or mathematical errors to violations of interests and ethical transgressions.¹ A series of words derived from the root *ἁμαρτ-* illustrates this wide range notion of error. Whether as the verb *ἁμαρτάνειν* (‘miss the mark, do wrong’) or in compound forms such as *ἁμαρτί-γαμος* (‘failure in marriage’), *ἁμαρτί-νοος* (‘erring in mind’), *ἁμαρτο-επής* (‘erring in speech’), or *ἁμαρτο-λόγος* (‘speaking faultily’), the *ἁμαρτ-* root signifies a general notion of error in Greek.

A well-known line of Theognis encapsulates a widely shared Greek intuition about human fallibility: “for failings always follows mortals” (*ἁμαρτωλαὶ γὰρ ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ἔπονται θνητοῖς*, 323–8).² Although *ἁμαρτωλαί* is not the same lexical form as *ἁμαρτία*, its indefinite plural functions generically, presenting “errings/failings” not as a determinate offence but as a recurrent and universal condition of mortal life. In this sense, the *ἁμαρτ-* word-family already provides a capacious idiom for articulating error in general terms.

Aristotle philosophically defined this concept in his *Magna Moralia* 1189b27–32:

ἁμαρτάνομεν οὖν ἐν τοῖς πρακτοῖς καὶ ἐν τοῖς κατὰ τὰς ἀρετὰς ὁμοίως. ἔστι γὰρ καὶ

ἐν ἐλλείψει καὶ ἐν ὑπερβολῇ ἁμαρτία, ἐφ’ ἐκάτερα δὲ τούτων φερόμεθα δι’ ἡδονὴν

¹ The concept of *ἁμαρτία* holds a unique cultural significance in Christian thought, particularly after St. Paul’s association of *ἁμαρτία* with Adam’s original sin in *Romans* 5:12. This linkage imbued the term with an “originary” quality, as it became closely tied to the notion of original sin. The influence of this theological perspective has been profound, shaping much of the scholarly exploration of *ἁμαρτία* in the moralising direction, especially after the Renaissance. For logical error, e.g. Arist. *Ph.* 199a 34; [*Pr.*] 919a 39, 919b 25; *Rh.* 1375b23, 1405a32. For ethical error, e.g. Eur. *Hipp.* 1334; Hdt. 1.91.1; Lys. 8. 3; Pl. *Leg.* 838c; *Resp.* 379d; *Thuc.* 3.46.1.

² Cf. Soph. *Ant.* 1024; Eur. *Hipp.* 615; *Hipp.* 1433; *Supp.* 250; *Thuc.* 3.40.1; 3.45.3; 8.24.5.

καὶ λύπην· διὰ μὲν γὰρ τὴν ἡδονὴν τὰ φαῦλα πράττομεν, διὰ δὲ τὴν λύπην τὰ καλὰ
φεύγομεν.

Therefore we go wrong in matters of action and in matters relating to the virtues in the same way. ... For there is *ἀμαρτία* both in deficiency and in excess, and it is toward each of these extremes that we are carried by pleasure and pain: for because of pleasure we do base things, and because of pain we avoid what is noble.

This passage presents an antithetical structure to ethics of the “golden mean” (*μεσότης*): when individuals indulge in excess driven by *ἡδονή* (‘pleasure’) or flee from deficiency due to *λύπη* (‘pain’), they deviate from the ideal state of virtue³. Aristotle’s analysis here clearly inherits Plato’s bifurcation from the *Laws* (864b: contrasting pain and fear with pleasure and desire), though he intentionally omits Plato’s third cause of error — “false expectations and belief of the highest good” (*ἐλπίδων καὶ δόξης τῆς μὴ ἀληθοῦς περὶ τὸ ἄριστον*).

This third cause of error in Plato’s *Laws* is rooted in Socrates’ famous dictum that “ignorance is evil”⁴. Plato argues that when an individual substitutes false beliefs (*ψευδῆς δόξα*) for true knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*), their actions inevitably fall into self-contradiction and ignorance (*ἀμαθία*. *Tht.* 170b). This cognitive contradiction plays out dramatically in Greek tragedy. Crossett interprets Oedipus’ *ἀμαρτία* as “double-mindedness”, a simultaneous believing and disbelieving or knowing and not knowing.⁵ He locates the error in Oedipus’ dual, irreconcilable response to the prophecy. On one hand, Oedipus accepts the oracle’s authority and flees Corinth to avoid patricide and incest. On the other, that very flight—rational as an act of prevention—also betrays a hubristic confidence that human agency can outmaneuver divine pronouncement. This “dialectical rupture between knowing and not knowing” (*OT* 397–8) traps Oedipus in a self-referential cognitive loop, where his very attempt to escape the prophecy leads to its fulfilment.

Crossett thus extends *ἀμαρτία* beyond an individual act to an epistemological predicament: the pursuit of truth can itself generate fatal misjudgement. Oedipus’ oscillation between submitting

³ In contrast, Aristotle uses the term *ἀρετή* instead of *ἠθικός* when referring to virtue, emphasizing that it signifies an ideal or perfected quality rather than a mere moral attribute. While errors in behavior can reflect imperfections in one’s virtue, they do not equate to moral flaws. Errors that result in moral imperfection are described by Aristotle as *ἀδίκημα*.

⁴ Cf. *Pl. Lysis* 218a; Hackforth 1946, pp. 118–20.

⁵ Crossett did not leave behind a substantial body of scholarly publications, but the compelling insights he offered in teaching were later collected and published by his students, see Arieti 1983, pp. 1–5.

to the divine decree and sustaining an erroneous hope (*ἐλπίς*) and beliefs (*δόξα*) that mortal action can alter cosmic order produces the cognitive dissonance that precipitates his downfall. On this reading, Sophocles stages *ἁμαρτία* as a failure of understanding and self-knowledge: in tragic discourse the term may name not merely a discrete misstep, but an instability of judgement (*γνώμη*)—anchored in *ἐλπίς* and *δόξα*—whose consequences render it ethically imputable. Crossett’s interpretation thereby marks one end of the semantic spectrum within the *ἁμαρτ*-family and sharpens the need to distinguish *ἁμαρτία* from the more action-focused *ἁμάρτημα* and from explicitly normative categories such as *ἀδικία*.

Taken together, the materials discussed above show that *ἁμαρτία* in Greek usage is not a fixed technical term but a capacious notion for “missing the mark”, whose range extends from concrete mis-aiming to failures in deliberation and action. When Greek texts speak of the concept of “error”, they often do more than name a lapse: they probe how, amid the enduring tension between reason and desire, truth and illusion, human beings are to bear responsibility for their own actions. It is precisely the unresolved nature of this question that constitutes the original impulse behind Greek thought’s sustained reflection on “error”.

2. Semantic Layering of *ἁμάρτημα* and *ἁμαρτία* in Historical Discourse

The conceptual differentiation between *ἁμαρτία* (*hamartia*) and the related noun *ἁμάρτημα* (*hamartēma*) reflects two distinct ways of speaking about failure in Greek. In classical Attic usage, *ἁμάρτημα* typically refers to a specific misstep or offence—an identifiable act and, in forensic contexts, a term that can function euphemistically for prosecutable wrongdoing. By contrast, *ἁμαρτία* more readily denotes “error” in a broader sense: a failure of aim or judgement that may underlie, recur across, or help explain particular acts, and thus characterizes a more general pattern of agency rather than a single deed. Scholars diverge on this distinction: Ostwald suggests that *ἁμάρτημα* refers to observable, concrete errors in behaviour, such as Oedipus’ patricide and incest, whereas *ἁμαρτία* emphasises the inherent flaws of an individual’s character (*ἔξις*), such as Oedipus’ ignorance of the truth.⁶ Dawe posits *ἁμάρτημα* as an objective term for specific missteps, contrasted with *ἁμαρτία*’s emphasis on internal decision-making processes.⁷ Conversely, Dodds maintains that Aristotle’s *ἁμαρτία* in *Poetics* 1453a is indistinguishable from his use of *ἁμάρτημα* in *Nicomachean*

⁶ Ostwald 1958, pp. 105ff.

⁷ Dawe 1968, pp. 119–21.

Ethics 1135b12 and *Rhetoric* 1374b6: in all these passages it denotes an error committed in ignorance and without malicious intent.⁸ To address this academic debate, Thucydides' nuanced use of these terms offers a critical case study for examination.

In Book IV (29. 3), Thucydides provides an insightful semantic contrast. In his account of the Battle of Pylos (425 B.C.), Thucydides constructs a detailed narrative from a military observer's perspective, stating: "For them, the enemy's *ἀμαρτίαι* and preparations would not be equally evident, being concealed by the woodland; whereas, for their own camp, all their *ἀμαρτήματα* would be plainly visible—so that the enemy could fall upon them unexpectedly wherever he wished" (*σφίσι μὲν γὰρ τὰς ἐκείνων ἀμαρτίας καὶ παρασκευὴν ὑπὸ τῆς ὕλης οὐκ ἂν ὁμοίως δῆλα εἶναι, τοῦ δὲ αὐτῶν στρατοπέδου καταφανῆ ἂν εἶναι πάντα τὰ ἀμαρτήματα, ὥστε προσπίπτειν ἂν αὐτοὺς ἀπροσδόκητος ἢ βούλοιτο*). Here, Sparta's *ἀμαρτίαι* are given a broader, latent meaning—"hidden tactical flaws" (e.g., the delay in Spartan mobilization or defects in their intelligence network)—and its invisibility (*ὑπὸ τῆς ὕλης*) is contrasted with the systematic preparations (*παρασκευήν*) of the enemy. In contrast, Athens' *ἀμαρτήματα* are presented in the plural as concrete tactical missteps—such as mispositioned sentinels or delays in logistical support—all of which would be plainly visible in their own camp (*τοῦ δὲ αὐτῶν στρατοπέδου ... καταφανῆ*). This binary structure in Thucydides' narrative constructs *ἀμαρτία* as systemic risk, while *ἀμάρτημα* is reduced to individual mistakes.

A more subtle distinction emerges in Thucydides' account of the 424 B.C. encounter between the Boeotians and Athenians (4.89.1–4). Two Athenian commanders fail to coordinate their movements because of a mismatch in timing (*γενομένης διαμαρτίας τῶν ἡμερῶν*), and this lapse opens the way for an intelligence leak. Thucydides' choice of *διαμαρτία* here points to a failure of coordination at the level of planning rather than to a single actionable mistake. By contrast, when the conspirators inside the city subsequently detect a concrete vulnerability—an identifiable *ἀμάρτημα*—they abandon their scheme. The narrative thus draws a quiet but consequential contrast: *διαμαρτία* names a breakdown in synchronization that produces conditions for failure, whereas *ἀμάρτημα* marks a discrete misstep that can be recognized and corrected.

Linguistic analysis further consolidates this distinction:

⁸ Dodds 1966, p. 39.

- *ἁμαρτία*, with its feminine noun suffix “-ια” (e.g. *φιλία*, *σοφία*), often lends itself to describing a state or condition of going wrong—such as a persistent blind spot in judgement or a broader failure of orientation—thus pointing less to a single act than to a general pattern that may underlie particular missteps.
- *ἁμαρτήματα*, as a neuter noun in “-μα” (cf. *ποίημα* from *ποιέω* ‘something made’), typically refers to a concrete misstep or offence—an identifiable act of going wrong (for example, a tactical oversight)—and thus lends itself to describing errors as discrete events with traceable, immediate effects.

The dual cognitive framework of etymological formation and historical writing enables Thucydides to construct a unique typology of error: embedding *ἁμαρτία* within the epistemological blind spots of institutional systems (such as Athens’ anxiety over imperial expansion), while *ἁμαρτήματα* is attributed to accidents (like communication breakdowns resulting from captured messengers). This pattern is consistent with a broader Greek tendency to distinguish between discrete acts and the wider conditions that shape them; at most, it points toward later historiographical interests in tracing causation at multiple levels.

In Thucydides, the contrast between *ἁμαρτήματα* and *ἁμαρτίαι* therefore marks a useful analytical distinction: identifiable missteps are set against less visible vulnerabilities of planning and preparedness. The examples discussed here suggest how his narrative can move between what is immediately observable on the ground and the more latent conditions that structure success or failure.

3. *ἀδικία*, *ἀνομία*, *ἀτυχία*: Conceptual Hierarchy and Responsibility

The terms *ἀδικία* (‘injustice’), *ἀνομία* (‘lawlessness’), and *ἀτυχία* (‘misfortune/misadventure’), all denote forms of error in ancient Greek thought, yet they occupy distinct ontological and ethical tiers.

Etymologically, *ἀδικία* derives from *δίκη* (justice), personified as *Δίκη*, daughter of Zeus and Themis, who personifies cosmic order.⁹ The privative alpha (ἀ-) negates this root, signifying a violation of natural or ethical justice.¹⁰ In contrast, *ἀνομία* originates from *νόμος* (law/custom), with *Νόμος* (Nomos) mythologically depicted as a guardian of social order.¹¹ The term denotes the

⁹ Hes. *Theog.* 1. 901. Cf. Finley 1978, pp. 78, 82; Gantz 1993, p. 52.

¹⁰ Cf. Hdt. 1.130.3; Pl. *Resp.* 354a, 609b; Xen. *Mem.* 2.2.3.

¹¹ *Hymn. Orph.* 63.

collapse of legal or customary frameworks, reflecting ruptures in human-made systems rather than universal principles.¹²

In *Minos* (314d–315d), Pseudo-Plato distinguishes between *ἀνομία* and *ἀδικία* as categories of “offence” through cross-cultural examples such as Carthaginian child sacrifices to Cronos and Greek rituals among Lycaean people and Athamas’ descendants.¹³ The crux lies in their divergent foundations: *ἀνομία* exists solely relative to sociopolitical norms — a Carthaginian sacrifice, sanctioned by local customs (315b), constitutes no *ἀνόμημα*¹⁴ within its context, yet may clash with Athenian laws.¹⁵ Such conflict represents a procedural deviation remediable through legislative reform, aligning with the *Statesman*’s call for laws adapting to practical needs (295e). In contrast, *ἀδικία* transcends legal frameworks. Even if Carthage codified human sacrifice as lawful, its inherent violation of the natural injunction against “sacredness of life” (*Leg.* 873a) renders it a moral wrong that cannot be annulled by legalisation. Plato anchors this distinction in natural justice (*φύσει δίκαιον*), ontologised as “the Form of the Good” (*Resp.* 509b), making *ἀδικία* an ontological wrong that ruptures human dignity (*φύσει σεμνότης*) and cosmic order (*κόσμος*).

The ethical gravity of these errors further diverges. The severity of *ἀνομία* fluctuates with context: a ritual oversight may be negligible in one community yet treated as a grave public offence in another. Its normative force derives from violations of mutable *νόμοι*, often arising without malicious intent (e.g. misinterpreting ambiguous statutes). *ἀδικία*, however, is presented as inexcusably grave (*ἐξ ἀνάγκης κακός*) because it violates what Plato construes as natural justice (*φύσει δίκαιον*)—norms claimed to hold independently of local convention and ultimately grounded in the Good (*Resp.* 509b). On this view, even practices normalized by custom, such as kin-killing, corrode bonds taken to be universally binding. Pindar’s dictum that “custom is the lord of all” (*Pind.* fr. 169) therefore cannot serve to vindicate *ἀδικία*: Athenian condemnation of Carthaginian sacrifice

¹² Cf. Diog. Laert., *Plato*, 104; Plut. *Vit. Lyc.* 2. 3; Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.44.

¹³ Cf. *Hdt.* 7.197. For human sacrificial rituals of Lycaea and Athamas, see Hughes 1991, pp. 92–6, 96–107, 115–6.

¹⁴ An *ἀνόμημα* should be an individual act which goes against a society’s *νόμοι*, *ἀνομία* should be systematic offending.

¹⁵ A similar example is found in Herodotus (III. 38. 4), where King Darius of Persia summons both Greeks and Indians to his court. He instructs the Greeks to consume their deceased fathers’ bodies and the Indians to burn theirs. Both groups accuse each other’s customs of being *ἀνομία*. This brings to mind the famous saying of Pindar, “Custom is the ruler of both the perishable and the imperishable” (*Pind.* fr. 169 = Pl. *Grg.* 484b). This illustrates that custom precedes or even supersedes societal moral and ethical values, just as *Νόμος* precedes *Δίκη*.

is framed not as legal one-upmanship, but as an appeal to a standard that purports to outrank positive law.

Remediation strategies likewise reflect this hierarchy. Legislators abolish *ἀνομία* by repealing contradictory statutes (e.g. establishing sacrifice laws), but *ἀδικία* demands philosophical reorientation (*περιπαγωγή*. *Resp.* 518d). Individual souls must perceive natural law’s imperatives through dialectical education (e.g. recognizing the unnaturalness of parricide). Athens’ critique of Carthage thus transcends legal dispute, urging a cognitive shift toward ontological truths (*εἰδός*) that reveal *ἀδικία*’s violation of rational order.

Plato ultimately positions *νόμος* (custom) as an inferior copy of *φύσει νόμος* (natural law), wherein *ἀδικία* serves as the ultimate measure for legal legitimacy. Any statute violating natural justice — even if legally consistent (lacking *ἀνομία*) — forfeits ethical validity due to its inherent *ἀδικία*.

Aristotle later systematised Plato’s insights in *Eth. Nic.* 1134b18–1135a5:

Fig. 1 Aristotle’s Natural Justice vs. Legal Justice

	Natural Justice (<i>φύσει δίκαιον</i>)	Legal Justice (<i>νόμῳ δίκαιον</i>)
Temporal and Spatial Validity	Universally Applicable (<i>πανταχοῦ</i>)	Regionally Limited (<i>κατὰ τόπον</i>)
Moral Implications	Constitutes the criterion of <i>ἀδικία</i>	Constitutes the criterion of <i>ἀνομία</i>
Examples	Prohibition of Kin-slaying (in any city-state)	prohibition of Olive Exports (only in Athens)

This framework clarifies the ethical hierarchy implicit from Plato: natural justice transcends human legislation, serving as the immutable standard by which even valid laws (*νόμιμα*) must be judged. While legal justice maintains social order, it remains subordinate to the cosmic rationality (*λόγος*) underlying natural justice. Thus, reforms to eliminate *ἀνομία* (e.g. revising trade laws) achieve only provisional correction, whereas addressing *ἀδικία* (e.g. abolishing culturally tolerated murder) demands alignment with what is *φύσει δίκαιον* — a reconciliation of human statutes with the

ontological imperatives of virtue (*ἀρετή*). This framework exposes law's contingent nature while affirming perpetual standards for moral judgment.

The term *ἀτυχία* is semantically tied to fortune denied or reversed, and it is often used where outcomes appear to exceed rational prediction or human control. In Greek thought, *Τύχη* (Tyche) is largely a personification of contingency—much like *Δίκη* of justice—used to name the unpredictable factor that can disrupt human plans. Hesiod (*Theog.* 360) lists Tyche among the Oceanids, and later iconography links her with the cornucopia. Yet this is not simply a “good-luck” emblem: Tyche also names the instability of what is allotted, including sudden reversals. Etymologically, *ἀτυχία*, formed with the privative *α-*, denotes “lack of fortune” or “ill fortune”, a formation that reflects the ancient Greek's fundamental anxiety toward the non-rational forces of fate.

In Greek philosophical usage, it is important to distinguish *ἀτυχία* (ill fortune, lack of success) from *ἀτύχημα*, which denotes a particular “mishap” or “unfortunate event”; both, however, are conceptually anchored in *τύχη* and thus in the element of contingency. By contrast, *ἀμαρτία* derives from *ἀμαρτάνειν* and is organised around failure of aim. This difference is already suggested by the verbal roots: *τυγχάνειν* can mean “to hit” or “to attain,” often with an implication of chance, whereas *ἀμαρτάνειν* means “to miss.” Homer's *Iliad* (23.857) makes the contrast vivid in Achilles' archery contest: “Whoever hits (*βάλῃ*) the flying dove shall carry all the double axes home; but whoever strikes (*τύχῃ*) the cord instead—missing (*ἀμαρτών*) the bird through lesser skill—shall take only a single axe” (*ὃς μὲν κε βάλλῃ... ὃς δέ κε μηρίνθοιο τύχῃ...*).¹⁶ The scene shows that *τυγχάνειν* can denote attaining a result that is not the primary target, while *ἀμαρτάνειν* marks straightforward failure to achieve the intended goal; in this early usage, “missing the mark” carries no necessary moral colouring. At the same time, the later development of the two word-families diverges: *τυγχάνειν* largely retains a neutral sense of chance attainment, whereas *ἀμαρτία* increasingly extends beyond physical mis-aiming to errors of judgement and cognition, and in some contexts attracts ethical force. Against this background, *ἀτυχία*/*ἀτύχημα* can be understood as linking failure with the volatility of *τύχη*, thereby differing from *ἀμαρτία* precisely in its constitutive relation to contingency.

Aeschines' use of *ἀτυχία* in *Against Ctesiphon* (57) illustrates how the *τύχη*-word family can be mobilized to reframe political responsibility. Instead of describing Athens' defeat at Chaeronea

¹⁶ For other instances of *τυγχάνω*, see *Il.* 4.106, 5.579, 12.189; *Od.* 19.452, 22.7.

and its aftermath as *ἀμαρτήματα* ('errors'), he repeatedly casts them as *ἀτυχήματα* ('misfortunes'), thereby shifting explanatory weight from human misjudgement to adverse contingency and, by implication, to the withdrawal of divine favour. He prepares this move by insisting on the city's dependence on divine protection—*τύχη* and *θεῶν εὖνοια* ('divine favour') are made to stand behind civic survival—so that political disaster can be presented as what follows when that protection is lost. In this way, the rhetoric does not simply deny agency; it relocates agency: failure appears less as a contestable matter of policy and competence and more as a calamity whose causes are not fully answerable to forensic proof. The effect is to blunt direct legal attribution of blame (as an argument framed in terms of *ἀμαρτία*/*ἀμάρτημα* would invite) and to recast collective defeat in a quasi-tragic key, where the polis suffers what seems to exceed ordinary calculation.¹⁷

Greek ethical thought consistently links accounts of error to states of knowledge. Socrates' maxim in *Protagoras* (345e)—“No one errs willingly” (*οὐδεὶς ἐκὼν ἀμαρτάνει*)—locates wrongdoing in an epistemic deficit.¹⁸ When individuals choose wrongly while weighing pleasure (*ἡδονή*) against pain (*λύπη*, 357d), Socrates attributes the failure to the absence of a properly calibrated “measuring” expertise (*μετρητικός*, 356b–e): without the ability to assess and compare goods and harms correctly, agents misjudge what is truly best. In this framework, intellectual ignorance (*ἀμαθία*) becomes inseparable from moral failure (357e). Plato's *Laws* (863c) extends the same orientation by counting *ἄγνοια* as a principal source of error;¹⁹ here *ἄγνοια* is best understood as ignorance of the relevant particulars or circumstances (*τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα*), even though Plato at times runs it together with *ἀμαθία* as a more general lack of understanding.²⁰

This intellectualist model, however, immediately raises the problem of *ἀκρασία* ('lack of self-control'): if wrongdoing is always ignorance, how can one explain actions performed “against better knowledge” under the pressure of desire? Aristotle explicitly presses this point in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1145b21–29), arguing against the Socratic denial of *ἀκρασία* and insisting that agents may

¹⁷ Demosthenes, significantly, often counters this move by adopting a complementary strategy of self-fashioning, presenting his own political stance in tragic terms and retrospectively converting miscalculation into the posture of heroic foresight, see Mader 2007, pp. 339–60.

¹⁸ For studies related to Socrates' assertion that “all wrongdoing is involuntary”, cf. Guthrie 1975, pp. 139–41; Segvic 2009, pp. 47–88.

¹⁹ Cf. Irwin 1995, pp. 17–29. For the ignorance of identity in Aristotle's *ἀμαρτία*, cf. Kim 2010, pp. 34–51.

²⁰ Compared to Aristotle, Plato is less concerned with maintaining strict terminological boundaries: in *Laws* 861a–864c he can use terms such as *ἀδικία* and *ἀμάρτημα* without consistently distinguishing their scope. His own justification is that “for us there is no present need for a contentious argument about names” (*ἡμῖν δὲ οὐκ ἔστι τὰ νῦν ὀνομάτων περὶ δύσερις λόγος*). On Plato's fluidity in error-vocabulary, see Adkins 1960, pp. 304–11. For the dramatization in Platonic works, cf. Nightingale 1992, pp. 120–41, Clay 2000, Hook 2005, pp. 19–25.

possess the relevant knowledge in some sense and yet fail to act on it. The larger point remains that classical ethical reasoning repeatedly treats error as centrally bound to epistemic conditions—whether by collapsing wrongdoing into ignorance, as Socrates tends to do, or by refining the account to accommodate weakness of self-control without abandoning the knowledge-threshold altogether.²¹

Aristotle refines the epistemic framework by the corresponding *-μα* forms that pick out particular acts or events and therefore suit ethical and forensic classification. In *Nicomachean Ethics* (1135b12–26) he articulates a threefold scheme:

- **ἀμαρτημα** arises from ignorance of the circumstances (*ἄγνοια τῶν περιστάσεων*), as when a practitioner makes a wrong diagnosis because relevant information is missing; Aristotle's more general point is that practical failure often stems from not knowing what one should pursue or avoid (*Eth. Nic.* 1110b15).
- **ἀδίκημα** stems from deliberate choice (*προαίρεσις*) with awareness of what one is doing—an intentional violation of what is due to others—its wrongness rooted in badness of character (*διὰ μοχθηρίαν*).
- **ἀτύχημα** belongs to outcomes that are contrary to reasonable expectation (*παράλογα*), such as a building collapsing in an earthquake; because the event is not the product of a defective choice, responsibility is mitigated (*Rh.* 1374b5).

This scheme is then restated with a more explicitly forensic emphasis in *Rhetoric* 1374b3–8:

- **ἀτυχήματα** are unforeseeable (*παράλογα*) and devoid of malicious intent (*μὴ ἀπὸ μοχθηρίας*).
- **ἀμαρτήματα** are potentially foreseeable (*μὴ παράλογα*) yet not from deliberately evil (*μὴ ἀπὸ πονηρίας*): they are the kinds of mistakes one might have avoided, but they do not proceed from vicious intent.

²¹ Aristotle's critique targets Socrates' denial of *ἀκρασία* (Pl. *Prt.* 345e; 358c; *Eth. Nic.* 1145b21–29). Xenophon's position is often read as unstable; see Klosko 1986, p. 55; Vlastos 1991, pp. 100–1. For recognition of *ἀκρασία* within Socratic theory, see Santas 1979, pp. 197–8; for denial, Walsh 1971, pp. 236–41; Segvic 2009, pp. 62–86. On the divergence between Aristotelian and Socratic/Xenophontic conceptions and on Aristotle's possible misreading, see Santas and Seel 2006, pp. 32, 34–9. For a broader overview, see Bobonich and Destrée (eds.) 2007.

- *ἀδικήματα* are potentially foreseeable (*μῆτε παράλογα*) and proceed from subjective malice (*ἀπὸ πονηρίας*): the decisive difference here is not a higher degree of “foreseeability” so much as the presence of malicious intent.

Here Aristotle distinguishes not only between chance, mistake, and injustice, but also between two kinds of moral badness. *μοχθηρία* tends to denote a settled deficiency or corruption of character, whereas *πονηρία* more pointedly marks active wickedness or malicious intent. In this rhetorical classification, the decisive line is therefore not merely whether something is *παράλογον* (‘beyond calculation’), but whether it proceeds from such malign intent.

In contrast with Plato’s terminological fluidity (for example, his tendency to run *ἀμαθία* and *ἄγνοια* together in *Protagoras* 357e), Aristotle articulates a gradational scheme in *Physics* (197a32–35): *ἀτύχημα* aligns with uncontrollable *τύχη* (for example, ships wrecked by storms), *ἀμάρτημα* with the limits of rational calculation (for example, navigational misjudgements), and *ἀδίκημα* with deliberate wrongdoing.

This typology does not reduce every failure to a single moral category, but differentiates kinds of causation and responsibility. Aristotle’s remark in *Metaphysics* (1025a14–19)—that art (*τέχνη*) and chance (*τύχη*) operate on the same material, though chance lacks purposive form—helps to clarify the contrast: *ἀτύχημα* can be described as an outcome without a rationally intended structure; *ἀμάρτημα* as an imperfect execution of a rational aim; and *ἀδίκημα* as intentional wrongdoing that seeks to damage or overthrow an established order. Such conceptual parsing informs both ethical reflection and legal reasoning in classical Athens (cf. *Ath. Pol.* 67), without implying a simple teleology from “primitive poetry” to “advanced prose.”

At the same time, any such system risks smoothing over the tension between fortune (*τύχη*) and choice (*προαίρεσις*) that tragedy—*Oedipus Rex* above all—keeps unresolved. The value of Aristotle’s distinctions lies in their analytical utility: they offer a way to describe how human vulnerability can arise from contingency, from misjudgement, or from deliberate malice.

4. The Dual Aspects of *ἄτη*: Divine Madness and Human Desire

Few Greek concepts stand as close to *ἀμαρτία* as *ἄτη*, and modern scholars have often stressed their proximity. Bremer, for instance, treats *ἄτη* and *ἀμαρτία* as naming a comparable nexus of delusion

and wrongful action, where divine causation and human failure intersect.²² Dawe presses the point further by casting *ἄτη* as an archaic, Homeric idiom that tragedy still exploits, but that Aristotle largely leaves aside: on his view, *ἄτη* belongs to the diction of earlier poets, whereas *ἁμαρτία*—absent from Homer—emerges as the term that later becomes serviceable for Aristotle’s account of “the ways in which good men come to harm”.²³ This is an important observation about vocabulary and genre. Yet Dawe’s stronger inference—that a play such as *Ajax*, read by a fourth-century audience, would simply count as a drama “about *ἁμαρτία*”—is much harder to sustain.²⁴ Tragic language is not a transparent index of later philosophical taxonomy; both the poet and his original audience could mobilize *ἄτη* as a specifically poetic term for ruin without thereby collapsing it into Aristotle’s more general *ἁμαρτία*.

This distinction becomes clearer once Aristotle’s own usage is kept in view. As Finkelberg notes, *ἁμαρτία* in classical Greek is often a morally neutral word for “error” in a broad sense.²⁵ By contrast, *ἄτη* typically concentrates a more charged scenario: a state of delusion or blindness that can be narrated as god-sent and yet remains entangled with an agent’s disposition and choices. In that sense it “bridges” divine intervention and human vice—not by assigning agency exclusively to either side, but by staging their interaction in the production of ruin. It is therefore closer, in ethical intensity, to what Aristotle calls a “great error” (*ἁμαρτία μεγάλη*, *Poet.* 1453a) than to *ἁμαρτία* as a general label for missing the mark. Put differently *ἄτη* can look like *ἀδικία* under the veil of divine sanction: wrongdoing appears at once as a human failure and as something amplified, authorized, or disclosed by the gods.²⁶

In Hesiod’s *Theogony* (230), *Ἄτη* is genealogised as the daughter of *Ἐρις* (goddess of Strife), a figure who can signify both productive rivalry and destructive strife. This genealogy matters: once rivalry hardens into destructive competition, it readily recruits desire—above all the desire for honour, precedence, and victory—into a logic of escalation, so that the pursuit of advantage tips into

²² Bremer 1969, p. 104.

²³ Dawe 1968, pp. 95, 102.

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 114–6. Evans contends that Ajax’s *ἄτη* is based on his *hybris*, Evans 1991, p. 72.

²⁵ Finkelberg 1995, p. 28, n. 59.

²⁶ There are three interpretative approaches to *ἄτη*: 1) The causation of *ἄτη* is sometimes not related to the gods, Sullivan 1988, p. 114; Yamagata 1994, pp. 54f; Teffeteller 2003, p. 26. 2) The causation of *ἄτη* is almost entirely related to the gods, Snell 1953, pp. 1–22; Dawe 1968, pp. 95ff; Lloyd-Jones 1983, p. 10; Russo 2012, pp. 11–28. 3) The causation is double-motivated, Dodds 1951; Lesky 1961; Porter 2017, pp. 1–20. For diachronic discussions of *ἄτη*, cf. Doyle 1984; Taplin 1992.

self-undoing. Porter’s “double motivation”²⁷ model captures the resulting ambiguity. *ἄτη* can be narrated as an external intervention, for example, Athena driving Ajax into the delusion of slaughtering sheep (Soph. *Aj.* 364–71), yet the same narrative also presents the catastrophe as inseparable from an internal disposition pushed to an extreme, for example, Ajax’s resentment and excess (Soph. *Aj.* 112–27). Williams rightly treats this as an interaction between mortals and gods, though his claim that divine interference straightforwardly contradicts an agent’s intention risks understating the agent’s implication in the disaster.²⁸ The point is not that *ἄτη* is “purely divine” or “merely human”, but that divine narration often functions to intensify—and to expose—the ruinous trajectory already latent in character and choice.

Homeric epic provides an essential framework for reading *ἄτη* in this sense. In *Iliad* 19.78–145 Agamemnon attributes his seizure of Briseis to *ἄτη*, yet the speech is framed so that responsibility is not simply evacuated; indeed, Agamemnon explicitly insists that even Zeus can be overtaken by *ἄτη*, which cautions against treating *ἄτη* as a one-way mechanism of divine punishment aimed only at mortals.²⁹ Epic likewise stresses human self-implication in suffering: Zeus’ complaint in *Odyssey* 1.32–34 is not that gods arbitrarily ruin men, but that “they themselves, through their own reckless folly, have pains beyond what is allotted” (*αὐτοὶ γὰρ σφετέρῃσιν ἄτασθαλίησιν ὑπὲρ μῶρον ἄλγε’ ἔχουσιν*). Against this background, the bT scholia on *Iliad* 2.111 can define *ἄτη* as “a voluntary *ἀμαρτία*” (*ἄτη ἢ ἐκούσιος ἀμαρτία*): a formulation that, while seemingly at odds with Socrates’ dictum that “no one errs willingly” (Pl. *Prt.* 345e), points to a different ethical emphasis—one concerned less with ignorance as such than with a willful slide into ruin under the pressure of passion, honour, and self-assertion:

- **Socratic involuntariness:** based on moral intellectualism,³⁰ where error is understood as a failure in knowing the truth (*Meno* 87b–89a).
- **Scholia voluntariness:** stressing that the agent’s choice can be called “voluntary” within a given value-horizon, even when it issues from a distorted judgement—in other words, the

²⁷ Porter 2017, pp. 2–3.

²⁸ Williams 2008, pp. 52–5.

²⁹ Adkins and Lloyd-Jones emphasise the agent’s implication in *ἄτη* and resist treating it as a merely exculpatory appeal to divine causation, cf. Adkins 1960, pp. 51f; Lloyd-Jones 1983, p. 23.

³⁰ Seel denoted that Socrates’ moral intellectualism does not make a fine distinction between action/intention, but focuses on the fact that “every virtue is wisdom”, Seel 2006, pp. 20–49, esp. 24–30.

agent commits himself to a course of action that violates the limits set by divine or civic order.

Sophocles' *Ajax* offers a particularly clear case for thinking through this tension. When Athena shows Odysseus Ajax in his madness (51–65), the goddess does not implant a new motive; she exploits the existing motive of vengeance and redirects it through illusion (*φάσμα*), substituting a flock of sheep for Ajax's enemies (364–71). The play thereby makes visible how *ἄτη* operates through several interlocking dimensions:

- **Human motivation:** Ajax's wounded honour after losing Achilles' armor (440–4).
- **Divine retribution:** Athena's punitive intervention, prompted by Ajax's refusal to acknowledge divine agency and his overconfident self-assertion (127–33).
- **Cognitive distortion:** the misrecognition of reality as judgement collapses under the pressure of passion (301–5).

Through this layered narration, responsibility under *ἄτη* emerges not as a simple transfer of blame to the gods, but as a structure in which divine action and human disposition jointly produce ruin: what is “sent” from outside operates by intensifying—often to the point of blindness—an orientation already present in the agent. This account also resonates with a Socratic line of thought as summarized by Segvic: agents can become fixated on their own evaluative outlook because desire and belief are easily entangled, so that what they want is mistaken for what they take to be good or just.³¹ In this sense, Golden's reduction of *ἄτη* to a “divine punishment mechanism” is misleading, because it overlooks *ἄτη*'s mediating role in amplifying human flaws (Soph. *Aj.* 758–61, the chorus's warning against mortal overreach).³² Stallmach's interpretation of *ἄτη*, later supported by Bremer and Dawe, is particularly apt: *ἄτη* denotes a calamity divinely imposed—either arbitrarily or as punishment—emerging from the daemonic tensions within a family or the immanent justice of the cosmos. It is actualized through human action distorted by blindness, deception, or impiety, and inevitably comes back to the agent in the form of retribution.³³

³¹ Segvic further clarifies a Socratic tendency to conflate “wanting” with “supposing,” i.e. to treat mistaken belief as if it were identical with desire, Segvic 2009, pp. 47–62, cf. Pl. *Prt.* 356a–357e; *Ap.* 21d; *Euthyd.* 280a; Penner and Rowe 2005, pp. 216–30, esp. 217.

³² Golden 1979, pp. 12.

³³ Stallmach 1950, p. 178, cf. Bremer 1969, pp. 99–111, 134, esp. 104, 111, 134; Dawe 1968, pp. 95f.

Aristotle's notion of *ἁμαρτία μεγάλη* ('great error') in *Poetics* 1453a offers a useful point of comparison for thinking about how tragic discourse reconfigures older poetic vocabularies of ruin. While *ἁμαρτία* can function in classical Greek as a morally neutral concept of "error",³⁴ *ἄτη* remains a markedly poetic term, often used to name catastrophic delusion and the collapse of judgement. Homeric epic does not present *ἄτη* simply as an instrument of divine punishment; rather, it is a way of narrating ruin in which the gods may be implicated without thereby cancelling human implication (cf. *Il.* 19.136–8).

Tragedy continues to inhabit this mixed explanatory field. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for instance, Oedipus' exceptional intelligence is beyond doubt—he solves the Sphinx's riddle—yet his confidence in inquiry and judgement leads him beyond the limits of proper self-knowledge, so that the pursuit of truth becomes inseparable from self-misrecognition and catastrophic consequence (*OT* 397–8). Here, ruin is not reducible either to sheer divine assault or to a simple moral fault.

Aristotle, writing two generations later, does not merely reproduce this earlier poetic grammar. Rather, his account in the *Poetics* shifts the emphasis toward intelligible error, misjudgement, and the kinds of failure for which responsibility may be discussed. Read in this light, the contrast between *ἁμαρτία μεγάλη* and *ἁμαρτία τις* points to a spectrum within "error" itself, from an unspecified lapse to a catastrophe-generating failure. Else's well-known observation that, in Aristotle's theoretical horizon, "the gods are gone" is therefore best understood not as a description of fifth-century tragic practice itself, but as a description of the explanatory recoding performed by Aristotle's later criticism.³⁵ Divine language does not disappear from tragedy; what changes in Aristotle is the primary framework through which tragic causation is rendered intelligible.

5. Conclusion

The javelin fatality in Antiphon's *Second Tetralogy* (3.2.4–5) epitomises Greek forensic experimentation with "error".³⁶ A youth practicing javelin-throwing in a gymnasium struck and killed a boy who unexpectedly crossed the trajectory of his javelin. When the defendant argues that it was an "accident" (*ἀτύχημα*), the imagined debate—focusing on whether the incident constitutes

³⁴ Finkelberg 1995, p. 28, n. 59.

³⁵ Else 1957, pp. 474–5.

³⁶ The analysis of errors of different nature and degree by the example of javelin-throwing is said to have occupied an entire day of discussion between Pericles and the philosopher Protagoras, according to Plut. *Vit. Per.* 36.

an *ἀμάρτημα* (negligence) or an *ἀδίκημα* (willful harm)—exposes the ambiguous boundaries between “accident” and “negligence” in ancient Greek legal thought.

Antiphon constructs hypothetical scenarios to clarify the case, contrasting the actual event with possible variations. For example, if the javelin had missed its mark (though it did not), or if the boy had stayed still and been struck (though he actually ran), the thrower would be guilty. Since neither of these scenarios occurred, the defendant is found not guilty. These hypothetical contrasts help explain why the defendant should be treated differently from others who might accidentally kill someone with a javelin. The general conclusion emphasises that even when both parties contribute to an unintended act, only the one who commits the error (*ἀμαρτία*) should be held accountable. While some arguments regarding causality and responsibility in the imagined debate seem less mature, they laid the groundwork for disentangling intention, causality, and responsibility — a fertile soil for legal-philosophical thought.³⁷

Drawing on Antiphon’s javelin case and the foregoing discussion, I propose a hypothetical javelin-throwing scenario as an analytical framework for mapping the multiple dimensions through which ancient Greek thought classifies “error”.

Fig. 2 Conceptions of Error in Greek Thought

	Contextual Explanation	Analytical Dimension and Philosophical/Legal Concepts
<i>ἀμάρτημα</i>	Practical mis-aiming: the thrower misses the intended target due to a controllable lapse of aim, skill, or judgement.	Epistemological rift: From archery error (<i>Od.</i> 8.229) to ethical/intellectual deviation (<i>Eth. Nic.</i> 1109b20)
<i>ἀτύχημα</i>	Collateral harm (accidental): a javelin unintentionally injures a bystander due to external disturbance (e.g. strong wind)	Weight of contingency: Intertwined with the force of fate (<i>τύχη</i>) and irresistible force (<i>Poet.</i> 1452a2)
<i>ἀδίκημα</i>	Intentional wrongdoing: a premeditated killing carried out under the cover of a “practice session.”	Normative foundation: Rooted in the violation of natural justice (<i>δίκη</i> . <i>Soph. Ant.</i> 456–7)

³⁷ For the discussion on responsibility and causality in Antiphon’s *Tetralogies*, cf. Gagarin 2002, pp. 120–2; Williams 2008, pp. 61–4.

	Contextual Explanation	Analytical Dimension and Philosophical/Legal Concepts
<i>ἀνόμημα</i>	Violation of an enacted rule: Practicing in a prohibited area, resulting in injury or death	Legal-positivist dimension: Collapse of statutory order (<i>νόμος</i> . Dem. <i>Meid.</i> 21)
<i>ἄτη</i>	Delusive ruin (divine–human interplay): the agent’s violent impulse is intensified and misdirected under divine involvement, producing a catastrophic misrecognition of the situation.	Shared and complex responsibility: divine narration does not simply cancel agency; it marks a collapse of judgement in which human disposition and divine involvement jointly generate ruin. (<i>Il.</i> 19.86–138)

In the Greek intellectual tradition, *ἀμαρτημα*, *ἀτύχημα*, *ἀδίκημα*, *ἀνόμημα*, and *ἄτη* all represent different types of “error” but each carries its own specific philosophical and legal connotation. From an etymological perspective, these concepts are linked to different normative dimensions: *ἀδίκημα* is grounded in “justice” (*δίκη*), referring specifically to violations of ethical values such as intentional harm, with its core being a malicious choice of will; *ἀνόμημα* focuses more on the breach of written laws and social order (*νόμος*); *ἀτύχημα* is rooted in the randomness of fate (*τύχη*), emphasizing uncontrollable outcomes resulting from chance (such as an accidental deviation in a sporting event), with its unpredictability putting it beyond human rational responsibility; finally, *ἄτη* refers to divine madness, where divine intervention distorts human will, in an interplay between divine influence and human character flaws.

The foregoing typology has focused on the *-μα* terms that denote discrete acts or events; *ἀμαρτία*, as an abstract noun in *-ία*, is not part of that event-based grid in a strict sense. It becomes relevant here because it operates at a higher level of generality, providing a concept through which Greek writers can connect those discrete mishaps to questions of agency and responsibility.

In this sense, *ἀμαρτία* can be treated as an intermediary notion linking cognition and ethics. On the one hand, it retains its non-moral meaning of “failure to achieve a goal” (as in Homer’s archery contest), but, within the philosophical systems of Plato and Aristotle, it evolves into a “necessary deviation” through failure to foresee negative outcomes due to ignorance (*ἄγνοια* and *ἀμαθία*) or lack of prudence (*ἀφροσύνη*). Aristotle’s triadic analysis of action (coercion, ignorance, free will) in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1110b15–1111a21), alongside his refined concept of

foreseeability (*παράλογα*) in the *Rhetoric* (1374b3–8), not only critiques and develops Plato’s “doctrine of ignorance” (e.g. *Prt.* 357e) but also establishes a hierarchy of responsibility based on foreseeability, similar to that found in Antiphon’s case study. From the hypothetical reconstruction of the javelin’s deviation (e.g. the foreseeability of the victim’s movement) towards Aeschines’ rhetorical use of *ἀτυχήματα* (to metaphorically suggest “divine punishment”) in his criticism of Demosthenes, all cases demonstrate how Greek thought defines “error” as interwoven with the limits of rational judgment, the uncontrollable weight of chance, and the need for normative order.

Ultimately, Greek error taxonomy mirrors a dual insight into human nature: humans as moral agents capable of self-perfection through prudence and as tragically finite beings forever caught between *τυγχάνειν* (attaining via chance) and *ἀμαρτάνειν* (failing despite intent)—struggling with the limitations of their rational faculties. Through the philosophical exploration of different error types, classical Athens not only forged the West’s primal error epistemology but also, through the collective reflection of its citizens, has provided us with a poetic inquiry into the essence of human nature.

II. Chinese Terminology of Error

白馬非馬

The white horse is not the horse.

— Gongsun-Long, *White Horse Discourse*, 1.

Early Chinese texts, no less than Greek ones, developed a differentiated vocabulary for describing the concept of “error” and “failure”, terms such as *cuo* (錯), *wu* (誤), *guo* (過), *sheng* (瞢), *shi* (失), and *jiu* (咎), whose meanings shift with genre, period, and argumentative purpose. Yet any attempt to reconstruct this lexicon must begin with a methodological caution: categories like “Confucianism,” “Daoism,” and “Legalism” are, at best, heuristic labels, and treating them as stable transhistorical entities risks flattening precisely the conceptual distinctions this chapter seeks to recover.¹

This problem is sharpened by the history of transmission. The extant materials have, to a large extent, undergone later processes of compilation and selection, while certain genres—especially technical legal and administrative materials before the Han dynasty—were far less likely to be preserved within the received corpus, producing a structural imbalance between the evidence available for citation and the conclusions that can be drawn.² Excavated manuscripts and tomb texts, by contrast, broaden the evidentiary base by introducing different types of writing and by challenging inherited taxonomies of “school” and “genre,” precisely because they were not subjected to centuries of selection and redaction.³

Accordingly, this chapter restricts its claims to text-specific and datable contexts, focusing primarily on materials from the Warring States through the early imperial period. Within this framework, the concept of “error” is reconstructed not as a unified category, but as a cluster of terms whose meanings and normative force vary across texts, genres, and historical settings. This reconstruction is tested against both transmitted classics and excavated sources, including early legal materials.

¹ Goldin 2020, pp. 2–3; Puett 2002, p. 5.

² Goldin 2012, pp. 2–3.

³ Csikszentmihalyi 2004, pp. 1–4.

1. *Cuo* (錯)

In medieval and modern Chinese, *cuo* (錯) becomes the default word for the concept of error, forming compound words such as *cuo wu* (錯誤, ‘error’), *guo cuo* (過錯, ‘fault’), *cuo miu* (錯謬, ‘fallacy’), and *cuo shi* (錯失, ‘oversight’). However, this usage evolved historically and did not originate in ancient times. In his *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字)⁴, Xu-Shen (許慎, 1st century A.D.) defined *cuo* as “Coating with metal” (金塗也), reflecting one Han-period usage associated with craftsmanship rather than a general semantic origin.

In pre-Qin sources, *cuo* is most often tied to spatial or procedural misplacement. For instance, the *Zhanguoce* (戰國策) describes a southeastern tribe: “Wearing their hair loose, bodies tattooed, *cuo* arms, and robes folded on the left; these are the people of Ou-Yue” (被發文身, 錯臂左衽, 甌越之民也),⁵ where *cuo* refers to the decorative crossing patterns. Similarly, in the *Shijing* (詩經, *Xiaoya*, *Heming*, 1), the phrase “Stones from another hill can be used for *cuo*” (它山之石, 可以為錯) signifies interlacing or friction in tool-making.⁶ Additionally, *cuo* also served as a “phonetic loan character” (通假字)⁷ for *cuo* (措), meaning “to place” or “arrange”, as seen in *Chu Ci* (楚辭, *Lisao*, 4), “Turning away from established norms to alter **arrangements**” (恤規矩而改錯), and in the *Analects* (論語, *Weizheng*, 19), “Promoting the upright and **setting** them above the crooked” (舉直錯諸枉). These uses foreground the idea of “putting things in the wrong place” rather than “making a mistake” in the later epistemic sense; yet precisely this notion of misplacement provides a bridge to later extensions in which disorder or mismatch becomes a way of describing failure.

By the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–25 A.D.), *cuo* began to signify disorder, contradiction, or incongruity. For example, Liu-Xiang (劉向, 77–6 B.C.) in *Jiutan* (九歎, *Xixian*, 2) wrote: “My heart is distressed and knotted with grievance, feelings **intertwined** in persistent sorrow” (心憤恨以冤結兮, 情舛錯以曼憂), employs *cuo* alongside *chuan* (舛)⁸ to express internal confusion.

⁴ The *Shuowen Jiezi* is the first comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters that was ever compiled. For a bibliographical guide for early Chinese texts, cf. Loewe 1993.

⁵ *Zhanguoce*, *Zhaoce*, *Wulingwang Pingzhou Jianju*, 5. The content in *Shiji* and *Zhangguoce* is same, cf. *Shiji*, *Zhao Shijia*, 67. This meaning of interlaced pattern remained until the Eastern Han period. The *Hanshu* records that Wang-Mang minted new currency *cuodao* (錯刀), *qidao* (契刀), “The *cuodao* is interlaced its inscription with gold, valued as five thousand coins”, *Hanshu*, *Shihuozi Xia*, 50.

⁶ Cf. *Zhouyi*, *Shuogua*, 3; *Chuci*, *Tianwen*, 5.

⁷ A phonetic loan character (通假字) refers to a Chinese character borrowed to represent another word with a similar pronunciation, regardless of its original meaning. This phenomenon often occurs due to the limited number of characters in early writing or the evolving phonetic structure of the language.

⁸ The character 舛 (*chuan*) originally meant “lying down opposed” and was likely an invented character from the “Small Seal Script” (小篆). After the Western Han period, it extended to signify mutual contradiction, lack of smoothness, error, and deviation, though it is rarely found in pre-Qin texts. The only notable pre-Qin

Similarly, phrases like “My heart, **troubled and entangled**, refuses to yield” (心紛錯而不受. *Jiutan*, *Youku*, 1) and “My heart gradually grows **vexed and tangled**” (心漸漸其煩錯. *Jiutan*, *Youku*, 2), depict emotional turmoil and complexity. These uses show a shift from concrete interlacing to the more general sense of “entanglement” or “incongruity”.

In Wei–Jin usage, *cuo* is increasingly employed in explicitly epistemic contexts, where it denotes identifiable mistakes in reckoning or speech. Pei–Songzhi (裴松之, 372–451 A.D.), in *Sanguozhi Zhu* (三國志註, *Wendi Ji*, 36), frequently used *cuo* to signify general errors, such as in his quotation of *Soushenji* (搜神記): “The count of years is *cuo*; it is unclear whether it resulted from a historian’s mistake or inaccurate transmission for long periods” (其年數則錯, 未知邢史失其數邪, 將年代久遠, 注記者傳而有謬也). Another example reads: “The Grand Tutor’s speech was *cuo wu*, to the extent that he could not bring the cup properly to his mouth and mistook south for north” (太傅語言錯誤, 口不攝杯, 指南為北. *Sanguozhi Zhu*, *Caoshuang Zhuan*, 3). Here *cuo* no longer merely names “crossing” or “entanglement” but functions as a standard term for error in judgement, statement, or record.

In summary, the evolution of *cuo* traces a clear trajectory from concrete to abstract. In pre-Qin texts, it denoted physical interlacing and arrangement, without ethical implications. In the Han period, it came to signify discord and disorder, with a more abstract meaning. By the Wei–Jin period, *cuo* had fully developed into a general term for error, primarily describing objective mistakes rather than moral failings. This semantic shift reflects a threefold development: first, cognitively, it follows the Chinese tradition of “observing objects and deriving symbolic meanings” (觀物取象); second, ethically, it shows restraint, focusing on deviations from objective order rather than subjective intentions; and third, conceptually, it constructs a logical sequence moving progressively from “interlacement” to “contradiction” then to “deviation” and ultimately to “error”.

occurrence appears in *Zhuangzi* (*Tianxia*, 7), where it describes the contradictions in Hui–Shi’s writings: “Hui–Shi versed in myriad methods, composed texts filling five cartloads; his doctrines were **contradictory and incoherent**, his arguments lacking cogency” (惠施多方, 其書五車, 其道舛駁, 其言也不中). The dating of the *Tianxia* chapter has long been debated, with scholars focusing on its style and ideas, yet no attention has been given to its use of such characters. This suggests that 舛 in *Tianxia* likely reflects later additions by Zhuangzi’s followers. For discussions on the dating of *Tianxia*, see Wang–Lei 2016, pp. 47–52; Qin–Xiao 2022, pp. 1–7.

2. *Wu* (誤)

Shuowen Jiezi defines *wu* (誤) as synonymous with *miu* (謬), which is explained as “absurd word of a mad person”. However, this definition fails to capture the semantic nuance of *wu*. In pre-Qin texts, *miu* primarily refers to misguided or unfounded speech—claims that deviate from what is taken to be correct, coherent, or warranted—and it often carries a polemical, pejorative force. For example, *Zhuangzi* (莊子, *Tianxia*, 6) describes certain discourses as “Groundless talking, absurd words, and unfounded phrases” (謬悠之說, 荒唐之言, 無端崖之辭), casting them as aberrant and unwarranted discourse rather than as mere inadvertent mistakes. In contrast, *wu* specifically indicates unintentional errors that arise from negligence or accident, leading to objective consequences. This distinction makes *wu* akin to the ancient Greek concept of ἀμάρτημα/ἀμαρτία.

In early pre-Qin texts, *wu* broadly referred to errors made unintentionally. For instance, *Mozi* (墨子, *Guiyi*, 12) notes: “Among things considered similar, **wu** inevitably occur” (同歸之物, 信有誤者) indicating misunderstandings or unintended deviations. Similarly, *Zhuangzi* (*Lieyukou*, 9) records Yan-He’s criticism of Duke Ai of Lu (魯哀公), who intended to appoint Confucius to a significant position; Yan-He remarked that this decision was “Well-intentioned yet **wu**” (誤而可矣). Here, *wu* implies a mistake due to insufficient insight rather than moral fault, emphasizing unwelcome consequences despite benevolent intentions.

During the Qin and Han periods, *wu* acquired a distinct legal connotation. Bamboo slips from this era define *wu* as non-intentional clerical errors made by officials in administrative duties, such as inaccuracies in census records, financial registers, or textual mistakes.⁹ A notable example from the *Shuihudi Qin Slips* (睡虎地秦簡, *Xiaoli*, §44) reads: “If an official **wu**(adv.) brands horses or cattle, or if items are incorrectly marked in a way that cannot be corrected, the responsible official shall be fined one shield” (馬牛誤職(“識”)耳, 及物之不能相易者, 貲官嗇夫一盾). Scholars, including the compilation group of slips,¹⁰ Hulseyé,¹¹ and Kudo,¹² agree that *wu* here refers to

⁹ Shu-Zhelan 2022, p. 110.

¹⁰ The *Shuihudi* compilation group argues that the *wu*(誤) here denotes errors made in marking cattle and horses, and mistakes in inscribing marks on objects that cannot be altered, *Shuihudi Qin Slips* 1990, p. 74. Discovered in 1975 in Yunmeng County, Hubei Province, the *Shuihudi Qin Slips* include legal and administrative documents from the Qin Dynasty (221–206 B.C.).

¹¹ Hulseyé questions the editorial group’s interpretation of the latter half of the sentence, noting a missing predicate in the grammatical structure, Hulseyé 1985, p. 97.

¹² Kudo interprets the sentence as “errors made in marking cattle and horses that cannot be corrected, and in this case, the officer is fined a shield”, Kudo 2018, p. 313.

inadvertent clerical mistakes for which the official is legally accountable, despite their different grammatical understanding of the slip.

The *Zhangjiashan Han Slips* (張家山漢墓竹簡, *Ernian Lüling, Zeilü*, §17) further clarify official errors: “[□□□] if officials *wu*(adv.) record quantities inaccurately, omit characters *wu*(adv.), fined one *liang* of gold; however, if the *wu* does not impede administrative operations, no penalty” ([□□□]而誤多少其實, 及誤脫字, 罰金一兩. 誤, 其事可行者, 勿論).¹³ Shu-Zhelan’s interpretation supports that clerical errors not obstructing administrative tasks could be exempt from punishment.¹⁴ The *Yuelu Qin Slips* (岳麓書院藏秦簡, vol. 4, §227) follow similar principles: “If a *wu* causes no harm [□□□□], the punishment shall be reduced by one degree” (誤, 毋(“無”)所害 [□□□□]毆(“也”), 減臯(“罪”) 一等).¹⁵ These legal practices show that during the Qin and Han dynasties, errors labelled as *wu* were generally met with lighter penalties or even exemption if they did not result in significant harm, reflecting the law’s tolerance toward unintentional mistakes.

More significantly, Qin law differentiated between “major errors” (*da wu* 大誤) and “minor errors” (*xiao wu* 小誤), clearly stipulating standards to classify varying degrees of errors:

賊律曰: 為券書, 少多其實, 人戶, 馬, 牛以上, 羊, 犬, 彘二以上及諸誤而可直(“值”)者過六百六十錢, 皆為大誤; 誤羊, 犬, 彘及直(“值”)不盈六百六十錢以下及為書而誤, 脫字為小誤. 小誤, 貲一盾; 大誤, 貲一甲. 誤, 毋(“無”)所害 [□□□□]毆(“也”), 減臯(“罪”)一等.

The Crime Statute states: When preparing an official report, cases involving discrepancies in actual quantities, involving one household, one horse or ox or more, or two sheep, dogs, or pigs or more, or other *wu* with a value exceeding 660 coins, these are considered *da wu* (‘major errors’). *Wu* involving one sheep, dog, or pig, or a value not exceeding 660 coins, as well as *wu* in writing, are considered *xiao wu* (‘minor errors’). For *xiao wu*, the penalty is (a value of) one shield; For *da wu*, the penalty is (a value of) one armor. If the *wu* causes no actual harm [□□□□], the penalty can be reduced by one degree.

— *Yuelu Qin Slips* vol. 4, §225–227.

¹³ *Zhangjiashan Han Slips* 2006, p. 10. Unearthed in 1983 in Jiangling County, Hubei Province, *Zhangjiashan Han Slips* include early Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–9 A.D.) legal codes, medical writings, and administrative records.

¹⁴ For other explanations of this slip, Shu-Zhelan 2022, p. 95.

¹⁵ *Yuelu Qin Slips* vol. 4 2015, p. 143. Collected through donations and archaeology in the 21st century at Yuelu Academy, Hunan Province, *Yuelu Qin Slips* preserve Qin Dynasty legal statutes and administrative texts.

The *Yuelu Qin Slips* established a binary distinction between “major errors” and “minor errors” through a threefold criterion: an economic threshold of 660 coins, the social value of essential resources, and the feasibility of textual corrections. This system transforms the abstract notion of error into a quantifiable governance mechanism. First, using economic loss as an objective standard to avoid ethical disagreements; second, differentiating between core resources (households, horses, and oxen) and secondary resources (sheep, dogs, and pigs), reflecting a differentiated governance strategy; and third, offering reduced punishment for self-reported errors (誤自重減罪)¹⁶ to incentivize self-correction. These regulations balance both the subjective motivations behind official errors and their practical consequences, illustrating the Qin and Han legal principle of integrating subjective and objective factors in accountability.¹⁷

From a cognitive-linguistic viewpoint, the term *wu* retains morally neutral characteristics. Unlike *miu*, which carries negative moral connotations of intentional deception (“lunatic words” in *Shuowen Jiezi*), *wu* in the Qin-Han legal contexts strictly denotes “unlawful outcomes due to unintentional causes”, akin to Aristotle’s distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1110a). Additionally, the Qin-Han legal principle of reducing penalties for harmless errors presents a consequentialist approach, contrasting with Confucian principles of “retracing heart for guilt conviction” (*yuan xin ding zui* 原心定罪)—that is, assigning guilt by tracing the agent’s underlying intention rather than judging solely by outcomes—and thus highlights different logics of responsibility in early China, prior to the predominance of Confucian moral discourse.

The semantic evolution of *wu* reflects the complexity of ancient Chinese concepts of error. Philosophically, it retains ethical neutrality; legally, it develops precise technical norms; and practically, it establishes incentives for error correction. As *wu* gradually merged with *cuo* (錯) in the Han dynasty, it both enriched the linguistic expression of error and its original legal precision

¹⁶ The *Yuelu Qin Slip* §227 are missing four characters, which, when combined with the *Shuihudi Qin slip* §60, suggest a possible reading: “Nothing is harmed [and the *wu* self-reported] also (毋(“無”)所害[且誤自重]毆(“也”))”.

¹⁷ *Zhangjiashan Han Slips*, *Ernian Lüling*, *Zelü*, §12, includes the crime of “deception (man 謾)”, specifically referring to officials who intentionally conceal or falsify information when writing to or advising the ruler. Due to the subjective malice involved, it is considered a more severe crime than *wu*, and is therefore punished more harshly. Cf. Yates and Barbieri-Low 2015, p. 395.

was diluted. In this respect, preserved Qin-Han slips provide some insights into the historical origins and mechanisms of China's distinctive integration of ritual (*li* 禮) and law (*fa* 法).

3. *Guo* (過) and the Principle of *Yuan Xin Ding Zui* (原心定罪)

In early Chinese discussions of “error” and “fault”, *guo* (過) is a key evaluative term: it often marks a deviation of conduct from what is taken to be right and therefore invites questions of responsibility. Any account of *guo*, however, must begin from a philological starting-point: the term does not carry a single, invariant meaning across texts and periods. In some contexts, it can lean toward an inadvertent lapse; in others it overlaps with *shi* (失) and can even be glossed by it. A crucial anchor is provided by the *Dadai Liji* (大戴禮記, *Shengde*, 12): “*Guo* means *shi* (a lapse/fault). Human feelings and dispositions are such that no one is without *guo*; but if one has *guo* and corrects it, then it is as though one had no *guo*” (過，失也。人情莫不有過，過而改之，是不過也). This formulation should not be treated as an inconvenient counterexample; rather, it sets the parameters within which *guo* must be mapped, precisely because it makes explicit the term's capacity to converge with *shi*.

The same passage is also frequently misread with the assumption that *guo* denotes “intentional error” in the strong sense of deliberate wrongdoing. Much depends on what “intentional” is taken to mean. It is necessary to distinguish at least two senses: (i) acting knowingly or voluntarily, and (ii) acting with malicious intent—doing wrong as one's aim. The *Dadai Liji* saying, with its emphasis on the universality of *guo* (“no one is without *guo*”) and on corrigibility (“if one has *guo* and corrects it...”), sits uneasily with the second sense. In many ethical contexts, *guo* can be imputable—because it names a failure to live up to what one recognises as right—without implying a bad will. It is often closer to an ethically charged lapse, a misalignment with one's better judgement or with a normative orientation of the heart–mind, than to a consciously pursued intention to err.¹⁸

Etymologically, *guo* is tied to movement: passing, crossing, or overstepping a boundary. When extended to “error”, this basic sense is redeployed to mark an overstepping of an accepted limit—of ritual propriety, social obligation, or, in some texts, a measure aligned with a wider order that links

¹⁸ In the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (*Mengchun Ji*, *Gui Gong*, 3), when Guan-Zhong (管仲, 7th century B.C.) was gravely ill, Duke Huan of Qi (齊桓公) asked him if Bao-Shuya (鮑叔牙) could replace him as the governor of Qi. Guan-Zhong rejected this, commenting that Bao-Shuya, being too “upright and straightforward” to “once knowing others' *guo*, never forget” (一聞人之過，終身不忘). This suggests that *guo* involves certain inherent moral flaws.

human conduct and the cosmos. In this respect, *guo* articulates a mode of responsibility that differs both from Greek tragic-philosophical treatments of *ἀμαρτία* and from strictly juridical models that assign liability primarily through objective criteria. Unlike *wu* (誤), which in administrative and legal materials often denotes clerical or computational mistakes, *guo* in many moral discussions carries a stronger normative charge. Yet its direction is not uniform: it may denote an unintentional lapse, a culpable fault, or overlap with *shi*. For that reason, the analysis below treats *guo* as a context-sensitive term whose precise force must be established text by text, in relation to genre, date, and its contrast with neighbouring terms such as *wu*, *shi*, and *jiu*.

The passages in the *Shangshu* (尚書, *Dayumo*, 11), “No *guo* is too great to pardon, no deliberate crime is too small to punish” (宥過無大, 刑故無小),¹⁹ and the *Zhouli* (周禮, *Diguan*, *Diaoren*, 116): “Any *guo* causing harm or death must be judged with regard to public sentiment, even for birds and beasts” (凡過而殺傷人者, 以民成之, 鳥獸亦如之),²⁰ together show that, in this legal context, *guo* is treated as an unintentional fault—one that nonetheless becomes punishable when it results in injury or death. However, Zheng-Xuan (鄭玄, 127–200 A.D.) in his *Zhouli* commentary, illustrates *guo* with the metaphor of “an axe head detaching and causing injury”.²¹ Though seemingly emphasizing *guo*’s unintentional nature, it *de facto* reflects the Han cosmological framework, where artifacts are integral to the order of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity (*sancai* 三才). In this system, artifacts are not mere tools but vessels embodying the *Dao*. The *Zhouli* (*Kaogongji*, 5) states, “All craftsmanship is the work of sages”, underscoring the ideal that human-made objects should align with cosmic order. Thus, an axe handle detaching is not simply an accident but signifies disorder on multiple levels:

¹⁹ Han scholar Kong-Anguo (孔安國, 2nd century B.C.) explains: “*Guo wu* committed, even if serious, should be pardoned; but intentional offenses, no matter how minor, must be punished” (過誤所犯, 雖大必宥; 不忌故犯, 雖小必刑). Tang scholar Kong-Yingda (孔穎達, 574–648 A.D.) further explains: “Those who are pardoned for *guo shi* are forgiven regardless of the severity, but those who intentional offend, no matter how small, must be punished” (宥過失者無大, 雖大亦宥之. 刑其故犯者無小, 雖小必刑之). Here, *guo* refers to unintentional faults, while *gu* (故) refers to intentional wrongdoing. *Shisanjing Zhushu* No. 2: *Shangshu Zhengyi*, p. 110.

²⁰ Zheng-Xuan’s explanation of *guo* as “without intent” is considered right, *Shisanjing Zhushu* No. 4: *Zhouli Zhushu*, p. 421.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 419, 1110. Although Zheng-Xuan’s examples may resemble Antiphon’s spear case, they address different dimensions: Antiphon distinguishes *ἀμαρτημα* (error) and *ἀτύχια* (misfortune) in Greek literature; whereas Zheng-Xuan emphasizes social harm and responsibility, reflecting Confucianism’s focus on ethical order and social relationships in defining *guo*.

- **Technical:** The axe, as an “instrument” (*qi* 器), fails to adhere to the rational “principle of craftsmanship” (工有巧, *ibid.* 6), revealing human inadequacy in mastering material properties.
- **Institutional:** In Han-classical discourse, *qi* (器) are not merely tools but material supports of normative order: “vessels and implements are expected to “store” and embody *li* (禮, ‘ritual’)” (“器以藏禮”, *Zuozhuan, Year 2 of Chenggong*, 2). Within the Han interpretive horizon shaped by portent discourse, a breakdown in an implement can be read as a sign of misalignment in the human order that calls for correction. On Dong-Zhongshu’s model, “When the state falters, disasters manifest” (*Chunqiu Fanlu, Biren Qiezhi*, 4), anomalies “warn” the ruler and prompt repentance and rectification; they function as cues for restoring normative order rather than as value-neutral accidents.²²
- **Ethical:** Though unintended, the disruption of the order of “Heaven—Artifacts—Human” necessitates moral accountability, as *Baihu Tong (Zaibian*, 1) states, “Why do disasters occur? They serve as warnings to the ruler, urging moral awakening”.

Using the axe example, Zheng Xuan turns *guo* from an abstract category of fault into an event legible within Han cosmology, thereby bringing into the same frame the legal rigor of “no deliberate crime is too small to punish” and the ethical flexibility of “no *guo* is too great to pardon.” This reading presupposes what later commentators describe as the “unity of vessels and the Dao” (*Qidao Hetong*, 器道合同): implements and vessels (器) are not value-neutral tools but material bearers of normative order (道), so that their proper functioning signifies alignment with that order, while their breakdown can be read as a sign of misalignment demanding correction.²³ On this basis, *guo* could be adjudicated within a horizon of Heaven–human correspondence, where responsibility is assessed not only by intent and harm, but also by the perceived disturbance of order.

As the *Yijing (Xici Shang*, 8) asserts, “Speech and action are the pivotal mechanisms of a noble person (*junzi* 君子); their movement determines honour and disgrace. Through speech and action,

²² Queen 1996, pp. 42, 234–5. Queen notes that Dong-Zhongshu moves beyond an anthropomorphic story of “Heaven’s chastisement” to a more naturalized account: unvirtuous conduct disrupts yin–yang balance, and human affairs can activate corresponding cosmic phenomena. Portents can thus be cast both as Heaven’s will and as a predictable mechanism of resonance. This makes “anomaly—attribution—rectification” institutionally workable: portents become triggers for political-ethical response, bridging anomalous events and political responsibility through imputable practices of self-correction.

²³ *Qidao Hetong* 器道合同, cf. *Zhuzi Yulei, Zhouzi Zhishu, Dongjing*, 5

the *junzi* moves Heaven and Earth—how can one not exercise caution?” In Confucian thought, *guo* thus signifies a moral subject’s deviation from the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命) in ethical practice.

In the *Analects*, this notion of deviation (*guo*) is characterized by a dual perspective. It criticizes moral weakness in concealing errors: “A petty person invariably covers up his *guo*” (小人_之過也必文. *Analects*, *Zizhang*, 8), while praising moral integrity in openly correcting them: “A *junzi*’s *guo* is like the eclipses of the sun and moon. When they occur, everyone sees them; when they are corrected, everyone looks up to them” (君子_之過也, 如日月之食焉. 過也, 人皆見之; 更也, 人皆仰之. *Zizhang*, 21). The counsel “When one *guo*, do not fear to correct oneself (過則勿憚改. *Xueer*, 9; *Zihan*, 10), underscores the Confucian ideal that confronting mistakes fosters moral growth. Hence, Confucius asserts “Through observing how individuals manage *guo*, we discern benevolence” (觀過, 斯知仁矣. *Analects*, *Liren*, 7). When *junzi*’s *guo* are as transparently observable as a solar or lunar eclipse, the subsequent correction process transforms into an ethical demonstration of “manifesting luminous virtue” (明明德).²⁴

This Confucian practice of publicly addressing one’s mistakes contrasts with Greek city-state trials: Whereas the *Analects* foregrounds self-correction as a visible practice of moral formation, Athenian popular courts stage responsibility as an object of public contestation, where verdicts emerge from adversarial speeches, character assessment, and rhetorical persuasion as much as from rational argument. The *junzi*’s willingness to acknowledge and correct *guo* reflects a dialectic approach to error—rectification is not merely the erasure of moral failure but a reaffirmation of ethical legitimacy. Thus, Confucianism does not seek to systematically dissect the epistemic origins of errors; instead, its primary focus lies on guiding individuals toward morally appropriate responses to their mistakes, thereby aligning actions with ethical principles.

Confucius elevates *guo* as a path to aligning with the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*),²⁵ as seen in his expression—“If I could study the *Yijing* diligently for fifty years, I could avoid **significant *guo***” (五十以學易, 可以無大過. *Analects*, *Shuer*, 17). This resonates with the *Yijing* (*Shuogua*, 1): “Exhausting principle and perfecting human nature to comprehend the Mandate of Heaven” (窮理

²⁴ “The Way of Great Learning lies in manifesting luminous virtue, in renovating the people, and in abiding in the highest good” (大學之道, 在明明德, 在親民, 在止於至善), *Liji*, *Daxue*, 1.

²⁵ The term *guo* (過) is used 32 times in the *Analects*, 11 of which refer to surpassing or exceeding; the remaining 21 instances refer to moral errors.

盡性以至於命). To “know the Mandate of Heaven” (*zhi tianming* 知天命. cf. *Analects*, *Weizheng*, 4) is to understand one’s place within the moral cosmos, while to “revere the Mandate of Heaven” (*wei tianming* 畏天命) is to consciously uphold moral responsibility. Thus, Confucius prioritizes *wei tianming* in the “*junzi*’s three reverences” (*Analects*, *Jishi*, 8), stressing ethical awareness and moral boundaries. His reading of Hexagram Major Excess (*Yijing*, *Xiangzhuan*, *Daguo*, 1), “The *junzi* maintains moral independence and fears nothing” (君子以獨立不懼), reinforces that once understanding *tianming*, the *junzi* transcends external evaluation and adheres to an inner moral standard. This underscores a key Confucian thought: the treatment of *guo* is not merely corrective but a process of internal moral cultivation.

This ethical reasoning gave rise to the judicial principle of *yuan xin ding zui* (原心定罪, ‘retracing heart for guilt conviction’)—that is, assigning guilt by reconstructing the agent’s inner motive, intention, or emotional state rather than judging solely by external outcome,²⁶ articulated by Dong-Zhongshu in *Chunqiu Fanlu* (春秋繁露, *Jinghua*, 5): “In legal cases, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* always **examine the facts of the matter and trace back to the intentions behind actions**” (春秋之聽獄也, 必本其事而原其志).

The principle of tracing intention in adjudication is best situated within the *Gongyangzhuan* (公羊傳) broader moralization of history. As Queen shows, pre-Han lineages transformed the *Spring and Autumn* from a terse chronicle into a canonical text invested with censorial and transformative power, in which historical writing and ethical judgment became inseparable.²⁷ Within this horizon, the *Spring and Autumn* is not merely a record of events but a medium for “rectifying right and wrong,” a role that later Han exegetes such as Dong-Zhongshu explicitly articulate.²⁸ “Tracing intention” in legal cases can therefore be read as one operationalization of this hermeneutic, translating canonical moral authority into forensic reasoning rather than as a timeless, undifferentiated “Confucian” doctrine.

The exemplified cases in Dong-Zhongshu’s *Chunqiu Jueyu* (春秋決獄):²⁹

²⁶ In different texts, “retracing heart for guilt conviction” (原心定罪) also appears under variant formulations, including “determining guilt by tracing intention” (原志定罪), “determining guilt by tracing affective circumstances” (原情定罪), “adjudicating guilt through an inquiry into the heart–mind” (論心定罪), and “determining *guo* by tracing affective circumstances” (原情定過), etc., all conveying the same idea, cf. Liu-Zhengquan 2013, pp. 154–7.

²⁷ Queen 1996, pp. 118–22.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 122.

²⁹ *Taiping Yulan*, chap. 640, 13. Cf. Cheng-Shude 2017, pp. 211–27.

- A son unintentionally injuring his father while attempting to protect him during a dispute, where filial piety mitigates the severity of the outcome.
- Xu-Zhi accidentally causes his father's death when administering medicine, where benevolent intent overrides technical fault.

Such judgments, which seemingly subordinate law to moral reasoning, actually align with the philosophical premise articulated in the *Zhongyong* (*Liji*, *Zhongyong*, 22): “Sincerity is the Way of Heaven” (誠者天之道).³⁰ It indicates that when an individual's motives (*xin* 心) resonate with the way of heaven (*cheng* 誠), specific transgressions become cosmologically pardonable. This judicial reasoning does not simply subordinate law to ritual propriety (*li*); rather, rather, it integrates cosmic principle (*tianli* 天理), human sentiment (*renqing* 人情), and state law (*guofa* 國法) into a cohesive ethical framework.

A classic example of “retracing heart for guilt conviction” (*yuan xin ding zui*) is the Confucian interpretation of Zhao-Dun's (趙盾) alleged regicide (*Zuozhuan*, *Year 2 of Xuangong*, 2): Zhao-Dun repeatedly remonstrated with the tyrannical Duke Ling of Jin (晉靈公) but was forced into exile. His cousin Zhao-Chuan later assassinated the duke, and Zhao-Dun failed to punish him. As a result, Confucius attributed the crime to Zhao-Dun himself. Although Zhao-Dun neither ordered nor committed the murder, the *Gongyangzhuan* (公羊傳, *Year 6 of Duke Xuan*, 1) explains: “Why is Zhao-Dun recorded as having killed his lord? Because he failed to punish the murderer.” Dong-Zhongshu elaborates in *Chunqiu Fanlu* (Yubei, 6): “Therefore, the record clarifies that Zhao-Dun initially had no intent to murder his lord. His fault was that, knowing the sinister plot, he did not decisively withdraw or subsequently punish the assassin.” Here, Dong elevates the moral failure of inaction to a fundamental subversion of the sovereign-subject ethical order.³¹ Therefore, this case exemplifies that Confucian determinations of *guo* consistently prioritize assessing the degree to which an act disrupts the cosmic-moral order, rather than focusing solely on its contravention of statutory laws.³²

³⁰ Cf. *Mengzi*, *Lilou Shang*, 12.

³¹ “Let the ruler be ruler, the minister be minister” (君君臣臣), *Analects*, *Yan Yuan*, 11. It is worth noting that Zhu-Xi criticized this interpretation as an over-extension, asserting that the sage's composition conveys deep meaning, but should not be overly dissected, cf. *Zhu-Zi Yulei*, *Chunqiu*.

³² In the Confucian ethical conception of error, Antigone's dilemma does not exist, as her inner moral conviction would rationalize her act of legal transgression.

The principle of “retracing heart for guilt conviction” reflects an inherent tension in Confucian ethics: upholding the objective order of “no deliberate crime is too minor to punish” (刑故無小) while aspiring to the moral ideal of “no *guo* being too great to forgive” (宥過無大). This tension peaks in the *Yantielun* (鹽鐵論, *Xingde*, 4): “Benevolent intention exempts one from punishment, while malicious intent necessitates condemnation” (志善免罪, 志惡誅行), exposing the challenge of subordinating law to moral judgment.³³ Cases from the *Chunqiu Jueyu* illustrate how this principle often became an elite privilege—when Confucian scholars monopolized the interpretation of “heart”, it evolved into an ideological tool for selective leniency, reinforcing hierarchical authority and legitimizing elite rule. In contrast, Legalist doctrine prioritized absolute accountability, rejecting subjective interpretation: “punishment for *guo* spares no high official” (*Han Feizi*, *You Du*, 5). These opposing approaches—Confucian moral discretion and Legalist objectivism—shaped the dual structure of Chinese legal thought, oscillating between ethical flexibility and rigid enforcement.

In sum, *guo* (過) is not a single, stable concept but a context-sensitive term whose evaluative force is negotiated across genres. In early administrative and legal formulations (e.g. *Shangshu* and *Zhouli*), *guo* tends to be aligned with unintentional fault that nonetheless becomes punishable when it results in injury or death; in Han exegetical horizons shaped by *qi-li* (氣-禮) reasoning and portent discourse, the same category can be redescribed as a disturbance of order that calls for correction rather than a mere accident. In the moral pedagogy of the *Analects* and the *Yijing* tradition, *guo* becomes a visible site of self-cultivation: not simply something to erase, but something to acknowledge and amend as a demonstration of ethical credibility. Against this backdrop, *yuan xin ding zui* is best understood as a hermeneutic technique—canonically articulated in Dong-Zhongshu and situated within Gongyang approaches to the moralization of history—that translates the “tracing of intention” into forensic reasoning. The cases examined here show both the normative ambition and the structural risk of this move: it can integrate motive, harm, and order into a coherent account of responsibility, yet it also opens a space in which interpretive authority over the “heart-mind” may become a vehicle for selective leniency. Rather than treating *guo* as inherently “unintentional” or inherently “moral”, I provide a restrained conclusion: *guo* names a family of fault-judgments whose meaning leans differently depending on textual setting, and whose decisive question is less “what

³³ Cf. *Lunheng*, *Fuxu*, 5; *Hanshu*, *Xuexuan Zhuo Zhuan*, 16.

happened” than “how responsibility is to be allocated once intention, consequence, and order are brought into the same frame.”

4. *Sheng* (眚) and *Shi* (失)

The concepts of *sheng* (眚) and *shi* (失) function like the two handles of a bronze vessel, embodying moral elasticity and technical rationality in ancient Chinese understandings of error. Together, they uphold the integration of rites and law, balancing ethical flexibility with legal rigidity.

Unlike *cuo* (錯), *sheng* has a unique usage in early texts. *Shuowen Jiezi* defines *sheng* as “eye disease causing cataracts”, a sense that readily supports metaphorical extension to impaired moral perception: when circumstances cloud judgement, the resulting fault is treated with epistemic leniency.³⁴ The *Shangshu* (*Yushu*, *Shundian*, 6) states: “The disaster of *sheng* is widely pardoned, while the intended transgression must be punished” (眚災肆赦，怙終賊刑). Kong-Anguo (孔安國, 2nd century B.C.) interprets *sheng* as an unintentional *guo*, warranting leniency if harm results but severe punishment if malice persists.³⁵

Kong-Yingda (孔穎達, 574–684 A.D.) further elucidates: “In *Chunqiu*, the term ‘*si sheng*’ refers to treating the person who is allowed to make *guo* with leniency. ‘*Si*’ refers to leniency, and ‘*sheng*’ refers to *guo* ... If the *guo* causes harm, even though it may fit the description of a crime, if the original intent was not deliberate, it should be pardoned with leniency. For minor [offenses], forgiveness should be granted; for major [offenses], a reprieve should be given ... If one relies on deceit and tricks, deceiving and wronging others, and persists in doing so without repentance, such individuals should be punished by death. Minor offenders should be punished, and major offenders should be executed” (春秋言肆眚者，皆謂緩縱過失之人，是‘肆’為緩也，‘眚’為過也 ... 過而有害，雖具狀合罪，而原心非故如此者，當緩赦之；小則恕之，大則宥之 ... 怙恃奸詐，欺枉時人，以此自終，無心悔改，如此者當刑殺之。小者刑之，大者殺之）。³⁶ This interpretation illustrates that the nature of *sheng* is unintentional, no matter what external harm caused, it must be treated with leniency and forgiveness.

According to the *Zuozhuan* (*Year 33 of Xigong*, 2), Duke Mu of Qin (秦穆公) took personal responsibility for failed military campaigns, calling them “the *guo* of mine” (孤之過), while

³⁴ *Sheng* (眚) also means disaster or misfortune, but this is not discussed here.

³⁵ *Shisanjing Zhushu* No. 2: *Shangshu Zhengyi*, p. 77.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 82.

attributing his generals' failures to *sheng*, declaring: "I shall not let a single *sheng* obscure one's great virtue" (孤不以一**青**掩大德). This distinction underscores *guo* as a moral or strategic error with clear subjective responsibility, whereas *sheng* refers to faults arising from unforeseen circumstances, incurring lighter moral judgment. Confucius' assertion, "If citizens have *guo*, the blame lies with only one person (their ruler)" (百姓有**過**,在予一人. *Analects*, *Yaoyue*, 1), reinforces this, highlighting the ruler's moral accountability.

The *Shangshu* (*Zhoushu*, *Kanggao*, 5), further distinguishes *sheng* from anti-*sheng* (非**青**): "Minor crimes which are **anti-sheng** ... cannot be ignored" (小罪**非青** ... 不可不殺). Here, anti-*sheng* denotes intentional crimes demanding severe punishment, whereas *sheng* signifies unintentional offenses deserving leniency. This distinction, established in Shang-Zhou legal thought, persisted into the later Confucian principle of "retracing heart for guilt conviction". While Qin-Han laws rarely used *sheng* explicitly, its essence was integrated into terms like *guo shi* (過失), forming a theoretical foundation for distinguishing intent from accident in Chinese legal thought.

By contrast, *shi* (失) is more technical, originally meaning "lost" or "dropped" before extending to denote deviations or failures. It often combines with *guo* and *wu* as in *guo shi* (過失) and *shi wu* (失誤), referring to technical or result-oriented mistakes. Pre-Qin and Qin-Han legal texts, particularly excavated slips, frequently use *shi* to denote administrative or judicial errors. For example, the *Shuihudi Qin Slips* records *shi xing* (失刑), meaning judicial errors in sentencing—over-penalizing minor crimes or under-penalizing major ones. These were generally treated leniently, distinguishing them from intentional judicial misconduct, such as *bu zhi* (不直, 'injustice') or *zong qiu* (縱囚, 'deliberately releasing prisoners').³⁷

The *Zhangjiashan Han Slips* (*Ernian Lüling*, *Julü*, §112) clarifies this further: "If an official fails to investigate thoroughly when prosecuting someone, it constitutes *shi*. If an official intentionally charges a minor offense as a severe one, it constitutes *bu zhi*" (劾人不審, 為**失**; 其輕罪也而故以重罪劾之, 為**不直**). This distinction highlights *shi* as errors from negligence or misjudgment, rather than deliberate misconduct. Additionally, a legal inquiry in *Shuihudi Qin Slips* (*Falü Dawen*, §48) records: "If the penalty is a shield and the fine is 5,000 coins, what should be the punishment for this *shi*? A reprimand" (當貲盾, 沒錢五千而**失**之, 可(“何”)論? 當**誅**). According

³⁷ see *Shuihudi Qin Slips*, *Falü Dawen* §95, p. 115.

to Yu-Zhenbo's research on the value of shields in the *Yuelu Qin Slips*, one shield is equivalent to approximately 384 coins, and one armor is worth 1,344 coins, giving a ratio of 1:3.5.³⁸ Ren-Zhonghe, however, argues that the ratio between the shield and armor should be 1:2, with one armor valued at 1,344 coins, meaning one shield is worth 672 coins.³⁹ Despite the significant financial discrepancy, the penalty was merely a “a reprimand” (諍), reflecting a lenient stance on non-deliberate errors. The *Zhangjiashan Han Slips* (*Ernian Lüling, Julü*, §95–6) further specifies: “Those who are not intentional, but *shi* in judgment, shall be dealt with by redemption” (其非故也, 而失不審者, 以其贖論之), reinforcing the Qin-Han legal system's cautious approach to unintended mistakes.⁴⁰

In sum, while both *sheng* and *shi* denote unintentional faults, they serve distinct functions. *Sheng* pertains to external or accidental errors, emphasizing moral leniency and ethical correction, aligning with Confucian “retracing heart for guilt conviction” principle. *Shi*, in contrast, focuses on technical precision, defining and correcting errors in judicial and administrative practices, reflecting Legalist emphasis on standardization. These two frameworks embody the dual “ritual and law integration” governance model of ancient China: The Confucian model, guided by *sheng*, centered on intention and moral education, and the Legalist model, represented by *shi*, prioritizing procedural accuracy.

5. *Jiu* (咎)

In early Chinese discourse, *jiu* (咎) can be treated as a term for culpable fault that is expected to invite misfortune—a mode of attribution grounded in a moral–cosmic horizon in which Heaven and the human world are thought to interact. It links wrongdoing to adverse outcome through a form of moral causality that does not depend on a direct, traceable chain between action and consequence, but on a broader logic of normative correspondence. In this respect, it differs both from the tragic idiom of Greek fatality and from modern legal approaches, which seek to establish responsibility through demonstrable relations of harm, proximate causation, and foreseeability.

³⁸ Yu-Zhenbo 2010, p. 37. According to the *Yuelu Qin Slips* §957 and §970, it confirmed: one armor unit equals 1,344 coins, equivalent to 2 *liang* (兩) plus 1 *chui* (垂) of gold; one shield unit equals 2 *chui* of gold; 12 horse armors (馬甲十二) total 23,040 coins, with one horse armor worth 1,920 coins, equivalent to 3 *liang* plus 1 *chui* of gold. Thus, one *liang* of gold is worth 576 coins, and one *chui* is worth 192 coins; thereby one shield unit valued at 384 coins.

³⁹ Ren-Zhonghe and Piao-Meiyu 2008, p. 30.

⁴⁰ The *Xuanquan Han Slips* (*Qiulü*, §I0112) unearthed in Dunhuang also discuss the issue of *shi bu shen* (失不審) in judicial investigation, but the final sentence reads, “to be redeemed by half the amount” (以其贖半論之).

Originally, *jiu* referred to disasters resulting from personal failings. While *Shuowen Jiezi* defines it simply as “disaster”, this overlooks its deeper ethical dimension — the attribution of responsibility. In the *Analec*s (*Bayi*, 21), “What is past do not *jiu*” (既往不咎) implies absolving past faults, while *Daodejing* (9; 46) states, “Wealth and pride bring their own *jiu*” (富貴而驕, 自遺其咎) and “No greater calamity than not knowing contentment, no greater *jiu* than wanting too much” (禍莫大於不知足; 咎莫大於欲得), linking misfortune to internal arrogance and greed. Similarly, *Mozi* (*Feiming Xia*, 3) asserts “If evil intentions are indulged, Heaven will impose *jiu*” (既防(“放”)凶心, 天加之咎), reinforcing the idea that disasters stem from wicked thoughts. Thus, *jiu* establishes a direct moral cause-and-effect relationship between wrongdoing and its consequences.

This retrospective logic of moral attribution makes *jiu* (咎) in some respects comparable to the Greek *ἄτη*. Both terms are used to explain misfortune in relation to divine or heavenly agency, and both trace calamity back to a fault within the agent—whether a moral deficiency or an excessive desire that has become destructive. The difference lies in how responsibility is configured. In Greek accounts, *ἄτη* is often legible through the agent’s visible frenzy or delusion, and it stages responsibility as a tension between divine infliction and the agent’s own impulse and choice. Early Chinese discourse on *jiu*, by contrast, focuses less on a psychology of madness than on Heaven’s response to disrupted human relations, stressing an intrinsic connection between ethical disorder and the misfortune that follows.

From a cognitive perspective, *jiu* aligns more closely with *ἀμαρτία*. *Lüshi Chunqiu* (呂氏春秋, *Zhongxia*, *Chile*, 1) states: “Everyone knows what they know, but they do not know how they know it. To know how one knows is knowing *Dao*; to not know how one knows is to abandon treasure. Abandoning treasure will inevitably lead to *jiu*” (人莫不以其知知, 而不知其所以知. 知其所以知之謂知道, 不知其所以知之謂棄寶. 棄寶者必離其咎). Although people acquire knowledge through sensory perception and experience, they fail to recognize that knowledge originates from the fundamental *Dao*. This logical framework parallels Plato’s *Protagoras* (345–57), where misfortune is traced to ignorance of the good. Read alongside *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus’s *jiu*—patricide, incest, and the ruin that follows—is not merely the aftermath of his deeds, but arises from a conjunction of ignorance (of his true situation and the oracle’s force) and a defiant confidence that he can outrun what is ordained. Framed in this way, a Daoist-inflected perspective does not replace

Greek categories, but offers a heuristic contrast that brings into focus how ignorance and resistance to a larger order can be narratively configured as the source of calamity.

Beyond moral philosophy, *jiu* plays a key role in divination and Confucian ethics. The *Yijing* mentions *jiu* 159 times, with “non-*jiu*” (無咎) as a central ideal for divinatory results. For instance, line 3 of the Hexagram Qian (乾, ‘heaven’) states: “The noble one spends the day in diligent effort, evening cautious and aware, and thus, though in danger, is **non-*jiu***” (君子終日乾乾, 夕惕若, 厲, 無咎). Confucius interprets this as: “The noble person advances virtue and cultivates achievements. Loyalty and sincerity are the means to advance virtue; refining speech and establishing truthfulness are the means to secure achievements. Knowing when to reach the goal and reaching it – this allows one to grasp opportunities; knowing when to conclude and concluding it – this allows one to preserve righteousness. Therefore, being in a high position without arrogance, being in a low position without anxiety – thus, diligent and cautious according to the times, though in danger, there will be **non-*jiu***” (君子進德修業, 忠信, 所以進德也, 修辞立其誠, 所以居業也. 知至至之, 可與幾也, 知終終之, 可與存義也. 是故居上位而不驕, 在下位而不憂, 故乾乾因其時而惕, 雖危無咎矣. *Qiangua, Wenyan*, 3). Similarly, in line 4 of the same hexagram: “One leaps into the abyss, but with non-*jiu*” (或躍在淵, 無咎). Confucius interprets this as: “Being high or low is not constant, but this does not mean acting improperly. Advancing or retreating is not fixed, but this does not mean abandoning the group. The noble person advances virtue and cultivates achievements, desiring to act in accordance with the times, therefore there is non-*jiu*” (上下無常, 非為邪也. 進退無恒, 非離群也. 君子進德修業, 欲及時也, 故無咎. *Qiangua, Wenyan*, 4).

“Non-*jiu*” as a middle level of divinatory result, in many of the 64 hexagrams, *Yijing* provides instructions on how to achieve this state. It suggests that non-*jiu* is not a matter of fate but the outcome of moral cultivation. This emphasis on self-cultivation is echoed in the *Analects* (*Shuer*, 17): “If I could study *Yijing* diligently for fifty years, I could avoid significant *guo*”.⁴¹ This reveals that understanding of “time” (knowing when to conclude and concluding it) and “position” (knowing when to reach the goal and reaching it), enables moral integrity in the ever-changing circumstances, thus transcending the entanglement of specific misfortunes and blessings. When the composed acceptance, “the noble lives with *Yijing* and waits for Mandate of Heaven” (君子居易以俟命. *Liji*,

⁴¹ The “significant *guo* (大過)” here should be understood as the *jiu* (咎) in the *Yijing*.

Zhongyong, 14) is linked with the cautious wisdom, “trembling, as if walking on the edge of a deep abyss” (戰戰兢兢, 如臨深淵. *Shijing*, *Xiaoya*, *Xiaomin*, 6), it effectively continues the practical wisdom tradition established by the concept of non-*jiu*, transforming external norms into an internalized principle of moral self-discipline.

This moral vigilance gave rise, within the Confucian tradition, to a distinctive conception of moral responsibility. Zengzi’s statement, “I examine myself three times a day” (*Analects*, *Xueer*, 4), is fundamentally directed toward averting the advent of *jiu* 咎 through sustained moral self-scrutiny; Mencius’ practice of “returning to oneself and being sincere” (反身而誠. *Jinxin Shang*, 4) goes further, transforming “being free of *jiu*” from a divinatory formula into a philosophy of self-cultivation. What is noteworthy, however, is that this transformation did not dissolve the cosmological dimension of *jiu*. As Sarah A. Queen has pointed out, Western Han *Gongyang* scholars criticized Qin law not merely for its harshness, but more importantly because it confined judgment to outward acts and failed to address the ethical disposition of the human mind and the motivations behind conduct. By contrast, the Confucian mode of judgment embodied in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* insists that responsibility must be traced through both motivation and circumstance.⁴² It follows that Confucian judgments of *guo* 過 and *jiu* are not based solely on outcomes; rather, they require that the agent’s inner disposition, the situational context of action, and the moral order as a whole be considered together.

More importantly, this orientation toward “determining guilt by probing the mind” was not a form of purely ethical introspection detached from cosmology. Queen further argues that Han Confucianism consistently maintained an ultimate continuity between Heaven and humanity, and that “knowing Heaven” was not external to self-cultivation but was achieved precisely through the unfolding of human moral nature.⁴³ Zhao-Lu’s study of Western Han discourse on *taiping* 太平 usefully supplements this point. In the context of Han classicism, anomalies and disasters were not understood merely as natural phenomena, but as outward manifestations of political and moral failure; *taiping*, likewise, was not simply a description of social stability, but a comprehensive ideal requiring the coordination of virtue, ritual propriety, the Way of Heaven, and kingly governance.⁴⁴

⁴² Queen 1996, pp. 143f.

⁴³ Ibid. pp. 250, 254.

⁴⁴ Zhao-Lu 2019, pp. 14, 24–6, 37–8.

Accordingly, within Dong-Zhongshu's framework of the resonance between Heaven and humanity, disasters were consistently interpreted as Heaven's response to "failures of the state".⁴⁵ The ruler's practice of "turning inward and cultivating self-reflection" was significant precisely because it did not entail passively awaiting the transfer of Heaven's mandate; rather, through moral self-correction, it sought to restore the continuity between political order and cosmic order. In this sense, the Confucian understanding of *jiu* differs both from the Legalist logic that assigns responsibility primarily according to consequences and from the structures of guilt found in Greek tragedy, which revolve around pollution, fate, and retribution. What it foregrounds is not how an individual bears already accomplished consequences after calamity has occurred, but how a moral subject, through constant self-examination and self-correction, preserves a desirable state of harmony among the self, society, and the Way of Heaven. That is why "being without *jiu*" becomes an ideal mark of the exemplary person: it signifies not only the success of moral practice, but also the fact that the subject has not yet ruptured his relation to a larger order.

In sum, *jiu* (咎) is understood not as a single doctrine of "punishment", but as a family of attributions that connect fault, consequence, and order across distinct textual settings. In ethical discourse it marks misfortune as morally intelligible—calamity is read as following from arrogance, excess, or ill-intention—while in cosmological and political idioms it can become a register through which disorder is diagnosed and correction demanded. In the *Yijing* tradition, moreover, *wu jiu* (無咎) does not function as a fatalistic promise but as a practical standard: it names the attainable state in which action is calibrated to time, position, and circumstance so that misfortune is averted or contained through cultivation. These strands do not reduce *jiu* to "outcome-based" responsibility; rather, they repeatedly bring intention, judgement, and the maintenance of normative order into the same explanatory frame. The comparative payoff is therefore limited but precise: *jiu* can be juxtaposed with Greek *ἄτη* as a way of attributing calamity to agency, yet it tends to stabilise responsibility through Heaven–human resonance and moral causality rather than through a tragic psychology of delusion.

⁴⁵ Hanshu, *Dongzhongshu Zhuan*, Tianren Sance. Cf. Puett 2002, pp. 289–95, 298–300.

6. The Daoist Ethical Concept of Error

The Qin–Han legal texts discussed above represent an administrative attempt to stabilise responsibility through explicit categories of fault and graded penalties. By contrast, in Analects-based ethical discourse, assessment often turns on the agent’s disposition and the appropriateness of response after the lapse—hence maxims such as “What is past do not *jiu*” (*Analects*, *Bayi*, 21) and “The greatest good is to correct one’s *guo*” (*Zuo Zhuan*, *Year 2 of Xuangong*, 2). Together these strands foreground an “active” orientation toward error—either by institutional classification and sanction, or by moral self-correction and renewed alignment with normative order. It is against this background that a Daoist treatment of error can be brought into focus, since Daoist texts often question the very impulse to fix, blame, and forcibly rectify, and instead probe how such efforts may themselves generate further disorder.

Daoism adopts a disengaged, passive stance on error, or rather, a naturalistic perspective that rejects moral intervention by human will. This is exemplified in Zhuangzi’s allegory of “Boring Holes into Chaos” (*Yingdiwang*, 7):

南海之帝為儵, 北海之帝為忽, 中央之帝為渾沌。儵與忽時相與遇於渾沌之地, 渾沌待之甚善。儵與忽謀報渾沌之德, 曰“人皆有七竅, 以視聽食息, 此獨無有, 嘗試鑿之”。日鑿一竅, 七日而渾沌死。

The ruler of the Southern Sea was called *Shu* (Haste), the ruler of the Northern Sea *Hu* (Sudden), and the ruler of the central region *Hun-tun* (Chaos). *Shu* and *Hu* from time to time came together for a meeting in the territory of *Hun-tun*, who treated them very generously. *Shu* and *Hu* discussed how they could repay his kindness. “All men” they said, “have seven holes for seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing. But *Hun-tun* alone has none. Let us try boring some for him.” So every day they bored one hole; but on the seventh day *Hun-tun* died.

Zhuangzi, renowned for his use of allegory to convey deep philosophical insights, presents the actions of *Shu* (‘Haste’) and *Hu* (‘Sudden’) as a metaphor for the civilizing or moralizing process.⁴⁶ In Confucianism, rites and music carve out moral apertures, while Legalism establishes institutional

⁴⁶ Zhuangzi profoundly knows the usage of allegory, “Nine-tenths of the content could be understood by allegorical narratives, which employ external analogies to articulate philosophical discourse” (*Zhuangzi*, *Yuyan*, 1).

ones through laws and regulations. Though seemingly benevolent, such interventions may disrupt the natural order. The *Daodejing* (18) asserts, “When the great *Dao* is abandoned, benevolence and righteousness emerge; when wisdom appears, great hypocrisy arises”, echoing Zhuangzi’s critique. He reinforces this in *Qiwulun* (7): “The clarity of right and wrong is where the *Dao* to be diminished” (是非之彰也，道之所以亏也), stressing that binary moral judgments fracture the holistic order of nature.

Daoism’s skepticism toward human intervention pervades Zhuangzi’s texts. Fables such as the Butcher Ding following the “way of heaven” in his skillful but effortless dissection of the ox (*Yangshengzhu*, 2), the oak tree with “no utility” (*Renjianshi*, 5), and the self-cultivation practices of Yan-Hui (*Dazongshi*, 9; *Renjianshi*, 2), all support the Daoist ideal: true moral order arises from harmony with nature, not imposed will. This embodies the Daoist principle of “non-action yet nothing left undone” (無為而無不為).⁴⁷ Only by avoiding artificial interference and contrivance can significant errors and calamities be prevented. The Daoist “*wuwei*”(無為, ‘non-action’) does not advocate for neglecting errors but urges reflection on humanity’s tendency to impose arbitrary moral distinctions. As Zhuangzi observes: “The sage’s stillness is not because stillness is good, but because it is still” (圣人之静也，非曰静也善，故静也。 *Tiandao*, 1). True goodness, he suggests, lies not in adhering to imposed moral standards but in returning to the natural state of being.

Yang-Zhu (楊朱, 4th century B.C.), another representative Daoist, embodies an extreme form of individualism. His ethical stance of “not plucking a single hair” (一毛不拔), advocates that individuals should never sacrifice personal well-being for externally imposed moral obligations:

楊朱曰：“伯成子高不以一毫利物，舍國而隱耕。大禹不以一身自利，一體偏枯。古之人，損一毫利天下，不與也，悉天下奉一身，不取也。人人不損一毫，人人不利天下，天下治矣。”禽子問楊朱曰：“去子體之一毛，以濟一世，汝為之乎？”楊子曰：“世固非一毛之所濟。”禽子曰：“假濟，為之乎？”楊子弗應。

Yang-Zhu said: “Bocheng Zigao would not sacrifice even a single hair to benefit others, so he abandoned his kingdom and retired to farming. The Great Yu did not seek personal gain, and thus his body became emaciated. The ancients neither gave up a single hair to benefit the world, nor accepted the world’s offering for personal gain. If everyone refrained from

⁴⁷ Cf. Zhuangzi, *Zhibeiyou*, 1; Zhuangzi, *Gengsangchu*, 16; Zhuangzi, *Zeyang*, 10; *Daodejing*, 37; *Hanfeizi*, *Jielao*, 2; *Lüshi Chunqiu*, *Sishunlun*, *Youdu*, 5.

sacrificing even a hair, and no one sought to benefit the world at their own expense, the world would be in order.” Qinzi asked Yang-Zhu: “If plucking a single hair from your body could save the world, would you do it?” Yang-Zhu replied: “The world cannot be saved by a single hair.” Qinzi said: “But if it could, would you do it?” Yang-Zhu did not respond.

— *Liezi, Yangzhu*, 11.

Yang-Zhu ultimately adopts “refusing to respond” (弗應) as his final stance. It remains unclear whether his silence should be read as a tacit denial, or whether he simply does not know how to answer. Perhaps Yang Zhu is not unable to answer, but instead calls into question the legitimacy of the question itself: is an ethical inquiry that demands the sacrifice of individual interest for the sake of the collective truly a form of moral practice, or rather a form of moral violence? From a Daoist perspective, the question is already marked by a coercive logic that imposes violence upon the individual. However one construes Yang-Zhu’s silence, it nonetheless brings into view a distinctive Daoist way of approaching “error” at the ethical level.

Yang-Zhu’s maxim of “neither harming a single hair nor benefiting a single hair” (一毫不損, 一毫不利) in fact embodies a Daoist tendency, in dealing with ethical “fault,” to privilege the preservation of one’s natural integrity and freedom from interference, while refusing moral obligations externally imposed. Zhuangzi’s parable of the “useless tree” (*Xiaoyaoyou* 6–7) forms a nuanced echo of Yang-Zhu’s “not pulling out a single hair” (一毛不拔): the former preserves natural life precisely through its uselessness, while the latter rejects any sacrifice of the individual demanded in the name of collective benefit, affirming the absolute value of life in itself. Together they point toward a central Daoist subject—that genuine morality should not be built upon the distortion of life’s original nature. Laozi’s claim that “He who values his body as the world may be entrusted with the world; he who loves his body as the world may be charged with the world” (貴以身為天下, 若可寄天下; 愛以身為天下, 若可托天下, *Daodejing* 13) offers a deeper theoretical grounding for Yang-Zhu’s radical individualism: only by fully respecting the wholeness of each living being can a truly enduring order under Heaven be established.

Yang Zhu’s radical individualism can be read less as a political provocation than as a Daoist diagnosis of how “error” is produced by moral overreach. Mencius’ famous rebuke—“Yang’s acting for oneself is tantamount to having no ruler” (楊氏為我, 是无君也, *Tengwengong Xia*, 14)—is

revealing precisely because it treats refusal of imposed obligation as an ethical and political fault. From a Daoist perspective, however, the Confucian programme of “extension of the self to others” (推己及人) does not simply extend care; it institutionalises a norm that compels the individual to measure himself against external expectations, thereby turning ethical life into a field of enforced alignment. Legalist governance radicalises the same impulse in another idiom: the stability of order demands that even minor deviations (down to miswritten characters in administrative practice) be disciplinarily corrected. In both cases, “error” is not merely identified; it is *produced* by the very mechanisms that claim to regulate it—through the conversion of life into an object of moral and juridical calibration.

This is why Zhuangzi’s counsel in *Yangshengzhu*—“For goodness, do not seek proximity to fame; for evil, do not seek proximity to punishment” (為善無近名, 為惡無近刑. *Yangshengzhu*, 1)—is not ethical indifference but a reorientation of what counts as fault. The point is to sever action from the twin external coordinates of fame (名) and punishment (刑), because once conduct is governed by reputation or fear of penalty, the agent is already drawn into a heteronomous economy in which the preservation of life’s integrity becomes impossible. Daoist “error”, in this sense, names not only wrong action but the deeper misalignment that arises when moral and legal compulsion—often justified by collective interest—invades the space of natural life and erodes the dignity of the person.

Daoism’s profundity lies in its deconstruction of all concepts of error, revealing that the distinction between “right” and “wrong” is ultimately a product of power discourse. Just as *Hun tun* had no intrinsic need for seven orifices, human nature is not inherently bound by rites and laws. From a Daoist perspective, “error” is merely a symptom of civilization. Yang-Zhu’s silence is the ultimate resistance to this flawed logic—any hypothetical moral proposition presupposes an anthropocentric value system. Only by refusing to respond can one preserve the wholeness of one’s natural integrity.

When the *Ernian Lüling* (*Zhangjiashan Han Slips*, *Zeilü*, §34–8) dictates “beating a father leads to decapitation”, the law rigidly codifies human relationships into absolute norms. When Confucius proclaims “What is past do not *jiu*” (*Analects*, *Bayi*, 21) moral judgment still operates within implicit value assumptions. Daoism, contrarily, seeks to dissolve these assumptions that

constrain the spirit through practices such as “sitting in forgetfulness (*zuowang* 坐忘)”, “heart-mind fasting (*xinzhai* 心齋)”, and culminating in the state of “casting off the body and discarding intelligence” (墮肢體, 黜聰明. *Zhuangzi*, *Dazongshi*, 9). This radical dismantling reflects a complete deconstruction that only by transcending the cognitive frameworks of benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, and law can one return to the primordial state of “uniting with the great thoroughfare” (同於大通. *Ibid.*), the spontaneous harmony of cosmic totality.

Daoist materials therefore re-situate the problem of “error” at a level prior to moral and legal classification. Against Qin–Han schemes that stabilise responsibility through codified categories and penalties, and against Confucian programmes that convert *guo* into a visible site of self-correction and ethical legitimacy, Zhuangzi and the Yang-Zhu chapter of the *Liezi* interrogate the very impulse to fix, blame, and forcibly rectify. The parable of boring the seven openings into Chaos makes the point in compressed form: interventions undertaken in the name of improvement can themselves destroy the integrity they claim to complete. Yang-Zhu’s refusal to answer pushes the same critique to its limit: when a moral question already presupposes a coercive economy of sacrifice, silence becomes a way of refusing the framework rather than merely refusing the act. Read together, these texts do not deny that actions have consequences, but they warn that “error” is often generated by imposed distinctions—between right and wrong, fame and punishment, duty and transgression—that invite heteronomous compliance and erode the wholeness of life. Daoist ethics thus treats the gravest fault not as deviation from an external norm, but as the disturbance of *ziran* (自然) through contrivance and compulsion; its alternative is not moral laxity, but a discipline of non-imposition—*wuwei*, *xinzhai*, and *zuowang*—through which agency is returned to a mode of responsiveness that does not manufacture disorder in the act of correcting it.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the terms related to “error”, *cuo* (錯, ‘deviation’), *wu* (誤, ‘error’), *guo* (過, ‘transgression’), *sheng* (眚, ‘fault’), *shi* (失, ‘lapse’), and *jiu* (咎, ‘culpability’) to explore their cognitive structure and evolutionary logic. Unlike Greek philosophy, which systematically traced error’s epistemological origins through logical analysis, ancient China developed a distinct, internally coherent framework focused not on theoretical abstraction but on the ethical evaluation and pragmatic correction of errors.

The semantic shifts of these terms map a cognitive trajectory in ancient China's conception of error. *Cuo* transitioned from physical "interlacing" to conceptual "deviation from norms"; *wu* and *shi* shifted from technical mishaps to legal classifications; *jiu* evolved from divinatory prognostication to moral causality. The interaction of these concepts in excavated documents and transmitted classics reveals a persistent negotiation between "heavenly *Dao*" and "human *Dao*".

The divergent interpretations of the concept of error by Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism constitute three dimensions of ancient Chinese ethics. Confucianism, through "retracing heart for guilt conviction", integrates moral judgment into judicial practice, constructing an ethical order centered on self-cultivation and the rectification of *guo* to "manifest luminous virtue" (明明德). Legalism, by quantitative standards of *wu* and *shi*, creates a technical system of governance, outlining a rational framework of rule in the bamboo-slip legal documents. Daoism, through the metaphor of "the death of Chaos", deconstructs the imposed binary of "right and wrong", offering a fundamental critique of civilization's disciplinary structures. These seemingly opposing perspectives collectively shaped the internal equilibrium of "ritual-law synthesis" (禮法合治): Confucian ethics infused institutions with humaneness, Legalist statutes demarcated boundaries for morality, and Daoist wisdom reserves flexibility within the framework.

In conclusion, the terminological system and ethical conceptions of error in ancient China exhibit rich internal tensions and pluralistic interactions. On one hand, Confucianism and Legalism, with their proactive engagement with the world, seek to correct errors and maintain social order through moral education and institutional discipline. On the other hand, Daoism, from its contemplative withdrawal, exposed the limitations and potential harms of ethical discipline itself, cautioning against excessive human moral intervention. Through mutual critique and partial synthesis, these traditions jointly shaped sociopolitical institutions and, over time, gave rise to the enduring tensions that shape China's ethical order.

III. Progeny-eating in Greek Literature: A Tragic Error Combined with Incest

“Of the brothers (Atreus and Thyestes), one was a killer, the other an eater, but the worse pollution belonged to the eater.”

— Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 104.

The story of Thyestes, a grim tale of vengeance and progeny-eating from Greek mythology, revolves around the bitter feud between Thyestes and his brother Atreus over the throne of Mycenae.¹ Although the tradition survives in multiple versions, with differences in motivation, sequence, and resolution, a core sequence recurs: Thyestes’ sexual betrayal within the royal household (often his affair with Aerope, Atreus’ wife) triggers Atreus’ retaliatory stratagem, culminating in the notorious banquet at which Thyestes unknowingly consumes the flesh of his own sons. The myth circulated widely in antiquity and proved especially attractive to tragic poets. In fifth- and fourth-century Athens alone, more than ten tragedies on the Atreus–Thyestes story are attested, yet none of these survives; much of what can be reconstructed therefore depends on later summaries, quotations, and philosophical or rhetorical meta-discourse rather than on the tragic scripts themselves.

This is precisely why Plato’s and Aristotle’s references are valuable as witnesses to the story’s cultural salience and to the kinds of ethical work it was made to perform. In *Laws* 838c, when Plato evokes acts “hated by the gods” (*θεομισήες*), he cites “some Thyestes and Oedipuses” (*ὅταν ἢ Θυέστας ἢ τινὰς Οἰδίποδας*) alongside the less familiar Macareus. In this context, Thyestes and Oedipus appear in the plural, underscoring their status as paradigmatic figures for such extreme transgressions. Aristotle, likewise, names Thyestes together with Oedipus in *Poetics* 1453a as exemplars of the sort of eminent figure who falls from good fortune to misfortune “not through vice but through *ἀμαρτία*”, thereby confirming the story’s importance for later reflection on tragic causality.

The banquet remains the myth’s most infamous centerpiece, and it invited sharply divergent readings: while Plato treated it as a paradigm of tyrannical desire and the entanglement of power

¹ For Thyestes, cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1191f, 1219f, 1583–1611; *Ap.E* 2.1–15; Eur. *El.* 699–736; *IT* 812–7; *Or.* 811–5, 997–1007; Hyg. *Fab.* 82–8; and Seneca’s play *Thyestes*. For mythical information, cf. Frazer’s notes on Apollodorus’ works, 1921; Tarrant 1985, pp. 38–43; Gantz 1993, pp. 543–7; Bömer’s commentary (Heidelberg 2006) on Ovid, *Met.* 6.173; Boyle 2017, pp. lxix–xxii; Hard 2020, pp. 421–5. For successful reconstructions of Thyestes in the literature of Greece and Rome, cf. Marti 1947; Hook 1992; Haley 2018b. For more information on the Greek dramas about Thyestes, see Appendix A.

with cannibalism; early Stoic thinkers could recast Thyestes as a figure whose wisdom remains untainted by what he suffers. In Varius' hands he could even be made a vehicle for Augustan heroism; and in Seneca's *Thyestes*—the only tragedy on this subject to survive in full—he appears at once sensual and moralising, indulging appetites while voicing Stoic-sounding maxims.²

Such later works do not merely multiply interpretations; they also reveal how the incest–progeny-eating nexus became an enduring framework for thinking about responsibility through the concept of *μίασμα* ('pollution') and its correlative *κάθαρσις* ('purification').³ In its basic sense, *μίασμα* denotes a condition of defilement that compromises the integrity of persons, households, or spaces and is imagined to "spread" beyond the immediate agent, drawing others into its consequences; *κάθαρσις* names the practices—ritual, juridical, or enacted at the level of narrative by which that condition is removed and a disturbed order is re-stabilized. In tragic plots, this vocabulary matters because it allows a wrongdoing to be framed not only as a lapse of judgement but as a disturbance that demands resolution at the level of the community and the cosmos. The analytic assumption frequently made in modern scholarship—that the "more polluting" act is therefore the "graver" one—is, however, not self-evident; it requires demonstration in each narrative setting, and it is precisely on this point that the Thyestean banquet becomes programmatic.

A well-known formulation of this assumption appears in Burkert's *Homo Necans*, "of the brothers (Atreus and Thyestes), one was a killer, the other an eater, but the worse pollution belonged to the eater".⁴ I partially accept Burkert's insight, but a correction is needed: the eater does not necessarily bear *greater* pollution so much as a more complex one—one that is distributed across intention, ignorance, kinship structure, and the ritual-narrative mechanisms through which the act is made intelligible and demands response.

One tempting inference, however, requires close investigation: the claim that progeny-eating is "more polluting" (and therefore "more guilty") than killing risks collapsing the myth into a simple

² For Plato, *Resp.* 571b, 574c, 619b, cf. Hook 2005, pp. 22–6. For Stoics, Diog. Laert. 7.121, cf. Hook 2005 (with Cynics), pp. 26–38; For a reconstruction and analysis of Varius' *Thyestes*, cf. Leigh 1997. For a Stoic interpretation in which Thyestes is portrayed as a virtuous man, cf. "truly humble" in Marti 1945, p. 240; "an innocent virtuous victim" in Poe 1969, pp. 360, 374; Schiesaro 2003, pp. 147–9. For Thyestes' stoic values as superficial and his guilt, cf. Tarrant 1985, pp. 446–70; Boyle 1983, pp. 199–228; 2017, p. 117; Davis 1989, p. 429; Burnett 1998, pp. 11–2. More philosophical interpretation of Thyestes will be discussed in chap. V. iii.

³ On *μίασμα* and *κάθαρσις* as an interdependent pair across Greek religious and civic life, see Golden 1976; Parker 1983; Meinel 2015. Their meanings and applications vary by domain (ritual practice, drama, politics, and public law), and the present chapter uses them in a deliberately limited sense as analytical terms for the narrative production and resolution of defilement.

⁴ Burkert 1983, p. 104; cf. Maharam 2006.

moral scale, as if cannibalism were intrinsically more defiling than homicide. Parker's account is related here because it shows both the plausibility and the limits of such a hierarchy: while cannibalism, incest, and kin-slaying are repeatedly treated as extreme sources of *μίασμα*;⁵ homicide—even within the family—could, in many contexts, be addressed through established rites of purification and reintegration.⁶ This comparative distinction, though not without basis, may nevertheless obscure the particular narrative mechanics of Thyestes' banquet, where pollution is not a static property of an act but something produced, distributed, and exploited within a structure of concealment, recognition, and retaliatory design.

Using structuralist approaches, Vernant and Detienne have shown that Greek narratives of anthropophagy cannot be treated as a single type: similar scenes of “eating human flesh” can be made to do very different work.⁷ In some contexts anthropophagy figures as the collapse of civilized restraint under extreme pressure;⁸ in others it is framed through sacrificial or quasi-ritual logic;⁹ elsewhere it functions as a polemical device for marking alterity and producing the “barbarian”;¹⁰ and, in a few exceptional readings, it can even be rhetorically neutralized so that the eater's moral status remains intact.¹¹ These variations matter here because they warn against collapsing Thyestes' banquet into a simple moral scale in which “cannibalism” automatically equals maximal *μίασμα*.

Since Detienne, however, the focus of scholarship has largely shifted toward the “identity of the eater”, emphasizing oppositions such as eater versus non-eater, or eater versus eaten.¹² As a

⁵ Parker 1983, pp. 98, 305. Bremmer agreed with Parker's opinion on cannibalism, Bremmer 1988, p. 51. For a wide-ranging discussion of work on Greek pollution and purification, cf. Parker 1983; Petrovic 2016; on pollution and purification in Greek tragedy, cf. Meinel 2015. For error and pollution in Antiphon's *Tetralogies*, see Williams 2008, pp. 59–62; Mann 2020, pp. 132–48.

⁶ Parker 1983, pp. 114, 135, 366–92.

⁷ Detienne 1979, p. 54. For arguments that reported cannibalism may in some contexts be historically credible, see Abler 1980, pp. 291–3; Petrey 2005, pp. 113–23; Whitehead 2008. On archaeological and historiographical discussion of cannibalism reports in Herodotus and Thucydides, see Murphy and Mallory 2000, pp. 388–94; Hornblower 1991, p. 356. For arguments that “cannibalism” is frequently a rhetorical trope and that many reports are unreliable, see Arens 1979; Hughes 1991; Goldman 1999, pp. 1–26; Obeyesekere 2005.

⁸ On famine cannibalism in Greek sources and its historical framing, see Angel 1945, pp. 311–2; Garnsey 1988, pp. 29, 36; Gipson 2022, pp. 157–66.

⁹ On Dionysiac ritual and the problem of anthropophagy, see Porph. *Abst.* 2.8.3. Cf. Dodds 1960, pp. xviii–xix; Detienne 1979, pp. 60–4, 86–91; Hughes 1991, pp. 88–9. On the Lykaia (Lycaean) festival tradition, see Ap.B 3.8.1; Porph. *Abst.* 2. 53. 3–56. 10; Pl. *Resp.* 565D–E; *Minos*, 315B–C; Paus. 8.38.7. Cf. Burkert 1983, 84–93; Hughes 1991, pp. 97–107; Gipson 2022, pp. 81–7. On Cronus' progeny-eating, see Hes. *Theog.* 459–505. Cf. Cook, *Zeus* 2.1: 548–9; Versnel 1989, pp. 121–52; Gipson 2022, pp. 40–5, 55–62.

¹⁰ Arens sharply argues that historical accounts of cannibalism in the ancient world are entirely based on an alienated imagination, essentially a writing technique to vilify the enemy or to distinguish civilized people from the barbaric, cf. Arens 1979. The response to this argument in Classical studies primarily focuses on Herodotus' accounts and interpretations of non-Hellas, cf. Hartog 1988, pp. 3–11; Thomas 2001, pp. 213–4; Cartledge 2002, pp. 56–9; Mitchell 2007, p. 29; Erskin 2013, pp. 14–34.

¹¹ See chap. II. n. 2.

¹² Detienne profoundly influencing subsequent study patterns with his exploration of the “eater” identity, cf. Detienne 1979, pp. 53–67; Versnel 1989, pp. 121–52; Hook 2005; Weimer 2022. For recent studies somewhat

result, analyses of Thyestes' banquet often foreground the act of eating itself—its alleged motivations (tyrannical desire, *akrasia*, powerlessness), its polluting force, or its possible exoneration—while giving less sustained attention to what changes when the victim is not a generic “human” but one's own offspring.¹³ The child as victim is frequently subsumed under the broader category of “cannibalism” thereby effacing the symbolic distinctiveness of the act.

Progeny-eating clearly belongs to the wider field of cannibalism, but it has a much greater symbolic significance. What is consumed is not merely human flesh, but the embodied continuation of the household: the children who secure lineage, inheritance, and the continuation of the family line. To make a father ingest his offspring therefore does more than violate a food taboo. It turns kinship itself into the instrument of retaliation, inverting the basic expectation that progeny is protected and nurtured, and concentrates a distinct kind of ethical shock that “cannibalism” *per se* does not necessarily entail.

Recognising the distinction between eating human flesh and eating one's own progeny opens up a set of questions about the Atreus–Thyestes narrative. Why is vengeance realised through forced progeny-eating rather than through straightforward killing? Why must the consumed victims be Thyestes' sons—what, symbolically and structurally, is achieved by targeting the line of descent itself? How does the myth use the concept of *μίασμα* so that this particular act is construed as exceptionally defiling? And is the implied hierarchy—whereby the progeny-eater bears a more complex form of pollution than a killer—specific to the Thyestes tradition, or does it point to a broader pattern in Greek representations of kinship transgression?

These questions become sharper when placed against a broader symbolic background. Psychology and anthropology have long recognized symbolic associations between food and sex, or more specifically, the link between taboo food and taboo sexuality, and classicists have also explored this topic.¹⁴ However, we should not be satisfied with abstract parallels; rather, we must ask which

developed beyond the theme of “the identity of cannibal” to examine Thyestes' progeny-eating, cf. Schiesaro 2003; Haley 2018A.

¹³ For *akrasia* (‘lack of control’), cf. Kovacs 2007. For powerlessness, cf. Rose 1987; Halm-Tisserant 1993, pp. 94–101; For power, Weimer argues that the act of cannibal symbolizes the ultimate form of dominance in ancient Greece, but it is pity that he does not address how the tension between Thyestes, as the weaker party engaging in cannibalism, and Atreus, as the dominant party forcing the former to partake, fits into his theory, Weimer 2022. For tyrannical desire and sinlessness, see chap. II. n. 2. For the nature of pollution, see chap. II. n. 5.

¹⁴ For psychological approaches, see Freud 1953, vol. VII, p. 159, 198. For anthropological frameworks (especially the linkage between food taboo, kinship, and sexuality), see Lévi-Strauss 2021, p. 105; for comparative case studies, see Labby 1976, 171–9 (western Pacific islands); Detienne 1979, 58–9 (ancient

specific food taboos are linked to which sexual taboos, and how. This chapter proposes that within the Greek literary tradition, a profound symbolic interaction exists between progeny-eating and incest. These two acts are conceptually linked and, within tragic plots, can function reciprocally as instruments of revenge or as means of resolving *μίασμα*—that is, restoring a disrupted kinship order through a narrative logic of *κάθαρσις*.

Such questions—largely overlooked in studies of cannibalism—constitute the central focus of this chapter. In the following sections, I will argue that:

1. Incest, under certain narrative conditions, can precipitate progeny-eating as a punitive response. Read through the ancient magical principles of similarity and opposition, the structural features of progeny-eating show that the avenger does not merely retaliate but deliberately imitates and inverts the ethical structure of incest, turning the victim’s kinship violation back upon his lineage in a retributive form.

2. Greek texts repeatedly organize incest and progeny-eating through a shared symbolic vocabulary of generation and embodiment. Terms and images of “sowing” (*ἀροῶν*, e.g. Thgn. 582), “seed” (*σπέρμα*, e.g. Eur. *Or.* 552), “seed-land” (*ἄρουρα*, *ibid.*), “belly” (*νηδύς*, e.g. Eur. *Bacch.* 527), and “pollution” (*μίασμα*) provide a semantic field in which kinship transgression is conceptualised as a disorder of reproduction and incorporation—whether through illicit conception or through the literal re-incorporation of offspring as food.

3. Incest can also function reciprocally as vengeance for—more precisely, as a narrative means of resolving—the *μίασμα* generated by progeny-eating, suggesting a bidirectional logic rather than one-way causality (e.g. Thyestes and Pelopia; Clytemnestra and Aegisthus).

1. Structural Inversion and Sympathetic Logic: Incest as the Premise of Progeny-eating Revenge

Revenge in the Atreus–Thyestes cycle is not merely a matter of violence; it is a matter of design. Atreus’ punishment is calibrated as a banquet in which Thyestes consumes his own offspring, rather than a direct execution or simple slaughter. Why does the narrative make progeny-eating the chosen

European tribal practices); Wolf 2014, 85–91 (selected materials from the Americas and Africa). In Classical scholarship, Moreau (1979) offers an early sustained study of the triangulation of parricide, incest, and cannibalism in Greek literature; for further discussion, see Burkert 1983; Parker 1983, pp. 98, 326; Hughes 1991; Burnett 1998, pp. 1–32, 177–91, esp. 11, 188; Hook 1992, 2005.

method of retaliation, and what does this choice reveal about the way Greek tragic plots render kinship violation intelligible? The issue at stake is the logic by which retaliation is shaped into an act that appears proportionate to the disturbance it seeks to redress.

The precipitating breach is Thyestes' incestuous violation within the royal household—often his affair with Aerope, Atreus' wife. Here “incest” should be understood not only in the narrow sense of blood relations, but also as a kinship transgression within the *oikos*, including violations of affinal bonds that destabilize the household's relational order and inheritance structure. In Athens, marriage between certain cousins could be socially acceptable (e.g. within the *ἐπίκληρος* framework);¹⁵ by contrast, appropriating a kinsman's wife (or violating the household boundary she represents) threatens the integrity of the kin network and generates precisely the kind of internal confusion and boundary-collapse that tragic narratives exploit.¹⁶ What the revenge responds to, therefore, is not merely sexual misconduct, but a rupture that confuses roles, loyalties, and succession within the household.

To analyse how this rupture is made to “call for” progeny-eating, this section proposes the transgression as having three analytically separable features: voluntariness (*ἐκουσία*), knowledge/awareness (*γνῶσις*), and concealment (*κρύψις*). These Greek terms are used here not as technical labels drawn from a single ancient source, but as heuristic descriptors that capture recurring emphases in Greek ethical and tragic discourse: whether an act is chosen, whether it is done with awareness, and whether the transgression is concealed. The claim to be tested is that Atreus' revenge is structured as a deliberate counter-form that targets and reverses these dimensions: it is not simply “more violent,” but differently configured.

At this point, the argument must be stated as a working hypothesis: Atreus' banquet can be read as a ritualized inversion that follows a logic often analysed, in comparative terms, under the heading of “sympathetic” or “analogical” magic—especially the principles of similarity and opposition (like

¹⁵ In Athens, when a household lacked a male heir, a woman as an *ἐπίκληρος* (heiress) could be required to marry her nearest agnatic kinsman so that the property remained within the same *ἀγχιστεία* (the circle of close relatives). Eligible candidates included an uncle or a cousin—an arrangement that shows, at an institutional level, that marriage within a certain range of cousins was not only permitted but could be treated as a legitimate means of preserving property and lineage continuity, cf. Cox 1998; Patterson 1998; MacDowell 1978.

¹⁶ On adultery and the “appropriation” of another man's wife as an offence that violates household boundaries and destabilizes the *oikos* (rather than merely a private sexual lapse), see Cohen 1991; Hunter 1994; Carey 1997. For the ways tragedy intensifies such boundary-violations within kinship structures—moving beyond blood relations to include affinal transgression and *oikos* disorder, see Zeitlin 1996, Foley 2001.

affects like; opposites repel or undo each other).¹⁷ On such a reading, progeny-eating is not an arbitrary escalation but a retaliatory design that mirrors the original kinship violation while inverting its ethical pattern, thereby producing an act that claims to resolve the disturbance it answers. Whether and how Greek texts themselves support this kind of structural logic is what the following close readings will establish.

Πρώταρχον ἄτη: A Primal Tragic Error Marked by Voluntariness and Awareness

Aeschylus, in *Agamemnon*, through Cassandra’s prophetic lament insists that the Erinyes’ harsh, discordant “song” still through this cursed house: its blood-guilt remains unpurged, and the cycle of retaliation continues unbroken. Cassandra, moreover, traces this ἄτη (‘ruinous delusion’) back to incest:

τὴν γὰρ στέγην τήνδ’ οὐποτ’ ἐκλείπει χορὸς
 ξύμφθογγος, οὐκ εὐφωνος· οὐ γὰρ εὖ λέγει.
 καὶ μὴν πεπωκὼς γ’, ὥς θρασύνεσθαι πλέον,
 βρότειον αἶμα κῶμος ἐν δόμοις μένει,
 δύσπεμπτος ἔξω, συγγόνων Ἐρινύων·
 ὕμνοῦσι δ’ ὕμνον δώμασιν προσήμεναι
πρώταρχον ἄτην, ἐν μέρει δ’ ἀπέπτυσαν
 εὐνὰς ἀδελφοῦ τῷ πατοῦντι δυσμενεῖς.

‘For this house is never without a chorus,
 sounding in unison, yet not sweet-voiced; for it speaks not well.
 And indeed, having drunk—so as to grow more bold—
 mortal blood, a revel in the halls remains,
 hard to send outside, (a revel) of kindred Erinyes.
 They hymn a hymn, seated close beside the house,
 the primal ἄτη; and in turn cast their loathing upon

¹⁷ For “sympathetic/analogical magic” and the principles of similarity and opposition, see Tambiah 1968, pp. 175–208; Mauss 2001(1902), pp. 78–91; Frazer 2002 (1922), pp. 15–7; Edmonds III 2019, pp. 83–4, 401; Watson 2019, pp. 186–7. For Anthropology of ancient magic, cf. Malinowski 1974; Tambiah 1990. For applications and discussion of magic in Greek materials, see Nock and Stewart 1972; Graf 1997; Christopher 1999; Iles-Johnston 1999; Flint 1999; Ogden 2008; Watson 2019; Edmonds III 2019. For a brief review of scholarship of Greek magic, cf. Watson 2019, pp. 1–3. For a good summary about the history of the debate about magic and religion, cf. Fowler 2000, pp. 317–43. For discussions of the materiality of magical practice and its objects in the ancient world, cf. Boschung and Bremmer 2015.

a brother's bed, hostile to the man who violated it'

— Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1186–1193.

As argued in Chapter 1, *ἄτη* is not a technical term for culpable “error” but a distinctly poetic idiom for ruin: it names a catastrophic trajectory in which divine pressure and human disposition intertwine, and in which disaster acquires momentum beyond any single deed. Read in this light, Cassandra’s *πρώταρχον ἄτην* does not point to a discrete offence to be assessed in the vocabulary of *ἁμαρτία*, *ἀδικία*, or *αἰτία* (‘cause’); it marks an originating breach that “stays in the house” and keeps reproducing itself. What she identifies as primal is precisely a violation of kinship and marriage boundaries—“a brother’s bed”—so that incest appears not as one transgression among others but as the initiating fissure through which the Atreids’ ruin is carried forward within the house from one generation to the next.¹⁸

Within this framework, Aeschylus’ use of *ἄτη* (1192) frames Thyestes’ transgression as ruin that is at once divinely inflected and grounded in voluntary choice (*ἐκουσία*). Gantz conjectures, on the basis of fragments from Euripides’ *Cressai*, that in that play Aerope may have seduced Thyestes out of passion rather than being seduced by him as part of a political plot.¹⁹ Yet Aeschylus’ emphasis points in another direction: the primary locus of agency—and thus of culpability—lies with Thyestes. On this reading, the incest is not merely an *ἁμάρτημα*, a mistake arising from ignorance, but a knowing transgression—closer to a deliberate *ἀδίκημα*.

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* draws a sharp line—already discussed in Chapter I—between wrongs grounded in ignorance and wrongs grounded in awareness: an *ἁμάρτημα* is committed *δι’ ἄγνοιαν*, whereas an *ἀδίκημα* presupposes the agent’s *εἰδέναι* what he is doing and its ethical status (*Eth. Nic.* 1135b12–26; cf. 1110b15). On this account, the decisive issue in Thyestes’ liaison with Aerope is not priority of initiative but assent: whatever the narrative configuration, participation “with knowledge” makes him answerable for the breach. In that sense, the offence is best framed not as a mere inadvertent misstep but as a failure of self-restraint—*ἄκρασία*, the condition in which

¹⁸ In most scholars’ interpretations of *ἐν μέρει*, the Erinyes remain the subject throughout, identifying “the first origin” (*πρώταρχον*) as Thyestes’ incest, Fraenkel 1962, p. 546; Raeburn and Thomas 2011, p. 195.

¹⁹ Gantz 1993, p. 546. Alexander, the Tyrant of Pherae, was emotionally moved to tears by Theodorus’ depiction of Aerope, Aelian, *HM*, 14. 40. While the specific authorship of the drama remains unclear (Euripides, Agathon, or Carcinus), the emotional narrative of Aerope is evidently a central element of the play.

one acts against better knowledge under the sway of irrational desire—which Aristotle identifies (1148a3) not merely as a form of error (*ἀμαρτία*), but as a form of vice (*κακία*).

Thus, Thyestes' primal *ἄτη* can be understood as an *ἀδίκημα* which is committed voluntarily and knowingly. It is not error in the benign or tragic sense of misstep, but guilt in the ethical sense of transgression. His incestuous act is both the origin of the curse and the ethical justification for the elaborate ritual of revenge that follows.

In examining narratives of incest and progeny-eating, such as those involving Tereus, Clymenus and Polytechnus, we find a consistent pattern: incestuous relations are invariably carried out knowingly and voluntarily.

Sophocles composed the tragedy *Tereus*, fragments of which Fitzpatrick has reconstructed using existing excerpts and *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 3013 (combined with Hesiod *fr.* 312 MW).²⁰ Finglass further clarified the drama's content and popularity based on the newly identified *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 5292.²¹ While narratives regarding Tereus circulated widely, as evidenced in Hesiod, Sappho, and Aeschylus, no complete accounts are extant before Apollodorus and Ovid.²² The sources agree that Tereus, King of Thrace, betrays his wife Procne by raping her sister Philomela, subsequently cutting out her tongue to secure her silence. Upon learning the truth through a woven message from Philomela, Procne avenges herself by killing their son, Itys, and serving him to Tereus as a meal. Discovering this horror, Tereus chases the sisters, until all three are metamorphosed into birds—Procne into a nightingale, Philomela into a swallow, and Tereus into a hoopoe.

Details vary across versions, yet a critical element persists throughout: Tereus commits incest without concealing his identity. Some versions foreground his agency, presenting the act as driven by an unrestrained, frenzy-like impulse rather than by accident or coercion. *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 3013 specifically notes “but he, not keeping the pledge, deflowered the virgin” (*ὁ δὲ τὰ πῶς[τὰ οὐ φ]υλάττειας διεπαρθένεν[σεν]*).²³ The phrase “*οὐ φυλάττειας*” (‘not keeping’) suggests an internal struggle against desire, ultimately leading to ethical surrender. Apollodorus similarly recounts, “seized by

²⁰ *TrGF*⁴, F581–95. Fitzpatrick 2001.

²¹ Finglass 2016, pp. 62ff.

²² Aesch. *Ag.* 1141–5, *Supp.* 58–67. Hes. *Op.* 568. Sappho, *Fr.* 135. Ap.*B* 3.14.8. Ovid, *Met.* 6.424–674. Cf. Conon, *Narr.* 31; Hyg. 45. There are two 5th century B.C. red-figure vase paintings related to Tereus, one is in Villa Giulia, 3579, the other is in Louvre, G147. For the mythical information of Tereus, cf. Gantz 1993, pp. 239–41; Hard 2020, pp. 322f.

²³ This papyrus likely summarizes the plot of Sophocles' *Tereus*, Finglass 2016, pp. 61f.

desire for Philomela, he violated her as well” (*Φιλομήλας ἐρασθεὶς ἔφθειρε καὶ ταύτην*, 3.4.8.), The participle “ἐρασθεὶς” (‘seized by desire’) frames Tereus’ act as driven by a consuming, tormenting desire rather than by concealment or accident. Ovid, in *Metamorphoses*, vividly externalizes Tereus’s pathological obsession—bribing servants, offering lavish gifts, promising Philomela a kingdom, and threatening war against Athens (6.460ff). Ovid captures the uncontrollable lust of Tereus, whose “breast can no longer hold the flames locked inside” (*nec capiunt inclusas pectora flammas*, 466), characterizing it with the phrase “seized by love” (*captus amore*, 465), depicting Tereus as a slave of his desire.

The story of Tereus appears as an archetype and is echoed in similar tales such as those of Clymenus and Polytechnus.²⁴ Both Clymenus’ incest with his daughter Harpalyce and Polytechnus’ violation of his sister-in-law Chelidon are committed knowingly and voluntarily. Such acts not only carry profound ethical guilt but also incur divine disapproval. Thus Euripides, in describing Clymenus’ incestuous act, imagines Zeus’ anger as so extreme that it disrupts the sun’s course (*El.* 727–36).²⁵ Aeschylus makes the same point in Cassandra’s vision of the Erinyes in the *Agamemnon*: they are hostile (*δυσμενεῖς*) to the one who “tramples” kinship boundaries, and the initiating breach is described as the violation of “a brother’s bed” (*εὐνὰς ἀδελφοῦ τῷ πατοῦντι*, *Ag.* 1193). Regardless of whether the aorist is gnomic, punctual, or performative, the force of *ἀπέπτυσαν* (‘they spat away’) is clear: it presents the Erinyes as repudiating the violated marriage-bed in a gesture of emphatic aversion—a type of “spitting out” that can carry apotropaic overtones in Greek idiom.²⁶ In this sense, voluntary and knowing incest (or incest-like *oikos* transgression) exceeds mere violation of human *νόμος*: it is precisely the sort of act Plato also classifies as *θεομισῆς*, “hated by the gods” (*Laws* 838c).

If the recognition of kin identity—who one is sleeping with, and within what kinship relation—is a decisive condition for the revenge-logic that later culminates in progeny-eating, then concealment or misrecognition should interrupt that logic. The Thyestes–Pelopia episode offers a

²⁴ For Clymenus Hyg. *Fab.* 206, 238, 239, 242, 246, 253; Parth. *Amat. narr.* 13; Nonnus, *Dion.* 12.70. The story of Polytechnus is a metamorphoses version of Tereus, *Ant. Lib. Met.* 11.

²⁵ Euripides also mentions “the land of Amon becoming arid, with rain clouds fleeing northward”, seemingly metaphorizing the incest among Egyptian rulers as bringing decay to Egypt. In *Orestes* 1000–5, the miraculous reversal of the sun, originally rising in the west and setting in the east, permanently changes to the present pattern. For more information about sun going backward miracles, see chap. V. n. 7.

²⁶ e.g. Eur. *Hipp.* 613f; *Hec.* 1276; *Tro.* 667f; Ar. *Pax* 528; Theoc. *Id.* 6.39. Cf. Gow 1952, pp. 125f; for Spitting as an aversion, see Watson 2019, p. 111.

suggestive test case: in the version where Thyestes has intercourse with Pelopia without disclosing who he is, the act is framed not as the opening of a new cycle of retaliatory progeny-eating but as an offence whose consequences unfold along a different trajectory. The third section of this chapter will return to this scene in detail and assess how far concealment functions, in tragic narrative, as a structural constraint on the incest–progeny-eating nexus.

Comparable instances may likewise be found in Near Eastern mythic traditions, including Lot’s intoxicated incest with his daughters (*Genesis* 19: 31–8), Tamar’s veiled incest with Judah (*Genesis* 38: 14–26), and the Assyrian princess Smyrna’s concealing herself for twelve nights with her father resulting in the birth of Adonis (Ap.B 3. 14. 4, Ovid, *Met.* 10. 298–514). These acts did not provoke extreme punishment due to at least one participant’s ignorance regarding the other’s true identity. Aristotle’s concept of error helps clarify this point: for the individual unaware of the other’s identity, the act theoretically resembles an ordinary sexual encounter. Despite the incestuous nature, ignorance of the situation (*ἄγνοια*) categorizes the act as error (*ἀμαρτία*), not deliberate transgression (*ἀδικία*).²⁷

For the participant who knows the other’s identity, concealing that identity is a way of managing shame (*αἰδώς*): it masks the relational impropriety that would otherwise make the act immediately shameful. Incestuous desire in tragedy often arises within intimate household relations yet is met with rejection or condemnation once it becomes “seen” as such (Hippolytus’ refusal of Phaedra is a paradigmatic case). In this sense, Agathon’s line is relevant because it links wrongdoing to the gaze of those whose recognition matters: “When I think to do something which is not right, I find shame in the eyes of my loved ones.”²⁸ Shame is activated not by an abstract rule alone, but by being exposed to the eyes of one’s family and friends. Williams insightfully observes that “the basic experience connected with shame is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition.”²⁹ Concealment, then, does not make the act ethically “right”; rather, it suspends the social and affective mechanism by which incest is recognised by the parties involved.

This observation supports a more precise claim about the incest–progeny-eating nexus. When incest is committed knowingly and voluntarily between persons whose kin relationship is fully

²⁷ For the association between ignorance and error, see chap. I, p. 15.

²⁸ “ἀδικεῖν νομίζων ὄψιν αἰδοῦμαι φίλων”, *TrGF*¹, 39 F 22; cf. Eur. *Hipp.* 246.

²⁹ Williams 2008, p. 78. For his distinction between *αἰδώς* and *αἰσχύνη*, see Williams 2008, p. 194, n. 9.

recognizable, it is more readily configured as a culpable violation that can provoke an externally imposed act of retaliation—progeny-eating being the most extreme example in the Atreid tradition. By contrast, when the kinship relation is not recognized at the time of the act, the catastrophe is not thereby diminished, but its tragic form changes. Oedipus is not forced to consume his children; instead, once the truth is recognized, the plot moves toward self-punishment and self-destruction. The difference, therefore, is not between more severe and less severe outcomes, but between a revenge structure grounded in recognizable culpability and a tragic structure in which suffering is turned inward through delayed recognition.

The Concealment of Transgression

The third key feature of transgression is the deliberate concealment (*κρύψις*) of the act. Such concealment does not mitigate the offence after the fact; on the contrary, it intensifies it by adding a further layer of wilful evasion. When incest occurs without any obscurity of identity, each party stands fully exposed to the other as kin, and both the responsibility and the shame of the act are immediately fixed. Neither can then be displaced onto ignorance, diluted through ambiguity, or undone by silence. Shame thus becomes a condition of shared and inescapable knowledge between the participants; in this context, concealment can only function as a futile attempt to cover over what both already know.

As Seneca's *Thyestes* (650–4) suggests, incest operates like a latent toxin: its force lies less in public exposure than in the lasting corruption it sets in motion. Precisely because such violations remain concealed, they can take root within the family in ways that are both harder to detect and harder to remedy. Concealment of transgression is therefore not a morally neutral tactic of evasion but a mechanism of intensification: it allows defilement to remain active before any cleansing can occur, and it enables what begins as a private violation to extend beyond the household and implicate the community. In other words, *κρύψις* does not block the contaminating force of incest; it is one of the means by which that force persists and spreads.³⁰

Yet concealment does not defer crisis indefinitely. In tragic plots, hidden transgression is typically driven toward disclosure, and Aristotle's discussion of recognition (*ἀναγνώρισις*) offers a

³⁰ On incest as a major source of *μίασμα* and on the necessity of public recognition and ritual management for containing such defilement, see Parker 1983, pp. 1–17; 97–100, 326.

useful vocabulary for describing this turning-point. In the *Poetics* (1452a30–32), recognition is not merely the identification of a person or fact; it is the moment at which a relationship is reclassified—often from *φιλία* (‘friendship’) to *ἔχθρα* (‘hostility’)—and the plot turns accordingly, often toward a reversal (*περιπέτεια*) in fortune.³¹ What concealment postpones is precisely this reclassification. Once the truth becomes known, the agent is forced to face the act no longer as a private indulgence but as a wrong against the kinship order. The result is a concentrated pathos: injury and defilement long held in suspension return at once, with sudden clarity, at the moment of recognition.

As a mechanism by which they are prolonged, *κρύψις* displaces guilt and shame from the moment of transgression to a later “moment of disclosure”, in which they can finally become manifest. It is precisely at that moment that the repressed disgrace returns with destructive force and becomes the ethical pivot that through which retaliation acquires its claim to justification. Thus, *κρύψις* is no longer external to revenge: it is absorbed into the logic of vengeance itself, forming part of its structure and supplying the necessary condition for the subsequent sequence of disclosure and punishment.

A comparable form of concealment of transgression can be seen in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Here *κρύψις* is not merely a tactic of covering up a deed after the fact; it begins before the transgression itself—at the level of the oracle: Oedipus seeks to prevent an unbearable piece of knowledge from becoming the truth that governs his life. The oracle states plainly that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. Confronting such a claim would require sustained inquiry and ethical self-scrutiny—above all, a willingness to ask what “father” and “mother” truly mean and how one ought to live under that knowledge. Oedipus instead seeks to neutralise the prophecy by pushing it out of view. His flight from Corinth is not only avoidance but a practical form of concealment: he treats the oracle as something to escape from geographically rather than face epistemically.

This logic of concealment then intensifies. The more the prophecy is treated as something to be covered over, the more it becomes the hidden centre around which action turns. What is suppressed does not disappear; it accumulates. The play suggests that the city’s plague is the

³¹ Else denies this kind of discovery of identity, citing the Orestes-Clytemnestra example as a counterinstance, where the son kills his mother while definitely knowing who she is. He argues that what should be discovered is the agent’s error, Else 1957, pp. 379, 445f. On the other hand, Belfiore discusses the role of discovering kin or the transformation of kin identity in tragic theory from the perspective of the social nature of kinship, Belfiore 1992, pp. 366f.

symptom of this accumulation: a pollution sustained by what has not been brought into the open, named, and addressed. In this light, *κρύψις* is not merely personal psychology but a civic condition. Laius' death remains unresolved because the truth has been deferred; responsibility has not been fixed; the disturbance therefore persists and spreads.

Oedipus' own way of speaking sustains this deferral. When he vows to pursue the killer, he speaks as if the crime were wholly external to him. Yet he has long known—at least in outline—that he once killed an older man and his attendants on the road, and he has not previously foregrounded this episode as a possible point of inquiry. That omission need not be read as calculated deception; it is enough to see it as another expression of *κρύψις*: the mind's tendency to keep dangerous knowledge compartmentalised so that life can continue. The tragedy's movement from *κρύψις* to *ἀναγνώρισις* consists precisely in the collapse of this compartment. As inquiry advances, what was kept separate—the oracle, the roadside killing, the marriage, the plague—converges into a single intelligible pattern. Recognition is thus not merely the discovery of an identity but the end of concealment itself: the moment when what has been covered over becomes unavoidable, and the accumulated pollution can no longer be deferred.

In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Agamemnon's concealment of his plan to sacrifice his daughter from Clytemnestra offers another, more politically inflected form of *κρύψις*. Here concealment is not simply the hiding of a fact, but the hiding of where responsibility lies. Torn between his paternal role and his obligations as commander, Agamemnon struggles to acknowledge that sacrificing his daughter is a political choice made by his own will. Instead, he repeatedly rewrites the causal chain by appealing to divine will, prophecy, and the pressure of the army, recasting his decision as something "forced" upon him. *κρύψις* thus becomes a mechanism of moral evasion.

Yet such concealment does not lessen culpability; it sharpens the tragedy's paradox. Precisely because the true intention is hidden, Iphigenia and Clytemnestra are struck mid-course by a discovery of the truth: the father shifts from protector to perpetrator, and the household's structure of trust collapses, intensifying both grief and anger. In other words, *κρύψις* delays the recognition of the act's ethical meaning, but when that recognition finally arrives, it produces a more devastating reversal in both feeling and judgment.

More importantly, this attempt to “manage responsibility” through concealment also prepares the ground for later revenge. Agamemnon’s sacrifice creates an irreparable fracture within the family and, from Clytemnestra’s perspective, marks him as the agent who has violated the kin order. Against that background, her union with Aegisthus in the tragic tradition—whether or not it counts as incest in the strict sense—can be read as a retaliatory transgression directed at the *oikos* itself: betrayal of the marriage-bed answers paternal kin-killing, and a renewed disruption of household order answers Agamemnon’s prior violation of kinship obligation. Thus, *κρύψις* does not neutralise the ethical burden of Agamemnon’s sacrifice. The structure of “delay and disclosure” ultimately opens a pathway for retaliatory kinship transgression.

In Seneca’s *Thyestes*, *κρύψις* is even more thorough and more cruel. Atreus’ revenge is almost an institutionalised use of concealment. He not only hides the truth of progeny-eating in the design of the banquet, but deliberately stages a scene of delayed knowledge: Thyestes, entirely unaware, is led step by step into eating the flesh of his own sons, until Atreus himself reveals the truth at the end. In that instant Thyestes is driven from joy to despair, undergoing an extreme form of recognition (*ἀναγνώρισις*).

On this basis, Thyestes’ incestuous transgression follows an ethical configuration defined by three features: voluntariness (*ἐκουσία*), awareness (*γνώσις*), and concealment (*κρύψις*). These operate as an interlocking sequence in which each element intensifies the next. Voluntariness establishes basic answerability. Awareness deepens that answerability: the agent acts in full knowledge that the other party stands within a prohibited kin relation, so culpability lies not only in the deed itself but in the deliberate violation of a known boundary. Concealment then extends and aggravates the offence. To choose knowingly and still to hide the act signals recognition of its defiling character while postponing the moment of exposure and response; what might have been confronted, named, and contained is deferred, allowing the pollution to persist and accumulate until it erupts as crisis.

Taken together, voluntariness, awareness, and concealment form a closed circuit with internal tension: they are ethically nested within one another, so that incest becomes not merely a deed but a structural offence. It violates kinship roles and normative order, and it also corrodes the conditions

under which the wrong can be openly spoken and dealt with, driving the household into prolonged defilement and enforced silence.

Progeny-eating: A Reversed Magical Ritual

In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, through Aegisthus' recollection of past events, we can clearly discern three key features of the progeny-eating scene:

τὰ μὲν ποδὴρῃ καὶ χερῶν ἄκρους κτένας

ἔθρυπτ' ἄπωθεν [.....]

[.....]

[.....] ἀνδρακὰς καθημένος·

ἄσημα δ' αὐτῶν αὐτίκ' ἀγνοίᾳ λαβὼν

ἔσθει, βορὰν ἄσωτον, ὥς ὀρᾷς, γένει·

κᾶπειτ' ἐπιγνοῦς ἔργον οὐ καταίσιον

ῶιμωξεν, ἀμπίπτει δ' ἀπὸ σφαγᾶς ἐρῶν,

[μόρον δ' ἄφερτον Πελοπίδαις ἐπέυχεται,]

λάκτισμα δείπνου ξυνδίκως τιθεὶς ἀρᾷ·

οὕτως ὀλέσθαι πᾶν τὸ Πλεισθένους γένος.

'The foot-parts and the branching extremities of the arms he cut up

small on top (?) [of the dish, and with

This dish Thyestes was served, Thyestes who was]

Sitting apart by himself;

but the indistinguishable parts of it (i.e. of the flesh)

he forthwith took in ignorance and ate,

a meal of ruin, as thou sees, to his race.

And then, when he perceived the monstrous thing that had been done,

He shrieked, and fell backward spewing out the butchery

Kicking over the table and making this act of equal right

With the curse he uttered: 'so perish all the race of Pleisthenes'.

— Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1594–1602.³²

³² The Greek and translation is cited from Fraenkel 1962, with general accepted correction of *ἀνωθεν* to *ἄπωθεν*, and *σφαγὴν το σφαγᾶς*.

Thyestes' act of progeny-eating exhibits three behavioural characteristics that stand in structural opposition to those of his earlier incestuous transgression: where incest was marked by voluntariness (*ἐκούσία*), knowingness (*γνώσις*), and concealment (*κρύψις*); the cannibalistic act is instead defined by involuntariness (*ἀκούσία*), unknowingness (*ἀγνοσία*), and belated recognition (*ἐπίγνωσις*). I argue that Atreus' consciously designed act of vengeance takes the form of a "reversed magical ritual", grounded in the logic of ancient sympathetic magic: a ritualistic inversion of the structure of incest, whereby vengeance is transfigured into a symbolic act of purification.

In the context of incest, Thyestes occupies the role of active initiator, wilfully violating the boundaries of kinship and ethical order. Atreus, by contrast, is cast as the passive sufferer, subjected to violence and humiliation. Yet in the revenge sequence, this dynamic is inverted: the shamed victim becomes the ritual's architect, while the former offender, stripped of knowledge and volition, is reduced to its unwitting instrument.

Aeschylus refers to this climactic moment in *Agamemnon* as "a meat-feast day" (*κρεουργὸν ἡμᾶρ*, 1592), a phrase laden with sacrificial and ritualistic resonance. Burkert, drawing on Seneca's version, further suggests that Atreus' act of serving Thyestes the meat of his children should be read not merely as vengeance, but as a form of sacrificial offering—not to divine beings, but to expiate the ethical contamination embedded within the familial structure itself.³³

As previously discussed, incest—an act reviled by the gods—generates a degree of miasma that exceeds the reach of conventional religious purification. When the divine withdraws and the law stands silent, the avenger turns to a surrogate force—magic. Crucially, magic is invoked here not to establish causal proof but to articulate a symbolic logic: it offers a symbolic grammar through which the aggrieved, by means of imitation, inversion, and reenactment, may reclaim agency and impose order upon a world deformed by shame.

As Burnett observes:

The avenger acts much as a priest or sorcerer does, and his improvised operation follows their model, for in vengeance as in a religious or magical rite, an ominous past event in which one was powerless is replaced by a replica of itself, a mimed action that is controlled now by the revenger as hierophant. Priestesses burn a pair of snakes on the anniversary of the night

³³ Burkert 1983, pp. 104–6, cf. Sen. *Thyestes* 691–788.

when a pair of snakes attacked the infant Heracles,³⁴ so reversing the dynamism of the past event, and in the same way the avenger imitates the attack once made on himself but takes it into his own control, so that he who was once the passive recipient of an outrage becomes the active author of the replicated deed. Sometimes he may even use a weapon that, like a ritual implement, objectifies the identity of the two situations—as Hofmannsthal’s Elektra intended to use Klytämnestra’s axe (as Vindice uses the skull of Gloriana). Or in the moment of success he may display a memento from the inaugural crime as if it were a sacred object, as Orestes does the web that caught his father when he reveals the corpses of his own victims. The revenger is thus impresario, philosopher, trickster, and magician.

— Burnett 1988, p. 5.

In this light, vengeance—especially in extreme scenarios such as incest and progeny-eating—is not merely an outburst of passion or a reactive form of punishment, but rather a ritualized performance: the avenger replicates the original trauma within a controlled frame, converting powerlessness into mastery, and suffering into spectacle.

In his study of ancient magical texts, especially that titled *On Sympathies and Antipathies* (*Περὶ Συμπαθειῶν καὶ Αντιπαθειῶν*), Marcel Mauss identifies three foundational principles of magical logic:³⁵

- **The Law of Similarity:** Things that resemble each other in structure or form may act upon each other; thus, mimicking an action can produce a parallel effect. This logic underlies imitative magic³⁶ and appears in paradigms such as the death of Cambyses (Hdt. 3.64).
- **The Law of Contiguity:** Objects that have been in contact maintain a hidden connection even after separation; consequently, bodily traces—hair, blood, garments—can serve as conduits of influence. This is commonly found in love charms and curses.³⁷

³⁴ Theoc. *Id.* 24.89; cf. Phrynichus, *Praeparatio Sophistica*, ed. I. de Borries [Leipzig, 1911], p. 15.12 AB 10.26; Philochorus, *fr.* 177 *FHG* 1.413. Cited from Burnett 1988, p. 5.

³⁵ Mauss 2001, pp. 78–91, esp. 88. Frazer similarly posited that the basic principles of sorcery are similarity and contiguity, Frazer 2002, pp. 15–7. For more information about ancient Greek magic, see n. 17.

³⁶ Cf. Edmonds III 2019, pp. 139, 369; Watson 2019, pp. 111, 124.

³⁷ Cf. Edmonds III 2019, pp. 83–4, 401; Watson 2019, pp. 186–7.

- **The Law of Opposition:** Founded on the principle that “opposite drives away opposite”, this law posits that opposing qualities possess purgative or neutralizing effects.³⁸ As Galen noted, saliva—classified as cold and moist—can cure ulcers and even kill venomous insects, whose nature is hot and dry. This principle captures the therapeutic logic of magical antipathy.³⁹

Watson argues that all magical operations generally fall under the domain of sympathetic principles: through imitation, contiguity, or opposition, human beings may exert influence upon other entities, reconfiguring order and redirecting energy.⁴⁰ At the core of this worldview lies the belief that all things in the universe—whether animal, plant, mineral, or immaterial—are linked by intrinsic affinities that allow them to act upon one another. Such influence may arise spontaneously in nature or be deliberately induced, forming a manipulable chain of cosmic reactions.

So pervasive were these principles in the Greek imagination that Pliny the Elder observed: “The Greeks have applied the terms *sympathy* and *antipathy* to this basic principle of all things” (*HN* 20.1, trans. Jones). As Geoffrey Lloyd notes, these ideas did not emerge from fringe mysticism, but saturated the intellectual mainstream of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. shaping medical theories, ritual practice, ethical discourse, and drama alike.⁴¹ In tragic revenge, magical logic is not an external framework but an operating principle within the story’s own structure.

Only within this cognitive framework can one grasp why revenge in Greek tragedy is imbued with such ritual gravity. Unwittingly, Thyestes is drawn into a symbolic reenactment and recognition that brings about a kind of purgation which is inaccessible to mere violence. Atreus does not merely inflict suffering; he orchestrates a symmetrical structure of pain, forcing Thyestes to become, within the logic of his own crime, what Atreus once was—a victim. In this process, the laws of sympathy and antipathy do not operate as opposites, but in tandem, producing a mimetic mechanism of symbolic purification: vengeance, thus, becomes a gesture of regeneration.

³⁸ Cf. Plin. *HN* 21.153, 24.1–2.

³⁹ Galen, *De Simpl. Med. Fac.* 12.288–90. Cf. “The nature of violet is cold. It checks inflamed boils” in *Cyranides*, 5.9. And Pliny records that the use of deer could avoid and cure bites of snake, based on the well-known “fact” (*nemo ignorat*) that deer kill and eat snakes, *HN* 28.150.

⁴⁰ Watson 2019, pp. 48, 107. Cf. Ankarloo and Clark 1999, p. xii; Edmonds III 2019, p. 283. The “law of opposition”, in this perspective, is not a negation of sympathy but a form of inversion: an interactive structure mediated by opposition.

⁴¹ Lloyd, G. 1978, pp. 10–29; esp. p. 29, n. 98. For the principle of opposition in Greek medicine (esp. Galen), cf. Keyser 1997, p. 190. For the notion of *συμπάθεια* in Greek medical literature, cf. Edelstein 1967, p. 232; Ogden 2008, p. 98.

The law of similarity creates a “formal mirror” for vengeance—not as a literal repetition of events, but as a structural and affective reconstitution of the original wound. As Aristotle observed, a man who cannot repay evil with evil feels enslaved (*Eth. Nic.* 1133a). Vengeance, in his account, is a measured and proportionate response to a past, shameful injury deliberately inflicted by an unrepentant equal. It is temporally bounded, governed by its own internal logic, and deemed just when executed correctly.⁴² It reaches completion only when the victim comprehends both the identity of the avenger and the rationale behind the inflicted harm (*Rh.* 1380b22). At that moment, the satisfaction of the avenger echoes the primal pleasure experienced by the original offender (*Rh.* 1378b; cf. 1370b9–12), peaking when the wrongdoer’s suffering becomes visible (*Rh.* 1582a9). Within Attic tragedy, such vengeance necessitates the invention of an alternate act—hence, the avenger becomes a kind of artist, both imitating and creating anew.⁴³

In the narratives regarding Thyestes, Atreus reenacts the humiliation he once endured:

- **Deception:** Just as Atreus was blind to the incest between his wife and brother, so too does Thyestes unwittingly consume the flesh of his sons. This is not a coincidental echo but a precisely constructed inversion of the concealment (*κρύψις*) Thyestes once practiced. Atreus stages a scene of misrecognition in which Thyestes, taking the banquet as a sign of reconciliation and restored kinship, relaxes into the household space—only to discover that this very appearance of familial safety has been engineered to entrap him.
- **Recognition and Collapse:** The shock Atreus experienced upon discovering the incest was not mere shame but an ethical upheaval. This crisis is transposed into the revenge ritual, compelling Thyestes to undergo a mirrored collapse: from pleasure to horror, from feasting to the recognition that he has ingested his own children. The imitative structure is not only emotional but symbolic, tearing apart the familial hierarchy and kinship roles.
- **Indirect Agency:** Atreus does not harm his brother directly, nor does he personally kill the children and force him to eat their flesh; rather, he orchestrates the entire event through ritual distance. Thyestes, by his own hand, becomes the instrument of

⁴² Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1125b30, 1126a20, 1132b20; *Rh.* 1378a–1380a.

⁴³ Burnett 1998, p. 3.

desecration. Atreus, as dramaturg and ritualist, completes the cycle from the side. Just as the original incest inflicted no physical wound on Atreus yet left an indelible stain, so too does he ensure that Thyestes enacts his own undoing, bearing the full ethical weight of his prior transgression.⁴⁴

The law of opposition serves as the “ethical momentum” for vengeance, grounded in the principle that “opposite drives away opposite”. Only through the encounter of fundamentally antagonistic forces can the logic of purification be activated. This reversal is precisely what Atreus requires, for the contamination of incest continues to exert its corrosive influence upon him.⁴⁵ Since Thyestes is the origin of this defilement, its expulsion must return to him. Progeny-eating is thus conceived not merely as a retaliatory act, but as a structural and ethical inversion of incest: it transforms knowingness into ignorance, voluntariness into involuntariness, concealment into revelation. Such reversal is not a narrative convenience but the very condition for ethical redress and symbolic cleansing.

“Ignorance” (*ἀγνοσία*), in this context, is not merely a psychological state but a structural arrangement. Thyestes’ ignorance must be self-sustained, unforced, and ethically charged—an illusory confidence that he is acting within restored order. Atreus does not force his brother into silence or forbid questions; instead, he carefully stages a scene of “family reunion” and “fraternal reconciliation” that invites Thyestes to suspend suspicion and to read the banquet as safe. This misalignment is the deliberate inversion of the earlier incest logic of “knowing incest”: what was once acting in full awareness is rewritten as the catastrophic shock of “eating one’s own blood” without recognition.

More deeply, this engineered unknowing reconfigures Thyestes’ ethical agency. Atreus does not meet him on the terrain of a simple moral choice; he narrows the space of choice itself, arranging conditions under which Thyestes carries out the most ruinous act precisely in a state that feels ordinary and permissible. That is why the later moment of recognition (*ἐπίγνωσις*) arrives with such force: once the illusion collapses, knowledge does not return gradually but floods in at once, concentrating guilt, fear, and ethical disintegration into a single instant.

⁴⁴ Sophocles’ version apparently concluded with Atreus slaying Thyestes, taking perverse pleasure in his brother’s shock. Cf. Σ. Eur. *Or.* 812, Gantz 1993, p. 548. Among the three tragic playwrights, Sophocles appears to engage the least with matters of sorcery.

⁴⁵ Cf. Seneca’s *Thyestes*, 176ff, 240, 327–30.

“Involuntariness” (*ἀκουσία*) here implies not the presence of coercion, but the total exclusion of will. Both Seneca and Aeschylus avoid any implication of deliberate choice on the side of Thyestes. Instead, the scene is staged as a ritualized, quasi-unconscious enactment. Enshrouded in ignorance, Thyestes is deprived not only of awareness but also of moral agency, transformed into a passive medium for purification.

This involuntariness functions as the most incisive reversal of the prior incestuous volition. The moral rupture of incest lies in its conscious, wilful violation of familial boundaries. If revenge is to effect purification, it must negate the volitional structure of the initial act. Hence, Thyestes’ visceral responses—howling (*ὠμωξεν*), collapsing (*ἀμπίπτει*), vomiting (*ἀπὸ ἐρῶν*), kicking over the table (*λάκτισμα*), and cursing (*ἐπεύχεται*)—are not mere dramatizations, but ethical manifestations of his unwillingness.⁴⁶ These somatic reactions confirm the involuntary nature of the act; they are not theatrical flourishes, but the embodied signs of psychic rupture and internalized horror.

Had Thyestes received the revelation with stoic composure or philosophical acceptance, he would have ceased to be a tragic subject and become instead the embodiment of Zeno’s sage—one who, under certain circumstances, could eat human flesh without emotional disturbance (Diog. Laert. 7.121). In that event, Atreus’ entire structure of revenge would collapse. For the structure of vengeance depends not on physical violence, but on the reversal of moral terms: only when the perpetrator is forced to feel guilt, disgust, and horror does he truly undergo the suffering the consequences of incest.

The completion of this structural reversal ultimately culminates in the moment of “recognition” (*ἐπίγνωσις*). In Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* (1602), Atreus does not reveal the truth outright; instead, he hides the dismembered remains outside the banquet hall, allowing Thyestes to arrive at the truth on his own—a moment marked by the word *ἐπιγνούς* (“after he realized”). In Seneca’s treatment, the recognition unfolds in two distinct stages: first, Atreus unveils the mutilated limbs (1005); then, through the cruelly enigmatic phrase, “All that remains of your sons you have. All that does not remain you have” (1030, trans. Boyle), Thyestes is prompted to reconstruct the truth himself. It is

⁴⁶ Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1599ff.

precisely this two-stage movement of recognition that orchestrates the ethical timing of the cognitive shock and allows revenge to shift from a physical act into a symbolic rite.

The violence of recognition lies in how it concentrates time: what has been deferred, suppressed, or only half known is forced into a single instant of understanding. In that instant, accumulated injury and shame are no longer dispersed across past actions and hidden intervals, but become present all at once, producing a shock that is cognitive, affective, and ethical at the same time. To describe this plot-mechanism it is useful—without treating it as an authoritative blueprint for tragedy—to borrow Aristotle’s vocabulary of recognition (*ἀναγνώρισις*) and reversal (*περιπέτεια*) (*Poet.* 1452a30–32). Aristotle offers a post-factum theoretical account, shaped by his own philosophical aims; but his terms help to name what Seneca dramatizes with particular sharpness: the way a staged disclosure can reclassify relationships, invert the situation, and make suffering intelligible as consequence. Atreus’ revenge pushes this logic to an extreme. By controlling the timing of disclosure and the symbolic cues through which Thyestes is forced to understand what has happened, Atreus turns a bodily atrocity into a designed sequence of recognition—one that does not belong to civic adjudication or formal cult, yet claims a comparable effect in the story’s moral economy: the re-stabilisation of a shattered kinship order through a purificatory act of revelation and recoil.

It is at this point that the circuit of magical revenge is closed. The devastation of progeny-eating lies not primarily in the act’s physical consequences, but in the cognitive shock that follows: truth instantly shatters the shelter built by “not knowing” and “not choosing”, forcing Thyestes to see how, in a state of complete powerlessness, he has become both the bearer of defilement and the channel of its return. The pollution unleashed by incest now flows back onto him in the form of forced progeny-eating. It is precisely here that Atreus reverses the allocation of responsibility: he makes Thyestes, through “knowing after” (*ἐπιγινῶναι*), bear the weight of guilt that properly belongs to “knowing beforehand” (*προγινῶναι*).

This magical logic of vengeance—anchored in concealment and revelation, animated by the twin forces of similarity and opposition—is one of the most refined narrative mechanisms in classical tragedy, and a powerful framework for reflecting on injury, humiliation, and the collapse of order. It not only reproduces cycles of suffering, but also shows how, in moments of ethical

breakdown, acts of defilement can return in symbolic form, and how a newly ordered world is sought through violence that is structurally arranged rather than merely impulsive.

Yet within this process, a critical question arises: can such reversal truly succeed? This question strikes at the heart of Atreus's revenge. Burnett and Boyle reduce his aim to the desire "to make a past offense as if it had never been", or "the erasure of the past".⁴⁷ But such erasure is inherently impossible. As Pindar reminds us, whether it is just or unjust, no one can make what is done undone, not even Cronus, the god of time (*Ol.* 2.15–7, cf. *Pl. Leg.* 934a). Yet this does not render revenge futile. Though the past cannot be undone, its lingering moral and psychic reverberations can be transformed—purified, reversed, or redirected. What Atreus seeks to eradicate is not the deed itself but the enduring shame and pollution. His vengeance is not an attempt to nullify the past, but to terminate its hold. This "erasure" is thus a psychic one—a symbolic intervention upon real trauma that restructures perception and restores interior equilibrium.

For this reason, the efficacy of reversal cannot be assessed by any external standard; it is defined within Atreus' own value-world and must be ratified in his own speech. Thus, when Seneca's Atreus declares, "Chastity and trust now return to my bed" (1099), he does more than announce victory: he performs the act as a claim of restoration. His aim is not simply to destroy an enemy, but to undo the violation that has altered the moral meaning of his household. The "bed" here is not merely a private location; it stands for conjugal legitimacy, lineage, and the integrity of the *oikos* as an ethical order.⁴⁸

Accordingly, "unknowingness—involuntariness—recognition" do not operate as a loose sequence of narrative elements, but as a closed symbolic circuit, a deliberate reversal of the incestuous triad: "knowingness—voluntariness—concealment". Through this one-to-one inversion, vengeance becomes more than a mimetic act—it becomes an act of ethical counter-inscription. It is this that defines "structural purification": the reenactment and symbolic transformation of the original trauma through a rigorously designed ritual, culminating not in destruction, but in the restoration of symbolic order. This is the essence of structural revenge.

⁴⁷ Burnett 1998, p. 5. Boyle 2017, p. 404.

⁴⁸ Seneca elsewhere uses the same restorative rhetoric of revenge, in which violence is represented as recovering what has been taken or corrupted: where Medea claims that through vengeance she has "taken back" the virginity stolen from her (interpretively, her violated status or honour is cast as recoverable by retaliatory action), cf. *Medea* 984.

Summary

The act of progeny-eating in the Atreus and Thyestes story is not the product of impulsive rage, but a form of structural revenge—a carefully constructed response grounded in a deep understanding and symbolic inversion of the ethical logic underlying incest. The avenger does not retaliate with brute force; rather, he constructs a ritualized, quasi-magical performance that reverses the three dimensions of the original transgression: from voluntariness (*ἐκούσῖα*) to involuntariness (*ἀκούσῖα*), from knowingness (*γνώσις*) to unknowingness (*ἀγνώσῖα*), from concealment (*κρύψις*) to recognition (*ἐπίγνωσις*). Through this structural mirroring, the pollution of incest is translated into an act of vengeance that functions as symbolic purification and ethical restoration.

Significantly, the force of this revenge does not stem from the avenger's capacity for violence, but from his mastery of the underlying structure of the original transgression. What Atreus constructs is not a massacre, but a symbolically charged theatrical ritual. Within it, he assumes the roles of magician, director, and priest, and by re-enacting the past and rewriting its structure, he repositions himself from a passive victim of shame into the sovereign author of meaning. Thus, revenge becomes not a private vendetta but a quasi-religious operation—an attempt to reimpose symmetry on a world thrown into disorder by transgression. This is why revenge in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Seneca's *Thyestes* is saturated with ritual form and symbolic density: revenge is not confined to the blade; it lies in logical symmetry, structural repetition, and the echo of meaning.

Magical logic, then, is not an interpretive layer added to tragedy—it is embedded in its core narrative structure. It illuminates why extreme acts such as filicide, progeny-eating, and incest are not abrupt narrative shocks, but as ethically explicable, structurally comparable, and emotionally relatable modes of dramatic expression.

In the end, Thyestes' incest can be described as a transgression undertaken through his own will and may be read as *ἄτη* in the Aeschylean sense. By contrast, his progeny-eating is a non-voluntary act driven by another's design and thus stands closer to *ἀμαρτία*—though the boundary between the two is not airtight. It is precisely this misalignment between structural position and moral responsibility that provides the symbolic condition on which the revenge can operate.

Thus, this section has demonstrated how the logic of sympathetic magic enables a structural revenge—one that explains why the avenger adopts the act of progeny-eating as the chosen mode

of retribution. Yet deeper questions remain: Why is the progeny selected as the object of vengeance? And why must the act of vengeance take the form of eating? These questions will be pursued in the following section, as we move toward uncovering the deeper symbolic association between progeny-eating and incest.

2. The Symbolic Convergence of Incest and Progeny-eating: Seed, Soil, and Stomach

In the tradition of Greek myth and tragedy, incest and progeny-eating appear as two distinct forms of extreme taboo. Yet in certain narratives, they are deliberately intertwined within a structure of revenge. This section addresses two central questions: Why must the agent of vengeance target the “progeny”? And why must the mode of vengeance take the form of “eating”, rather than some other act of humiliation or annihilation? These inquiries aim to move beyond the generalized understanding of “cannibalism” as a cultural taboo, and instead illuminate the semantic, ethical, and symbolic specificity of progeny-eating.

I argue that this specificity is grounded in a network of symbolic associations within ancient Greek culture—centered on “sowing” (ἀροῦν), “seed” (σπέρμα), “land” (ἄρουρα), “womb” (μηδύς), “ingest” (ἐσθίω), and “pollution” (μίασμα). This symbolic system generates a structural resonance between incest and progeny-eating, whereby the two taboos become not only mutually implicated, but also functionally entwined within the logic of revenge.

Further, I suggest that the complexity of progeny-eating within this symbolic structure does not arise from its being ethically more “polluted” than incest *per se*. Rather, its intricacy lies in the way the avenger, through a structure of symbolic revenge, imposes upon the progeny-eater a triple contamination: that of incest, that of progeny-eating, and that of absorbing the avenger’s own polluted legacy—returned symbolically through the act of vengeance.

Progeny of the Incestuous Person

Why must revenge be directed at the progeny? At the most obvious level, destroying a man’s legitimate offspring is the most effective way to erase his lineage: it cuts off succession, inheritance, and the future continuity of the *oikos*. Tragic revenge, however, rarely remains at this strategic level. In plots grounded in a breach of kin order—above all illicit sex within the household—children are not a dispensable by-product but the point at which the breach becomes durable and visible: they embody the house’s continuation, and make betrayal legible as a reproductive fact.

One point needs to be made explicit. In many Greek accounts of generation, the male sperm is treated as the decisive formative principle—roughly what modern biology would locate in the fertilised embryo—while the female is cast primarily as the “soil” that receives and nurtures it.⁴⁹ On this model, when an incestuous offender tramples a kinsman’s bed (Aesch. *Ag.* 1192–3: *εὐνὰς ἀδελφοῦ τῷ πατοῦντι*), he is not merely violating a sexual norm: he is casting his own seed into another man’s domain, sowing where he has no right to sow.

In addition, a divergence in the tradition must be acknowledged. In some versions, the children consumed are not the sons of Thyestes and Aerope, but are instead presented as the offspring of Thyestes and his wife (e.g. *Ap.B.* 2.11); in others, they are explicitly identified as the issue of Thyestes’ transgressive union with Aerope.⁵⁰ Hyginus, for example, names Tantalus and Plisthenes as the sons of Thyestes and Aerope (*Fab.* 246), a detail that may preserve the same tradition as Euripides’ lost *Cressae* (*TrGF*⁵, F460–70), whose plot seems to have treated either Aerope’s Cretan past or her relationship with Thyestes, or both. The affective force of this Aerope material is suggested by Aelian’s report that Alexander of Pherae was moved to tears when Theodorus performed the role of Aerope (*Varia Historia* 14.40), which points to the emotional currency of this tradition for later audiences. Even where a given variant leaves the children’s parentage uncertain or assigns them a different mother, the logic of revenge can still turn on the destabilization of bloodline itself. Hyginus, in another notice, relates that Atreus mistakenly took his own son Plisthenes to be a child of Thyestes and killed him (*Fab.* 86); Euripides’ fragmentary *Plisthenes* (*TrGF*⁵, F625–32) may well have dramatized this episode. In such narratives, misrecognition and misattribution become a further register of ethical rupture, staging the breakdown of paternal and filiation bonds as part of the violence that revenge unleashes. Where the Aerope version is in play, the logic of retaliation is at its most pointed, since the children of the illicit union embody, in the most literal sense, the “misplaced seed”; but even where that genealogy is unstable, the tragic force remains intelligible through the disruption of descent, paternity, and kinship continuity itself.

Even so, the retaliatory structure does not depend entirely on that particular genealogy. Versions that assign the children a different mother do not nullify the logic of the punishment. The fulcrum

⁴⁹ Cf. Arist. *Gen. an.* 716a8, 721b7; de Ribera-Martin 2019, pp. 87–124. On Aristotle’s conceptualization of “seed” more broadly, see Gelber 2022, pp. 104–21.

⁵⁰ For the speculation that the children born were the result of an incestuous relationship between Thyestes and Aerope, cf. Gantz 1993, pp. 546–7, 549.

of the “magical” logic is not a single genealogical fact, but the systematic inversion of the incest’s ethical features (as argued above in the structural counterpoint of voluntariness, awareness, and concealment). In principle, what drives the logic of retaliation is the incestuous offender’s “seed”: the punishment is directed not at maternal attribution, but at the ethical damage caused when the offender’s generative power crosses a boundary it has no right to cross. The tragedy’s force, therefore, lies in the intelligibility of the structural reversal, not in the audience’s prior commitment to any single fixed genealogy.

On this view, progeny-eating is intelligible not because children are simply “killable”, but because they concentrate what revenge seeks to negate: the victim’s claim to futurity. In the Atreid tradition, Atreus targets Thyestes’ sons because they embody the continuation of Thyestes’ line; forcing their flesh back into the father’s body enacts a symbolic cancellation of descent itself—lineage converted into food, continuity reversed into incorporation. The Thyestean banquet does not require that the victims be incest-born. Still, Greek myth repeatedly exploits incest-produced offspring to sharpen the same logic of defilement and kin-confusion: Oedipus’ children and the child of Macareus and Canace. In such cases, progeny functions as the living evidence of a violated boundary, so that to strike the offspring is to strike the transgression’s afterlife—its persistence, its publicity, and its hold on the future.

In Seneca’s *Thyestes*, the extent to which specific materials are inherited from Greek tragedies remains a matter of debate, though the Latin play unmistakably bears their imprint.⁵¹ What distinguishes Seneca’s handling, however, is his obsessive focus on Atreus’ pathological demand for genealogical certainty. He is driven not only by the desire to punish Thyestes, but by a gnawing anxiety about the purity of his own bloodline. “My wife defiled, my power untrusted, my house sick, my blood unsure. Nothing is sure” (240, trans. Boyle), he laments. His need for verification reaches a grotesque extreme when he proposes to test the legitimacy of Agamemnon and Menelaus: “Let this crime test their dubious birth. If they spurn war and reject the feud, if they call him uncle, he is their father” (325–30, trans. Boyle). Vengeance, in other words, is made to serve as an instrument of

⁵¹ For the relationship between Seneca’s *Thyestes* and Euripides’ plays, Lesky’s work remains seminal, Lesky 1922, pp. 172–98. For a different line of influence—Seneca’s engagement with Greek comic and metatheatrical conventions that inform scenes of disclosure and staging, see Meltzer 1988, p. 315 (on *Cyclops*); Haley 2018A, pp. 152–7, 164–73, esp. 170 (on *Proagon*).

exposure: Atreus turns retaliatory violence into a means of forcing knowledge—of making kinship legible by pushing it to the point of rupture.

It is only after the final act of cannibalism—after Thyestes has unknowingly consumed his sons—that Atreus finds his suspicions laid to rest: “Now I praise my hands. Now the true palm is won. The crime was wasted without your pain. I now believe the children mine. Chastity and trust now return to my bed” (1096–99, trans. Boyle). The repeated “now” (*nunc*) underlines a shift from inner frenzy to catharsis. As Aristotle put it, “revenge (*τιμωρία*) brings an end to anger and replaces pain with pleasure (*ἡδονή*)” (*Eth. Nic.* 1126a20). Seneca’s point here is more specific: Atreus construes revenge as the act that converts uncertainty into certainty. What is “confirmed” is not merely that an enemy has suffered, but that the household’s legitimacy—his bed, his heirs, and the line secured through them—can be claimed again as untainted and securely his.

Seneca thus constructs an alternative motivation for revenge: Atreus’ target is not merely the adultery itself, but its continuing effects within the house—the living remainder of a defiled bed. Even if the boys are not explicitly marked in Seneca as Aerope’s children, they can function, in Atreus’ own revenge-logic, as the “issue” of that pollution-event: once the marital bed has been violated, legitimacy becomes unstable, and the house’s futurity appears in a tainted form.

What is crucial, however, is that the revenge is not driven by hatred toward the children *as such*. Their destruction serves a more total negation: by annihilating offspring, Atreus symbolically denies the illicit union and seeks to revoke, retroactively, the kinship and marital relations that the betrayal has brought into being. Incest/adulterous violation constitutes a radical breach of the household’s marriage order, and progeny are the most visible and irreducible “product” of that breach. To strike the children is therefore to strike the embodied result of the betrayal.

Clymenus’ story follows a similar structural pattern as the story of Thyestes: Harpalyce feeds to Clymenus the child born of their incest.⁵² In the story of Tereus, although Itys is not the product of incest—Philomela and Tereus have no child—Procne selects him as the object of revenge because of whom he belongs to. As the legitimate progeny of Tereus and Procne, Itys is the embodiment of their violated marriage. His death, then, becomes a symbolic negation of that union. In the absence of an actual incestuous child, revenge redirects its force toward the nearest available proxy.

⁵² Hyg. *Fab.* 206, 242.

Euripides' *Medea* offers a precedent: when the sanctity of marriage is violated, extreme actions become socially intelligible (265). Medea kills her children only because they carry Jason's blood and symbolize the persistence of his betrayal. "For I have touched your heart in the vital spot" (1360, cf. 1046, 1398), she declares, demonstrating that for the betrayed, the children are not victims but vectors: living extensions of betrayal that must be cut off to inflict reciprocal pain.

Incest intensifies this logic. In incest, the betrayal is not merely personal or sexual, but structural: it destroys the very fabric of the family. The progeny of incest thus acquire a doubled significance—they are at once the fruit of betrayal and the embodiment of a collapsed ethical order. In such cases, killing the child may not suffice; the betrayal must be driven deeper, internalized by the betrayer in the most literal, most intimate, and most horrifying way possible. Only through this grotesque inversion can the betrayal be negated in its two most durable forms: the offspring it produces and the kin-relations it reconfigures.

Conceptual Link between Incest and Progeny-eating

The relation between incest and progeny-eating can be clarified by reconstructing a Greek semantic field in which sexual intercourse and cultivation are articulated through a shared vocabulary of sowing, seed, and land. As Clarke has observed in his analysis of agricultural metaphors in ancient Greek culture, sexual union and the acts of ploughing and sowing were conceived as both structurally and semantically analogous.⁵³ Terms such as *ἀροῦν* ('to plough'), *σπείρειν* ('to sow'), *σπέρμα* ('seed'), and *ἄρουρα* ('arable land') constitute a coherent and pervasive lexical network in which the female body, especially the womb, is figured as fertile soil (*ἄρουρα*), while the male assumes the role of the sower (*ἀροτήρ*) who implants the seed (*σπέρμα*) that transmits the lineage of the house. This is not a superficial metaphorical flourish, but part of a deeper symbolic grammar embedded in the language of Greek tragedy, where it emerges with particular force in the representation of familial reproduction, kinship order, and transgression. Fig. 3 presents the principal terms that structure this semantic field.

⁵³ Clarke 2001, p. 368.

Fig. 3 Semantic Field among Sex and Agriculture

	Greek Text	English Trans.
<i>ἀροῦν</i> 'to plough'	ἐχθαίρω δὲ γυναῖκα περιδρομον, ἄνδρα τε μάργον, ὃς τὴν ἀλλοτρίην βούλετ' ἄρουραν <i>ἀροῦν</i> , Thgn. 581–2.	I loathe a promiscuous woman, and a lust- maddened man too—one who wants to plough another man's field. ⁵⁴
<i>ἀροτήρ</i> 'ploughman'	ἃ σφάζει μὲν τὸν πεντήκοντ' <i>ἀροτήρα</i> τέκνων Πρίαμον, Eur. Tr. 135.	She who slaughters Priam, the ploughman of fifty children.
<i>ἄροτος</i> 'crop'	ἅτις τέκνων ὃν ἔτεκες <i>ἄροτον</i> αὐτόχειρι μοίρα κτενεῖς, Eur. Med. 1281.	You who bore these children will kill the offspring you yourself brought forth, by your own hand. ⁵⁵
<i>ἄρουρα</i> 'land'	πατήρ μὲν ἐφύτευσέν με, σὴ δ' ἔτικτε παῖς, τὸ σπέρμ' <i>ἄρουρα</i> παραλαβοῦς'	My father planted me, and your daughter gave birth [to me], receiving another's
<i>σπέρμα</i> 'seed'	ἄλλον πάρα, Eur. Or. 552.	seed like soil receives the grain. ⁵⁶
<i>σπείρειν</i> 'to sow'	Ἀτρέα δ', ὃς αὖ σ' ἔσπειρε δυσεβέστατον, προθέντ' ἀδελφῷ δεῖπνον οἰκείων τέκνων, Soph. Aj. 1293.	Atreus—who sowed you, most impious seed—who served his own children as a feast to his brother! ⁵⁷
<i>ἀροῦν</i> <i>σπείρειν</i>	τὸν πατέρα πατήρ ὑμῶν ἔπεφνε· τὴν τεκοῦσαν ἤρσεν, ὅθεν περ αὐτὸς <i>ἐσπάρη</i> , κάκ τῶν ἴσων ἐκτήσαθ' ὑμᾶς, ὧν περ αὐτὸς ἐξέφυ, Soph. OT 1497–9.	Your father killed his father; he ploughed her who bore him, where he was sown, and from the same source he acquired you, where he had sprung.
<i>σπορά</i> 'seed'	ὥς οὔτε μ' ἄρσην οὔτε θήλεια <i>σπορά</i> πολλῶν γενομένων τὴν τάλαιναν ὠφελεῖ, Eur. Tr. 503.	For neither male seed nor female seed, though many were born, will help this wretched woman.
<i>ρίζα</i> 'root'	ὥς ἀπ' εὐγενοῦς τινος <i>ρίζης</i> πέφυκας τοῖς φίλοις τ' ὀρθῶς φίλος, Eur. I.T. 610.	Truly you spring from a noble root, and are a faithful friend, to your friends. ⁵⁸
<i>ἔρνος</i> 'sprout'	ἀλλ' ἐμὸν ἐκ τοῦδ' <i>ἔρνος</i> ἀερθέν, Aesch. Ag. 1525.	But my own shoot, sprung from this man. ⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Cf. Men. Dys. 842; Perikeiromene 1012.

⁵⁵ Cf. Eur. Hyps. 82; Pl. Crat. 406b4.

⁵⁶ Cf. Soph. Trach. 31; Eur. Andr. 636.

⁵⁷ Cf. Pind. Pyth. 4. 224, 254; Soph. El. 533.

⁵⁸ Cf. Soph. Aj. 1178; Eur. Ion, 1576.

⁵⁹ Cf. Soph. OC 1108; Eur. Bacch. 1306; IA. 116; Phoen. 191.

This analogy is deeply embedded in the Greek conception of procreation, order, and pollution. As Aristotle notes in *Generation of Animals*, “it is commonly held that all living beings originate from seed (σπέρμα), and the seed comes from those who generate them (γεννώντων).”⁶⁰ In other words, σπέρμα refers not only to the botanical seed⁶¹ but also to male semen⁶² and, by extension, to the offspring⁶³. This is why the structure of “seed–soil” is not merely a metaphor for biological reproduction; it forms the very foundation of ethical order.

Precisely because this natural mechanism is understood as part of a sacred ethical order, any violation of its rules constitutes a grave act of pollution. When a field is sown by an unauthorized hand—or when a seed is implanted in soil to which it does not rightfully belong, as tragic language figures incest—an ethical dislocation occurs: boundaries of belonging are confused, claims of authority are contested, and the order that secures legitimate generation is breached. This is why incest in Greek culture is repeatedly treated as a grave source of *μίασμα*: not merely as an individual sexual transgression, but as a systemic violation of the intertwined logics of generation and household legitimacy—patrimony, succession, and the control of wealth and power within the *oikos*.

This semantic and symbolic structure is powerfully developed in the tragic tradition. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Sophocles describes Oedipus’ incestuous act as the “ploughing of a father’s furrows” (πατρῶαι ἄλοκες, 1121–2), while Jocasta’s body is figured as a “double ploughland” (διπλᾶς ἀρούρας, 1257). These metaphors lay bare the essence of incest as a mis-sowing—a transgressive act that produces offspring who stand as the most immediate and undeniable evidence of ethical collapse.

If we return to Atreus’ logic of revenge, the targeting of progeny is not a matter of personal rage or arbitrary cruelty. It is structurally necessary. Within the “agriculture–procreation” metaphor, children cease to be mere continuations of life; they become tainted fruits, symbolic extensions of

⁶⁰ Arist. *Gen. an.* 721b7. Aristotle’s understanding of σπέρμα differs in important ways from the modern notion of sperm: at times, it refers specifically to the male semen, but elsewhere it can denote the female ovum—or even the fertilized embryo. In short, Aristotle conceives of life as the product of two generative seeds, contributed by both parents and combined in the process of reproduction. For a detailed examination of Aristotle’s use of this term, cf. de Ribera-Martin 2019, pp. 87–124. On Aristotle’s conceptualization of “seed” more broadly, see Gelber 2022, pp. 104–21.

⁶¹ e.g. Hes. *Op.* 446; Hdt. 3.97.

⁶² e.g. Plato, *Ti.* 86c; Arist. *Gen. an.* 716a8.

⁶³ e.g. Aesch. *Cho.* 503; Soph. *OC* 600.

μίασμα. To symbolically annul the pollution of incest, vengeance must strike its product, returning the polluted fruit to its origin—to the one who sowed it.

Yet within this structure, Atreus faces a formal problem: if the revenge is to fulfil the logic of homeopathic retribution—based on the law of similarity—he must compel Thyestes to assume the role not merely of the sower, but of the gestator. As a man, however, Thyestes lacks any natural capacity for gestation. Atreus therefore seek a symbolic surrogate—a space that can function, within this metaphorical system, as a site of ethical pregnancy.

That surrogate is the male belly. In Greek, while *μήτρα* and *ύστέρα*⁶⁴ typically denote the female womb, the term *νηδύς* can be applied to both male and female bodies—referring to the uterus,⁶⁵ abdomen or stomach.⁶⁶ In certain contexts, it acquires the functional significance of a masculine womb: Dionysus, gestated in Zeus’s thigh, is said to have developed in a “masculine womb” (*ἄρσενα νηδύν*, Eur. *Bacch.* 527); similarly, after Zeus swallows Metis, Athena is said to be carried within his *νηδύς* (Hes. *Theog.* 890, 929e). The notion of male gestation, then, is not an anomaly but a structurally available operation within the symbolic grammar of Greek myth. Just as Oedipus enacts the paradox of sowing the very field that once bore him (*OT* 1497), Thyestes’ *νηδύς* becomes a symbolic site of gestation—where the sower is now to ingest the fruit of his own seed, thus undergoing an ethical “reverse gestation”.

Yet the male *νηδύς* can only ever operate as a secondary, displaced analogue of the womb, lacking the sacral and generative authority culturally vested in the female reproductive body. It is precisely this displacement—this mismatch between the symbolic site of violation and the symbolic site of generation—that Atreus’ revenge seeks to answer, by redirecting retaliation onto the level of lineage and descent.

First, in terms of the object, the “seed” implicated in incest remains unformed—potential rather than actual—whereas the children devoured in progeny-eating are already fully formed, concrete lives. The intensity of pollution and the ethical shock are thus exponentially greater. Second, in terms of the method, the revenge follows the magical logic outlined above: a defilement committed in secrecy is answered by its diametrical opposite. “I must see him—not broken, but breaking” (907,

⁶⁴ *ύστέρα* relates to *ὑστερος* (‘behind’), it is the vocabulary preferred by Aristotle, e.g. Arist. *Hist. an.* 493a25, 511a22, 564ab21; *Gen. an.* 718a35, 720a26.

⁶⁵ e.g. Hom. *Il.* 24.496; Hes. *Theog.* 460.

⁶⁶ e.g. Hom. *Il.* 13.290; *Od.* 9.296; Soph. *OC* 1263.

trans. Boyle). Only by standing aside in attentive spectatorship—watching the entire process by which the defiled fruit returns into the sower’s own body—can Atreus’ vengeance achieve its structural counterpoint. What Atreus insists on seeing is not the shattered outcome, but the breaking itself: the moment of rupture itself—the instant of ethical inversion and cosmological reversal (cf. Arist. *Rh.* 1582a9).

Notably, eating and sexual intercourse share, in some extent, a structural symmetry. Though distinct in biological function, both follow a similar logic: the entry of external substance into the body, its transformation, and its eventual expulsion. In nature, sex is a generative transformation—converting seed into life. Eating, by contrast, is a sustaining transformation—absorbing food into nourishment, expelling waste. Within the symbolic structure of revenge, Atreus imitates the structure of sex through the act of eating, but reverses its meaning. If sexual union symbolizes order, fecundity, and beginnings, then eating here becomes a symbol of corruption, breakdown, and terminal closure.

Atreus’ design thus achieves a structural reversal of incest through the symbolic logic of “agriculture–procreation”. He drives Thyestes, in a state of ignorance, to consume the fruit of his own seed—thereby transforming his body into the locus of pollution. This is not the inception of life, but its fermentation into decay: the seed, retained within the body, festers and is expelled as waste. This perverse cycle collapses the sacred structure of generation—“sowing–gestation–birth”—into a corrupted circuit of “ingestion–digestion–excretion”. Through this transformation, Atreus goes so far as to transfer the pain of Aerope’s past childbirth onto Thyestes. The agony he suffers is not corporeal rupture, but a collapse of cognition itself. As the polluted progeny undergoes its internal conversion and is ultimately expelled, Thyestes experiences a male parturition—a ritual of birth not consecrated by life, but saturated with shame, defilement, and negation.

Eating, moreover, enacts another symbolic function: retraction and reversal. Much like the idiom of “eating one’s words”, it denotes an active swallowing-back, an annulment of what has been spoken or done. Within Atreus’ design, progeny-eating can be read as an inverted rite of “pollution against pollution”: the “fruit” of mis-sowing is forced back along its path to its source, so that defilement is made to close upon the offending subject.

Crucially, this retaliatory design does not unfold in a frenzy of rage; it is embedded in a deeply ritualized, quasi-religious framework. In Seneca’s telling, Atreus is not merely an avenger: “he is

the priest, he chants the death-chant and funeral prayer with violent rhythm. He stands at the altar, sets and settles the sacral victims, readies them for the blade” (691–4, trans. Boyle). He recites hymns, arranges the sacrificial bodies, presides over the rite. The execution takes place not in the open, but within the sanctified interior of the palace-as-altar (691–788). Burkert has noted that these details align closely with Greek sacrificial practice—from the setting of the sacred space to the stylized arrangement of limbs and remains (cf. *SIG*³ 1042; *LSS* 115, B16; Demon. *FGrH*. 327F1).⁶⁷ Aeschylus similarly evokes a ritual register through his striking compound *κρεουργὸν ἥμαρ* (*Ag.* 1592), literally “a meat-feast/butchery day”. The adjective *κρεουργός*—rare in extant Greek and arguably coined for this context—compresses the violence of cutting up flesh into a single, programmatic epithet. The word itself does not explicitly say “sacrifice”; rather, it names butchery in the idiom of meat-processing, and it is precisely this diction, placed within a palace-space that is being staged as an altar, that invites the audience to hear the scene as sacrificially patterned violence: killing becomes “meat-work”, and revenge assumes the grammar of a rite.

Within this symbolic construction, revenge transcends private retaliation; it becomes a religious project of cosmic reparation. Atreus certainly means to destroy Thyestes, but his violence is engineered to signify more than destruction: it aims at a structural purification through forced return. Pollution is no longer externalized as the guilt of others, but is forced back into the very body that generated it. Transgression is not merely punished as a past deed, but ritually reabsorbed, dissolved, and purged. What Atreus seeks is not annihilation, but the repair of a cosmic fracture—not a terminus, but the reconstitution of order.

Summary

This section sought to answer the following questions: Why, in avenging incest, must the act target the progeny and take the form of eating? And why does the *μίασμα* borne by the progeny-eater become even more complex? These are not questions of narrative function or emotional *katharsis* but of symbolic structure—rooted in the conceptual link between incest and progeny-eating in ancient Greek thought.

The solution proposed in this section is grounded in the semantic field structured by the ancient Greek agricultural-procreative metaphor—the generative sequence of “sowing–field–seed–

⁶⁷ Burkert 1983, p. 104.

offspring”. Incest disrupts this order by misplacing the seed, generating *μίασμα*. The resulting child becomes the visible fruit of transgression. In seeking symbolic restoration, Atreus reverses this cycle—substituting “sowing–gestation–birth” with “ingestion–digestion–expulsion,” and thus enacting a ritual of reverse gestation.

Since the male body cannot literally gestate, Thyestes’ *νηδύς* becomes a symbolic womb—one whose structural deficiency must be compensated through variant ritual intensity. Atreus targets not potential life, but actual progeny; he transforms vengeance into purification, turning the act of eating into a sacrificial rite.⁶⁸ In doing so, he expels his own inherited *μίασμα*, while Thyestes unknowingly absorbs a triple defilement: the original incestuous defilement, the symbolic counter-defilement returned by Atreus, and the contamination of progeny-eating itself.

The child is irreplaceable as “the fruit of transgression” or “the seed of incestuous offender”, because it occupies an unbreakable symbolic link in the chain of transgression. Likewise, eating is irreplaceable: its structural functions of incorporation and return, as well as its mimetic proximity to the act of sexual impregnation, render it the key ritual medium for constructing a logic of reverse gestation. Atreus does not impose progeny-eating on his brother merely to cause suffering; he turns it into a ritualized, symbolically coherent act of counter-pollution. Thus, whether the Thyestes narrative is read through the lens of dramatic structure or ritual logic, one must conclude: the pollution of the progeny-eater exceeds in its complexity that of the child-killer.

3. Toward a Bidirectional Structure

In the preceding sections, we examined how Atreus, through the way of progeny-eating, responds to incest and constructs a symbolic mechanism of revenge grounded in a magical logic. Yet revenge in Greek tragedy may not be unidirectional. If progeny-eating can function as a symbolic reversal of incest, might incest itself, under certain conditions, serve as a form of vengeance or purification in response to progeny-eating?

This section explores the possibility of a mutual ethical structure underlying tragic error in the Greek narrative. Four key cases frame the inquiry:

⁶⁸ Although in the later narrative we observe that the pollution is not entirely purged, the land is barren, and Atreus departs to seek out Thyestes in Sicyon, where he encounters Pelopia, Hyg. *Fab.* 88, cf. Gantz 1993, p. 550.

- 1) The incest between Thyestes and Pelopia, shaped by oracle and hidden identity, acquires a ritual logic aimed at avenging and purifying the *μίασμα* of progeny-eating.
- 2) The incest between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus operates as a counterstrike against Agamemnon's symbolic progeny-eating in the sacrifice of Iphigenia.
- 3) Oedipus, though guilty of incest, does not activate the logic of progeny-eating—precisely because the ethical thresholds of volition and epistemic clarity remain unbreeched.
- 4) The myth of Cronus, who devours his own children, retains within it a structural echo of incest and generates the recurrent tragic pattern of attempted closure and violent reversal.

Together, these cases raise a broader structural question: Do incest and progeny-eating form a reciprocal, mutually implicated system within the ethical logic of Greek tragedy rather than a one-way system? If so, pollution and vengeance are not linear sequences of cause and consequence, but recursive, cyclical movements embedded in a symbolic order. This vision of repetition and return serves as a fundamental hermeneutic framework through which ancient narratives make sense of the world.

Thyestes and Pelopia

The Thyestes–Pelopia episode belongs to the later, “tragedy-shaped” strata of the Atreid tradition, and it condenses the cycle's violence into a stark oracular plot.⁶⁹ After Atreus' banquet, Thyestes is driven into exile and consults an oracle; the response is appalling in its simplicity: only by sleeping with his own daughter can he beget the agent of vengeance. Thyestes therefore returns and approaches Pelopia in disguise; she does not know who he is, and he does not disclose himself. From this hidden union Aegisthus is conceived. The story then turns on delayed disclosure: tokens from the encounter and later recognitions expose the incestuous origin, Pelopia is destroyed by shame, and Aegisthus—marked from birth by this paradox of pollution and mandate—becomes the instrument through which Atreus is finally brought down.

⁶⁹ Ap.E. 2. 14; Hyg. *Fab.* 87–88; cf. Gantz 1993, pp. 500–3; Hard 2020, pp. 423–4. In Aeschylus' version, Aegisthus was born before the banquet, *Ag.* 1604.

Read in this sequence, the episode is not simply another instance of sexual transgression inside the house, but a carefully constructed hinge in the cycle's ethical logic: an oracular command makes incest the vehicle of retaliation, while concealment suspends immediate moral legibility and postpones the crisis to a later moment of recognition. That is precisely the framework within which the following analysis unfolds: if Atreus' progeny-eating can be read as an extreme response to incest, the Pelopia story stages the inverse possibility—incest, under oracle and hidden identity, reorganised as a retaliatory counter-form to progeny-eating, and thus as evidence that the two transgressions can enter a reciprocal, structurally charged relation rather than a one-directional sequence of crime and punishment.

Sophocles' lost tragedy *Thyestes at Sicyon* may have dramatized this oracular episode. In one surviving fragment, we read:

Σοφὸς γὰρ οὐδεὶς πλὴν ὃν ἄν τιμᾷ θεός.
 ἀλλ εἰς θεοὺς [σ'] ὀρῶντα, κἂν ἔξω δίκης
 χωρεῖν κελεύη, κεῖσ' ὁδοιπορεῖν χρεών'
 αἰσῶρόν γὰρ οὐδὲν ὧν ὑφηγοῦνται θεοί.

For no one is wise except the one whom a god honours.

But if you look to the gods—and even if they command you
 to go outside justice—then you must travel that road;
 for nothing is shameful of the things the gods prescribe.

— Sophocles, *TrGF*⁴, F247.

Pearson and Radt have suggested that this fragment may have involved the oracle that instructs Thyestes to commit incest with his daughter.⁷⁰ In Greek tragedy, the oracle is not a vacuous pronouncement; it serves as a mechanism for the reconstruction of *μοῖρα* and cosmic order. An emblematic case of faith in oracular authority leading to redemption is Orestes: after the matricide, he says to Electra with composed conviction, “all is well within the house, if Apollo's oracle spoke well” (τὰν δόμοισι μὲν καλῶς, Απόλλων εἰ καλῶς ἐθέσπισεν, Soph. *El.* 1425). This line articulates a fundamental principle of Greek ethical reasoning: when divine mandate and secular justice come into conflict, the former prevails. It is in this light that we must read Euripides' famous line, “If the gods commit any shameful act, they are not truly gods” (εἰ θεοί τι δρῶσιν αἰσχρόν, οὐκ εἰσὶν θεοί,

⁷⁰ Pearson 1917, p. 187; *TrGF*⁴, F247.

*TrGF*⁵, F292). Far from indicting the gods as morally fallible, the phrase asserts the inverse: that because the gods are gods, what they do cannot be shameful, and what they command cannot be unjust. Accordingly, though Thyestes commits incest, the act—being divinely ordained—is ethically absorbed into the framework of fate rather than simply condemned as defilement.

What prevents this oracularly sanctioned incest from triggering another cycle of progeny-eating is the hidden identity.⁷¹ At the moment of union, Thyestes veiled himself, so Pelopia is unaware of his identity. This state of non-recognition introduces ethical ambiguity, structurally detaching the incestuous act from the framework of volition and awareness, and producing a condition of suspended moral responsibility. Hidden identity interrupts not only the traceability of guilt but the transmissibility of pollution. In this respect, the episode stands in stark contrast to Atreus' revenge, where Thyestes consumes his offspring with full awareness—a deliberate act staged to return pollution to its source and to enact shame through visibility. In Thyestes' incest, by contrast, cognition and shame are extracted from the act itself, enveloped instead in oracular necessity and ignorance. The result is not the collapse of ethical order, but its tragic reconstruction.

Within this structure of oracle–hidden–transformation, incest acquires a paradoxical purificatory potential. Pelopia's death marks both the rupture of the ethical field and the closure of the polluting cycle. Aegisthus, the child born of incest, is no longer the fruit of pollution but the bearer of retributive justice.⁷² In this way, the incestuous act, while still a physiological taboo, performs an inverted symbolic function within the tragic structure: it becomes part of the machinery that dissolves pollution and reinstates order. Thyestes' incest is no longer the reproduction of transgression; it is a redeployment of disorder—authorized by divine will, veiled by ignorance, and absorbed into a structure of ethical transformation.

Unlike Atreus, who seeks to cancel *μίασμα* by forcing it back into Thyestes' body through progeny-eating, Thyestes' oracular incest works in the opposite direction: it converts pollution into a means of producing an avenger. The defilement is therefore not “cleansed” in the immediate sense; it is redirected into a generative sequence that carries the house toward retaliatory closure. This pattern complicates any simple moral polarity. In Thyestes' case, incest is simultaneously a

⁷¹ For the concealment of identity, see chap. III.1. pp. 60–2.

⁷² Hyg. *Fab.* 88. Although Aegisthus is ultimately slain by Orestes, his death belongs to another cycle within the family's hereditary curse—namely, the spiral of hatred between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

continuation of tragic error and, under divine mandate, a pathway toward the restoration of order—at once the source of guilt and the mechanism by which guilt is made to end. The resulting inversion, in which a normally condemnable act is absorbed into a larger economy of fate, is one of tragedy’s sharpest strategies for thinking through “great error” (*ἁμαρτία μεγάλη*).

Clytemnestra

Within the tragic genealogy of the House of Atreus, the incestuous union between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is not an act of private desire or familial transgression; on the contrary, it is a structural response to the lingering shadow of progeny-eating. It addresses not only Agamemnon’s betrayal as a husband, but more profoundly, his symbolic consumption of his offspring as a father.

The origin of this violence lies in Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia. In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus depicts how, in order to secure favorable winds and divine favor for the expedition to Troy, Agamemnon resolves to offer his daughter upon the altar (150–5).⁷³ Scholars like Hughes point out that literal human sacrifice was rare in Greek ritual practice—and note that the term *ἄδαιτον* (“not to be eaten”) in line 150 suggests an absence of cannibalistic intent.⁷⁴ True as this may be, Weimer is surely right to think that even when literal consumption does not occur, there is always an implicit idea that the sacrificial victim would have been, should have been, or could be, eaten.⁷⁵ In other words, Agamemnon’s sacrifice enacts a kind of symbolic progeny consumption, regardless of whether or not Iphigenia’s flesh is ingested.

From Clytemnestra’s perspective, Iphigenia may not be merely slain; she is swallowed—by the state, the gods, the army, and above all, by her father. This symbolic act of devouring does not require physical eating. It is a homologous ethical gesture: the father, once the sower, now directs the destruction of his own seed; the household, once a space of protection, becomes a sacrificial site; the child, bearer of generational continuity, is willfully offered and obliterated.

Clytemnestra’s response to this symbolic progeny-eating is a structural inversion: she ceases to play the passive role of mother and becomes an agent of disruption. Her incest with Aegisthus—himself a descendent of Thyestes’ cursed line—turns the progeny once devoured into the force that

⁷³ Cf. Hom. *Od.* 3.234, 4.91, 4.513–37, 11.409–34, 24.96, 24.199; Pind. *Pyth.* 11.15–22.

⁷⁴ Hughes 1991, p. 89. For the approval of cannibalism during human sacrifice, see Dodds 1962, p. 278; for disapproval, see West 1983, p. 160, n. 69; Henrichs 1982, pp. 137–60; Bremmer 1984, pp. 267–86.

⁷⁵ Weimer 2022, p. 236.

now devours structure. By turning the marital bed into the functional equivalent of an altar, Clytemnestra makes sexual transgression a ritual act of counter-violence. The affair does not simply violate conjugal loyalty; it reactivates the curse from within the oikos and redirects the logic of sacrificial destruction back toward Agamemnon—the man who first converted his own child into an offering.

The symbolic intensity of this incest far exceeds the domain of private infidelity. It is not incidental, but a calculated reversal within the logic of revenge. Agamemnon sacrifices his child to the gods to secure military advantage; Clytemnestra sacrifices the sanctity of marriage by giving her body—her arable field (*ἄρουρα*)—to another kin, thus returning Agamemnon’s tragic error in kind. He turns the fruit of reproduction into an offering; she transforms the site of procreation into a medium of bodily vengeance. In this sense, incest becomes a symbolical opposite of progeny-eating.⁷⁶

Oedipus

In the preceding cases, we have traced a structural interplay between incest and progeny-eating: one often functions as the origin, the other as its symbolic riposte, forming a cyclical mechanism of pollution and revenge. Yet in the well-known myth of Oedipus, although incest lies at the very heart of the tragedy, progeny-eating is conspicuously absent. This striking exception reveals that the structural cycle can only close when specific ethical and biological prerequisites are met.

First, Oedipus’ incest is fundamentally involuntary. Both Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* emphasize that he enters into union with Iocasta in complete ignorance of their kinship, fathering children unknowingly. His guilt is not the result of moral choice, but of fate’s design. In his old age, Oedipus explicitly describes himself as *ἄκων*—unwilling—in committing the polluted act:

ὅστις φόνους μοι καὶ **γάμους** καὶ συμφορὰς

τοῦ σοῦ διῆκας στόματος, ἃς ἐγὼ τάλας

ἤνεγκον **ἄκων** ...

ἐπεὶ καθ’ αὐτόν γ’ οὐκ ἂν ἐξεύροις ἐμοὶ

⁷⁶ For the interpretation of Clytemnestra’s adultery as anti-patriarchal revenge, see Burnett 1998, pp. 110–8.

ἀμαρτίας ὄνειδος οὐδέν, ἀνθ' ὅτου
τάδ' εἰς ἐμαυτὸν τοὺς ἐμούς θ' ἡμάρτανον
(968) ... (981)

ἔτικτε γάρ μ' ἔτικτεν, ὦμοι μοι κακῶν,
οὐκ εἰδότη' οὐκ εἰδυῖα, καὶ τεκοῦσά με,
αὐτῆς ὄνειδος παῖδας ἐξέφυσέ μοι.
ἀλλ' ἔν γάρ οὔν ἔξοιδα, σὲ μὲν ἐκόντ' ἐμὲ
κείνην τε ταῦτα δυσστομεῖν: ἐγὼ δέ νιν
ἄκων ἔγημα φθέγγομαί τ' ἄκων τάδε.
ἀλλ' οὐ γὰρ οὔτ' ἐν τοῖσδ' ἀλώσομαι κακὸς
γάμοισιν οὔθ' οὐς αἰὲν ἐμφορεῖς σύ μοι
φόνους πατρώους ἐξονειδίζων πικρῶς.

Whoever it was that, from your mouth, drove home to me
murders, marriages, and disasters—
which I, wretched man, bore against my will ...
since, by yourself at any rate, you could not find for me
any reproach of error, in return for which
I was “missing the mark” against myself and against my own ...
(968) ... (981)

For she bore me—she bore me, alas for my sufferings—
I unknowing, and she unknowing; and having borne me,
she bore me children who are a reproach to herself.
But one thing at least I know well: you, willingly,
and she as well, willingly, speak these words with bitter mouth against me;
whereas I, involuntarily, married her, and involuntarily I utter these things.
No—in neither respect shall I be found guilty
neither in these marriages, nor in the murders
you are always pressing upon me,
bitterly reproaching me with my father's blood.

— Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 962–990.

In this ethical defence, Oedipus grounds the mitigation of responsibility in non-knowledge and non-voluntariness.⁷⁷ Sophocles' wording consistently frames the catastrophe in terms of *ἄγνοια* and *ἄκων* action: incest is acknowledged as a rupture of order, yet it is not presented as a chosen *ἀδίκημα*. The plot therefore does not demand an externally administered, retaliatory "counter-purification"; instead, suffering is internalised as self-directed punishment rather than violence routed through the offspring.⁷⁸

Additionally, the widespread influence of Sophocles' versions has led modern readers to overlook alternate traditions concerning the structure of Oedipus' incest. In several versions outside the Sophoclean canon, Oedipus married Iocasta in name, but no sexual consummation takes place. For instance, Pausanias casts doubt on whether they ever shared a bed:

But I do not think that he had children by her; my witness is Homer, who says in the *Odyssey* (11.27): "And I saw the mother of Oedipodes, fair Epicaste, Who wrought a dreadful deed unwittingly, Marrying her son, who slew his father and Wedded her. But forthwith the gods made it known among men". How could they "have made it known forthwith", if Epicaste had borne four children to Oedipus? But the mother of these children was Euryganeia, daughter of Hyperphas. Among the proofs of this are the words of the author of the poem called the *Oedipodia*; and moreover, Onasias painted a picture at Plataea of Euryganeia bowed with grief because of the fight between her children.

— Pausanias, 9.5.10–11.

In Pherekydes' account, as in the *Oedipodia* mentioned by Pausanias, Oedipus fathers his children not with Iocasta, but with Euryganeia, daughter of Periphas; he later marries Astymedousa, daughter of Sthenelos (Pherec. *FGrH* 3F95). A scholion on Euripides' *Phoenissae* 1760 reports that Euryganeia—Jocasta's sister—became the mother of Oedipus' four children, who were born after he was blinded. These variations offer crucial structural insight: Oedipus' incest, in some traditions, remains purely symbolic—a misalignment of kinship, rather than a literal defilement. If no biological children result from the act, there is no "polluted fruit", and without such fruit, there can

⁷⁷ Soph. *OC* 521–6: Oedipus explicitly describes his "greatest miseries" as arising from "unintended deeds" (*ἄκων*) and from being bound "unknowing" (*οὐκ εἰδώς/ἄγνοων*) into an "evil marriage"; the passage supplies the play's own language for distinguishing involuntary pollution from deliberate wrongdoing.

⁷⁸ He also comes to recognize that the punishment he has inflicted upon himself has exceeded what is justly due (*OC* 438–9). This suggests that his incest, in some fundamental sense, is not a fully substantial transgression.

be no symbolic ingestion to return it to its source. This gap marks a key structural divergence from the Thyestes and Atreus myth.⁷⁹

Therefore, the twin conditions of involuntariness and non-procreation suspend the incest in an ethical gap, leaving it outside the logic of cyclical retribution.

This structural divergence reveals a fundamental proposition: in Greek tragedy, incest and progeny-eating, though often symbolically entangled, are not inherently coextensive. Their convergence depends on specific conditions of proactivity and procreation. Here tragic pressure does not arise from a revenge-machine that externalizes pollution through retaliatory design, but from the inescapability of fate and the internal ordeal of belated knowledge. He need not devour his children, for he never knowingly sowed; he need not return a polluted fruit, for he never consciously brought it forth. His tragedy lies not in the multiplication of defilement, but in the dawning of awareness—not in the calculus of repayment, but in the weight of bearing. For this reason, Sophocles' Oedipus stands outside the incest–progeny-eating structure, offering one of the most ethically autonomous and philosophically resonant models in the entire tragic imagination of Greek thought.⁸⁰

Cronus

As the personified figure of Chronos (*Χρόνος*, Time),⁸¹ Cronus establishes the foundational model of progeny-eating in Greek myth through the act of devouring his own children. His actions reveal not only a deep patriarchal anxiety about generational succession, but also elevate the symbolic nexus of incest and progeny-eating beyond the realm of familial ethics into a mythic structure concerned with generation, inheritance, and the flow of time itself.

Inscriptions from Asia Minor frequently refer to Cronos as *Κρόνος τεκνοφάγος* ('Child-eater Cronus', *IK C.P.* 5. 236; *IK Perge*, 207). Porphyry, in discussing human sacrifice, links numerous rites involving the offering of children to the cult of Cronus (*Abst.* 2.53.3–56.10).⁸² Through this cultural memory, progeny-eating assumes the weight of cosmic symbolism, reflecting a structural imbalance that exceeds the household. Cronus is not merely a father, but the embodiment of temporal

⁷⁹ Cf. Gantz 1993, p. 501.

⁸⁰ This might explain why Aristotle highlights Oedipus in the *Poetics* as a central tragic figure alongside Thyestes.

⁸¹ For the identification of Cronus with Chronos see, for example, Pl. *Cra.* 402b; Cic. *Nat. D.* 25; Procl. *In Cra.* 396b7; Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 32.

⁸² E.g. Cretan, Carthaginian, Phoenician, and Rhodian, cf. Diod. Sic. 20.14.7; Versnel 1989, pp. 128–9; Hughes 1991, pp. 124–5.

authority, and his devouring of offspring represents a total refusal of temporal continuity and generational succession.

This structure is predicated upon Cronus' incestuous union with his sister Rhea. According to Hesiod (*Theog.* 133–8), both are children of Gaia and Uranus, and together they produce the next generation of gods. Incestuous unions are not uncommon in theogonic myth; what is distinctive here is that the children produced by this union are immediately swallowed by their father, so that procreation and devouring form a single, continuous sequence. The incest thus provides the generative premise for progeny-eating, while progeny-eating functions as an attempt to block succession: warned that one of his children will overthrow him, Cronus turns reproduction into its own negation by absorbing the next generation back into himself. In this configuration, incest does not merely mark a transgressive marriage-choice; it frames a closed kin network in which ordinary distinctions between husband and brother, father and son, are structurally compressed—and that compression is matched by a second, more violent compression, the interruption of generational replacement through devouring.

Unlike the revenge-driven logic of tragedy, Cronus' devouring of his children is not a punitive response to incest—it precedes it. It functions instead as a structural pre-emption of succession. He devours not only his children, but the very possibility of the future as the symbol of temporal unfolding. In this mythic architecture, incest and progeny-eating form a co-originating disjunction: the former marks a usurpation of beginnings, the latter a foreclosure of endings. Together, they construct a symbolic mechanism of temporal discontinuity.

Symbolically, Cronus' actions represent both a repression of generative order and an extreme assertion of paternal sovereignty.⁸³ He refuses the passage of time, the continuation of lineage, and the surrender of power. This structure is not driven by individual moral failure, but by the chaotic preconditions of cosmic order itself. In this sense, incest and progeny-eating are not bound by a linear causal relation; rather, they are co-structured within a shared logic of temporal dislocation: a dual disruption of kinship and inheritance.

Ultimately, this transgression is redressed within the mythic framework. Rhea substitutes a stone for the infant Zeus, allowing him to escape from being devoured. This symbolic substitution not

⁸³ Versnel 1989, pp. 130–41.

only halts the cycle of consumption but inaugurates the transition to Olympian rule. The pattern of disruption–substitution–ascendancy emerges as a recurring mythological logic for the restoration of order: the foreclosure of futurity is undone by the future’s own insurgent return.

The myth of Cronus thus offers more than a primal template for the incest–progeny-eating structure; it exposes a foundational anxiety in Greek culture—one centered on succession, the collapse of patriarchal sovereignty, and the precariousness of generative power. Within this symbolic architecture, incest marks the disarray of beginnings, while progeny-eating enacts the suppression of ends. The two are not isolated events nor opposing forces, but entangled metaphors—co-constitutive responses to time, inheritance, and the fragility of order itself.

Summary

This section asks whether incest and progeny-eating can operate within a reciprocal structure rather than as a linear sequence of transgression and punishment. Through an analysis of four cases—Thyestes with Pelopia, Clytemnestra with Aegisthus, Oedipus, and Cronus—it becomes clear that, within the ethical logic of Greek myth and tragedy, incest and progeny-eating are neither mutually exclusive taboos nor causally bound in a fixed sequence. Rather, they operate as mutual symbolic structures, capable of alternating roles as cause and response, source of *μίασμα* and site of *κάθαρσις*.

In the case of Thyestes and Pelopia, incest—far from reproducing the pollution of the past—assumes, under the guidance of oracular command and the veil of identity, a structurally redemptive function, counteracting the violence of prior progeny-eating. In the union of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, incest becomes an ethical counterstrike against Agamemnon’s symbolic filicide—an act not merely of genealogical displacement, but of symbolic resistance to patriarchal violence. The case of Oedipus reveals the conditional nature of this mutual structure: only when an act fulfills both volition and procreation can incest and progeny-eating complete a closed symbolic circuit. Where either is absent, the loop is interrupted. Finally, the myth of Cronus elevates the tension to a cosmic sphere: here, incest and progeny-eating are not temporally sequenced, but co-emergent from mythic chaos, together forming an archetype of generational refusal and temporal stasis.

These narratives reveal that incest and progeny-eating are not isolated transgressions but dual modulations within the broader system of tragic error in Greek thought. They may alternately enact pollution and retribution, rupture and repair, chaos and restitution—repeatedly staging the tragic

error and reconstitution of ethical order. In this light, the tragic ethic no longer unfolds as a linear logic of punishment, but as a highly structured symbolic cycle: every act of defilement calls forth its return, and each return may take the form of its structural opposite.

From this structural perspective, Greek tragedy no longer views error as an isolated lapse in individual conduct, but as a dynamic field of tension—shifting, reverberating, and cycling between taboos. The interaction between incest and progeny-eating marks one of its most volatile fault lines. As these transgressions intersect across roles and generations, the tragic ethical landscape unfolds into a nonlinear aesthetics of recurrence—a symbolic order legible only within the tightly woven logic of classical narrative.

4. Conclusion

The interaction of incest and progeny-eating in Greek tragedy reveals not two discrete taboos, but a symbolic logic and ethical architecture deeply embedded in the mythopoetic imagination. These acts are not isolated transgressions, but reciprocally charged through cultural metaphor and narrative form. In Atreus' revenge on Thyestes, progeny-eating is not brute violence, but a ritualized inversion—disrupting the voluntariness, awareness, and concealment that marked the original incest. Revenge becomes not just punishment, but symbolic restoration, aimed at repairing a cosmic rupture. This counter-violence, governed by a magical logic of symmetry, demands more than mimetic form—it enacts symbolic transformation. As Thyestes unknowingly consumes the flesh of his own children, he absorbs not only the returned defilement of incest, but also becomes a passive vessel in a rite of reverse gestation: the offspring, as the fruit of mis-sowing, is returned to the body of the original violator. Within the agricultural–procreative metaphor that structures Greek cosmology, this moment marks both the collapse and reconstruction of the ethical chain.

To ask whether the progeny-eater is more polluted than the incestuous agent is not a moral question, but a structural one. *Μίασμα* is not a static stain, but a point of symbolic saturation—where circulation breaks down or overloads. Atreus intensifies pollution not to escalate harm, but to force structural closure through excess. The complexity of Thyestes' pollution lies in his role as bearer of this structural burden. Pollution, in this frame, is not a moral label but the cost of symbolic correction.

Crucially, this cycle hinges on cognition and volition. Oedipus' incest, committed in ignorance, does not trigger the logic of retributive return; Clytemnestra's conscious transgression turns incest

into a weapon against Agamemnon's symbolic progeny-eating. These variations suggest that Greek tragedy defines error as a confrontation with the limits of human agency under the weight of fate. When Atreus enacts revenge with priest-like precision, and Thyestes consumes his sons in ignorance, they do not stage a battle between good and evil, but a solemn attempt to counter taboo with taboo, to dissolve violence through its own logic.

Ultimately, these inquiries resist a single unified conclusion about the ethics of tragedy. What persists is a dynamic, interwoven symbolic logic: the aim of revenge resides not in retribution per se, but in the structural imitation of fractured order; progeny-eating transcends extremity of suffering to symbolically rectify the ethical dislocation caused by incest; incest, in turn, operates variably as either a catalyst for or a response to pollution, functioning as a structural lever across contexts. What their interweaving yields is not a system of moral judgement, but a deeper tragic structural model—one organised around *μίασμα* as its central point, driven by a magic-inflected logic of structural inversion, and brought toward resolution through symbolic revenge as a mode of *κάθαρσις*.

This offers a new perspective towards Greek tragedy. The force of tragic error lies not only in the fall of individual fate, but in its revelation of the ethical cost entailed in the restoration of order. The cycle of incest and progeny-eating becomes the stark emblem of this burden: acts that dismantle the old while inaugurating the new; that wound, yet simultaneously define the very conditions of healing. In the unending dialectic of ruin and return, Greek tragedy casts its gaze toward the depths of human existence—a tragic state suspended between divine will, mortal agency, and the inexorable structures that bind them.

IV. Progeny-eating in Chinese Literature: A Tragic Error Serving Political Ethics

受賜茲醢, 西伯上告. 何親就上帝罰, 殷之命以不救?

Receiving this granted minced meat, Xibo protests to the upper. Why did he personally implore the god's punishment to himself, yet in turn, Shang's fate was not saved?

— Qǐ-Yuan, *Question to Heaven*, 27.

In Herodotus' portrayal of Harpagus, we find a paradigmatic expression of Greek cultural imagination regarding "Oriental despotism" (Hdt. 1.110). The violence embedded in this narrative—Median King Astyages ordering Harpagus to kill his own grandson and, upon discovering his disobedience, serving Harpagus his son's flesh at a banquet—is not only shocking but highly symbolic. This instance of progeny-eating does not stem from famine, madness, or a miasmatic religious ritual, but rather constitutes a cold and almost judicial act of punishment. Its aim is not to express emotion, to acquire power through consumption, or to dispel a curse, but to declare the sovereign's absolute authority over kinship, ethics, and even the human body. The flesh of the son, laid upon the banquet table, has been transformed into a token of dominion.

At this level, Harpagus' suffering is no longer a tragedy of individual fate; it becomes a synecdoche for cultural otherness. To the Greeks, such "rationalized brutality" embodies the pathological logic of Oriental monarchy: a regime devoid of compassion (ἔλεος) and shame (αἰδώς), in which ethical boundaries collapse and the household is reduced to a site for the exercise of sovereign arbitrariness.

This version of progeny-eating constitutes, in Greek eyes, a tragic retreat: it strips tragedy of its essential tension—moral conflict, emotional struggle, cognitive realization—and replaces it with the absolute command of the will. Harpagus' son becomes food at the banquet not through ignorance or folly, but precisely because his father once acted from compassion. Punishment, in this context, is framed as a negation of pity itself: power will not tolerate within its subordinates the capacity for independent moral judgment. Fatherhood, once grounded in natural ethics, is re-scripted into a manipulable conduit within the architecture of sovereign control.

Through this radicalised narrative, Herodotus constructs the East as a political counter-image: a regime in which the sovereign may lawfully command a father to consume his own child, and

where civic responsibility and legal moderation are wholly absent. In contrast, the Greek paradigm of law–citizen–responsibility appears all the more moderate, rational, and ethically restrained. The “Eastern progeny-eater” thus becomes an emblem of non-Greek governance, a negative mirror reflecting the precarious limits of reasoned political order.

Modern scholarship on the history of cannibalism in China is commonly traced back to Kuwabara Jitsuzō’s “支那人間に於ける食人肉の風習” (‘On the Cannibalism of the Chinese’).¹ By assembling a substantial body of historical evidence, the article established “cannibalism in Chinese history” as a distinct object of modern inquiry. Its contribution, however, was primarily documentary rather than analytical: it gathered materials without yet differentiating their textual genres, narrative functions, or historical settings in any sustained way. Its significance therefore lies not only in the foundation it provided for later scholarship, but also in what it reveals about modern Japanese efforts to understand Chinese civilization through the recovery of its “darker” dimension.

Subsequently, Robert des Rotours’s two articles, “Quelques notes sur l’anthropophagie en Chine” (‘Some Notes on Cannibalism in China’, 1963) and “Encore quelques notes sur l’anthropophagie en Chine” (‘Further Notes on Cannibalism in China’, 1968), became among the earliest important studies in international Sinology to address the issue of cannibalism in China directly. The 1968 article largely serves as an introduction to and supplement of Kuwabara’s work, whereas the 1963 article, beginning from cannibalism-related materials connected with the An-Lushan Rebellion, gathers a series of historical records and classifies them into four categories: famine cannibalism, ritual/revenge cannibalism, gustatory cannibalism, and medicinal cannibalism.² This classification has some preliminary heuristic value. Yet the later textual career of these practices shows that they did not retain a single stable meaning: some were moralized and incorporated into filial discourse, whereas others remained associated with brutality, political servility, and the performance of power. In such a discursive situation, a fourfold classification may provide an initial framework, but it cannot adequately explain how these practices were recoded, resignified, and legitimized in different contexts. des Rotours remained chiefly concerned with establishing whether such practices had in fact occurred, rather than asking why these texts represented them in the ways

¹ Kuwabara 1924, pp. 1–62.

² des Rotours 1963, p. 387.

they did, or how cannibalism came to acquire different ethical meanings in different discursive settings.

Key Ray Chong's *Cannibalism in China* is the first systematic English-language monograph devoted to the subject. Its importance lies chiefly in bringing together relevant materials more comprehensively and in establishing the topic more firmly within English-language scholarship. Yet the book as a whole still remains largely at the level of expanding and classifying sources. It lacks sufficiently critical engagement with the materials and does not penetrate the cultural logic and ethical structures underlying these narratives. Its contribution is therefore better understood as a documentary enlargement of the field than as a methodological advancement.³

A more systematic attempt to enter the internal ethical structure of cannibalism in China begins with David Graff's *Meritorious Cannibal: Chang Hsün's Defense of Sui-yang and the Exaltation of Loyalty in an Age of Rebellion*.⁴ The importance of this article lies not in retelling a horrific episode, but in elevating the "cannibalism at Suiyang" from the level of event-history to that of political-ethical construction. Graff's sharpest insight is that Zhang-Xun (張巡, Chang Hsün) was fashioned into a paragon of loyalty not merely *despite* his cannibalism, but in an important sense *because of* it. In other words, cannibalism was not a stain that had to be concealed within the discourse of loyalty; rather, it became a crucial proof of that discourse's extremity and purity. The article's real breakthrough lies precisely in moving beyond the factual question of whether cannibalism occurred, and toward the more significant question of how cannibalism was incorporated into the discourse of loyalty and endowed with political legitimacy.

Among more recent studies, Wang-Guojun and Guo-Yingde's *Gender and Violence: The Multivalent Voices of a Cannibalized Concubine in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* is especially noteworthy from a methodological perspective.⁵ Focusing on Zhang-Xun's concubine, the first victim consumed in the Suiyang siege narratives, the article examines how drama and literary works from the late Ming to the Qing repeatedly rewrote a female figure who had been nearly silenced within the traditional male-centered discourse of loyalty. Its value lies in asking how this sacrificed woman regained a narrative position in later literature once loyalty had been constituted through the

³ Chong 1990, cf. Guzman 1992, p. 97.

⁴ Graff 1995, pp. 1–17.

⁵ Wang-Guojun and Guo-Yingde 2023, pp. 267–93.

destruction of the female body. More importantly, the article successfully brings together the question of violence and that of female subjectivity, showing that the discourse of cannibalism involves not only political ethics, but also the complex interaction of gender order, narrative power, and cultural rewriting. Compared with Graff, this study advances the discussion from the construction of value between state and loyal minister to the question of how the sacrificed figure herself could be made to speak again.

Taken as a whole, modern scholarship on cannibalism in China still lags noticeably behind comparable discussions in classical studies, both in quantity and in methodological rigor. For a long time, research remained focused on the collection of sources, the verification of facts, and the classification of types, while paying insufficient attention to the mechanisms of textual production, the transformation of ethical structures, and the operation of narrative power. For this reason, rather than continuing to dwell on whether cannibalistic acts “really” occurred, it is more productive to examine how these narratives were constructed in the first place and what kinds of ethical meanings they came to bear in the course of their transmission. In the case of Wenwang’s progeny-eating, what merits attention is not only whether the act itself ever existed as historical fact, but why this narrative was placed within a framework of sagely suffering, self-restraint, and dynastic transition, and how it eventually came to acquire a positive, even elevated, significance. In other words, Wenwang’s progeny-eating is not merely a gruesome anecdote of violence, but a narrative that was progressively ethicalized and politicized through repeated retelling.

Once this issue is situated within a cross-cultural perspective, it becomes clear that the story of Wenwang’s progeny-eating is not an isolated case. It bears a striking structural correspondence to Herodotus’ account of Harpagus. Both narratives revolve around a father compelled under political coercion to consume his own child, and both place progeny-eating within a scene of royal cruelty and political testing. Yet the ethical evaluations toward which the two stories ultimately move are by no means the same. It is precisely within this tension—between structural similarity and divergence of meaning—that Wenwang’s progeny-eating emerges as a particularly revealing case in the Chinese tradition. The account appears in texts such as the *Liutao* (六韜), *Diwang Shiji* (帝王世紀), and later historiographical compilations, and its core plot unfolds as follows:

The Tyrant Zhou (紂⁶ 王) of the Shang dynasty, fearing the growing influence and moral authority of Wenwang, had him imprisoned in Youli. One day, Zhou ordered a pot of meat broth to be sent to Wenwang, intending to test whether he truly possessed the saintly wisdom that popular rumor attributed to him. Through divination, Wenwang discerned that the broth was made from the flesh of his eldest son, Boyikao (伯邑考). Yet he displayed no sorrow or anger; instead, he thanked the king and ate the meal without visible distress, concealing his grief and restraining his outrage in anticipation of future opportunity. After his release, Wenwang returned to the western territory, and eventually, his son Wuwang (武王) fulfilled his legacy by overthrowing the Shang and founding the Zhou dynasty.

In both the narratives of Harpagus and Wenwang, the sovereign inflicts violence by making the liege's child the instrument and medium of punishment, and the liege, having endured the loss, eventually brings about a reversal of power. The divergence between the two lies not in structure, but in narrative focus and cultural meaning. In the Greek tradition, attention remains fixed on the cruelty of tyranny and the humiliation of the subordinate. Harpagus' progeny-eating demonstrates the disintegration of the liege's agency: his body is no longer his own, his grief no longer untainted, his dignity consumed, his rage deferred into an icy calculus of revenge. Tyranny eclipses all; morality is shattered by violence, and the ethical realm becomes a stage for sovereign spectacle.

In contrast, Wenwang's story, though steeped in the cruelty of tyrannical violence, effects a fundamental narrative reorientation. Traditional Chinese accounts do not foreground the villainy of Tyrant Zhou or the collapse of ethics, but rather place Wenwang's composure and endurance at the heart of the moral evaluation. The tyrant's cruelty serves only as contextual backdrop; the narrative's true axis is how Wenwang's virtue becomes manifest under extreme circumstances. In this cultural context, the symbolic meaning of the child's flesh is fundamentally reconstituted. In the Greek world, it signifies moral dissolution, tyrannical horror, and the annihilation of dignity. In the Wenwang narrative, however, it becomes a touchstone for inner ethical order. To eat without rage, to know without blame—this near inhuman self-discipline is precisely what constitutes the saintly figure of the “sage king”. Wenwang's virtue (*de* 德) lies not merely in suffering indignity, but in transmuting private grief into concern for all under heaven. Thus, his action is not seen as polluting, but rather

⁶ “Zhou” (紂) is a *Shihao* means: “Acting with cruelty and harming virtue is called Zhou” (殘義損善曰紂), *Duduan*, 2.37.

as an emblem of moral transcendence. As the *Daodejing* (5) puts it: “Heaven and earth are not benevolent—they treat all things as straw dogs; the sage is not benevolent—he treats the people as straw dogs” (天地不仁以萬物為芻狗；聖人不仁以百姓為芻狗).

From a comparative perspective, this narrative reversal reveals a fundamental cultural logic. In Greek tradition, progeny-eating invariably leads to ethical rupture—progeny-eating marks the terminal collapse of moral worlds, an irreparable break. In the story of Wenwang, however, it is reconceived as the supreme test of ethical capability, a radical exercise in the path toward sagehood. Thus, while the narrative surface may appear strikingly similar, the internal logic diverges: Harpagus and Thyestes represent political resistance paid for with ethical annihilation; Wenwang represents political waiting anchored in ethical constancy. Harpagus centers on tyranny and the reclamation of dignity; Thyestes is grounded in incest and structural revenge; Wenwang focuses on virtue, constructing an alternative narrative of “unpolluted progeny-eating”.

This chapter focuses on the narrative of Wenwang’s progeny-eating to explore how ancient Chinese thought constructed an ethical logic of “progeny-eating without pollution.” Specifically, I challenge the widely accepted academic opinion that the narrative of Wenwang eating his son was a Wei-Jin period (3rd–5th century A.D.) invention aimed at fabricating a sage-king mythology. On the contrary, I argue that this narrative did not emerge abruptly, but underwent a discernible evolution across four distinct phases from the Chinese classical period (5th century B.C.) through to the late Ming (16th century A.D.): omission, acceptance, critique, and diversification.

Building upon this reception history, I further argue that it is precisely because Wenwang was regarded within Confucian political ideology as a paradigmatic transmissive sage that his actions—however extreme—could be subsumed within a symbolic order of “*dezheng* and *wangdao*” (‘virtue and kingly governance’). His progeny-eating is thus not an exception to moral law, but an expression of how political systems can reassign symbolic value to acts otherwise deemed ethically intolerable.

The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate how the notion of “unpolluted progeny-eating” was constructed within the Chinese tradition, and to uncover the political forces underlying this symbolic transformation. By focusing on the structural relationship between progeny-eating and sovereignty, virtue, and filial-political ethics, I aim to show that in Chinese thought, pollution is not an inevitable moral consequence, but a symbolic condition that can be redefined through political legitimacy.

Within this symbolic order, the acceptability of progeny-eating derives not from the rationalization of the act itself, but from the ethical status of the actor within the political cosmology.

1. Wenwang

Although Wenwang belongs to the mythic epoch of the early first millennium B.C. the historical memory surrounding Wenwang is rich. This is largely due to the long-standing stability of the Zhou dynasty (周朝, 1046–256 B.C.) and the sustained elevation of its culture through the Confucian tradition. Yet strikingly, despite his status as a paradigmatic “sage king”, Wenwang’s act of progeny-eating is treated in early sources with curious brevity—mentioned only in passing, as if it were a wound too deep to dwell upon, yet too essential to erase.

The primary accounts of Wenwang’s life are found in Sima-Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) and Huangfu-Mi’s *Diwang Shiji* (帝王世紀). Earlier mythic narratives about the Zhou people can be traced to the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), which recounts the tale of Jiang Yuan, a woman of Qiang (羌) origin in western China, who miraculously conceived Houji (後稷) after stepping into a giant’s footprint. In these verses, Houji is portrayed as a child repeatedly abandoned and miraculously nurtured by animals—a “heaven-sent” being (*Shijing*, *Shengmin*; *Bigong*). Upon reaching adulthood, he turned away from pastoral life and pioneered the art of agriculture.⁷ His descendants migrated gradually north-westward (*ibid.* *Gongliu*; *Shiji*, *Zhou Benji*, 3), until his descendant Gugong Danfu returned to the ancestral land of Zhouyuan⁸ and established a state beneath Mount Qi (*ibid.* 4; *Shijing*, *Mian*).⁹ While the motives for this return remain obscure, both the *Bamboo Annals* (*Zhushu Jinian* 竹書紀年)¹⁰ and *Shiji* suggest that the Zhou people had already entered into close relations with the Shang, even serving in significant state or military roles.

⁷ Cf. *Shiji*, *Annals of Zhou* (chap. 04). 1–2. For research on “*Sheng Min*” and Jiang Yuan, cf. Wen-Yiduo 1929, pp. 50–7.

⁸ The name of the Zhou people comes from their place of residence, the Zhouyuan area. According to Shi-Nianhai’s research, the Zhouyuan area comprises most parts of Fengxiang, Qishan, Fufeng, and Wugong counties in Shaanxi Province, as well as portions of Baoji, Meixian, Qianxian, and Yongshou. Shi-Nianhai 1978, pp. 80–8. Li-Shuo is the first to clearly point out that the historical term “Zhou people” referred to three successive tribes that lived in the Zhouyuan area. The first was the Qiang tribe of Taishi (邰氏), who remained in the Zhouyuan area even after Hou-Ji’s departure. This “Zhou people” frequently appears in oracle bone inscriptions in the form of “Kou Zhou” (寇周, ‘bandit Zhou’), indicating regular conflicts. The second occurred when the Shang people conquered the former tribe, they awarded this place to the affiliated Zhou state of their tribe, which was mentioned in oracle bone inscriptions. The third was when Gugong Danfu, after the reign of Shang King Wuding (武丁), led Hou Ji’s tribe back to Zhouyuan to establish the Zhou clan (with the matrilineal family name Ji (姬)), which later became the Zhou Dynasty. Cf. Li-Shuo 2022, pp. 306–8.

⁹ For early migration of Zhou people, cf. Gu-Jiegang 1981, pp. 142–150; Shaughnessy 1999, pp. 299–307; Rawson 1999, pp. 375–92; Li-Feng 2013, pp. 112–7; Li-Shuo 2022, pp. 287–326.

¹⁰ For the scholarship debate about the authentic value of *Zhushu Jinian*, cf. Shaughnessy, 1997, pp. 69–100.

The *Zhushu Jinian*, for instance, portray Jili, Danfu's heir, as a prominent Shang general whose accomplishments eventually led to his execution by the envy of Shang king.¹¹

Upon ascending to power, Wenwang continued the legacy of his forebears. He sought to restore diplomatic ties with the Shang court, consolidate internal governance, and forge alliances with surrounding states, gradually expanding Zhou influence. However, the reigning Shang monarch, Di Xin (viz. *Tyrant Zhou*) though a figure of reformist ambition, was notoriously violent and deeply suspicious.¹² While Wenwang's growing prestige earned him the title of "Duke of the West" (*Xibo* 西伯) and even secured his eldest son a position as the Tyrant's charioteer, his rising influence eventually provoked Tyrant Zhou's resentment. He was imprisoned in Youli, where he is said to have composed the *Yijing* (易經); it is also during this captivity that the infamous progeny-eating episode is situated (*Shiji*, *Zhou Benji*, 7–10).

According to the *Diwang Shiji*, Wenwang's eldest son Boyikao, serving as a hostage for king's driving at the Shang court, was made into meat broth, and served to Wenwang. Though Wenwang divined the truth, he concealed his knowledge, thanked Tyrant Zhou, and ate without protest. Satisfied that Wenwang posed no threat, the tyrant released him.¹³ In one variant of the tale, Wenwang is said to have vomited afterward, whereupon Boyikao's spirit ascended and became divine—a gesture that seems to infuse the act with retrospective sanctity.¹⁴ In the years that followed, Wenwang diligently rebuilt Zhou strength; his son Wuwang would ultimately fulfill his legacy by overthrowing the Shang (*Shiji*, *Yin Benji*, 11–16). Thus, father and son together laid the foundation for the Zhou dynasty, widely regarded as the origin of Chinese ritual civilization. Yet across all versions, the act of progeny-eating does not result in ethical collapse or polluting consequence. Instead, it is seamlessly integrated into a moral structure centered on endurance, self-restraint, and the virtue of bearing humiliation without resentment.

¹¹ *Guben Zhushu Jinian* (古本竹書紀年), p. 9–11. Li-Shuo hypothesizes that Ji-Li may have been contemporaneous with Shang King Wuyi (武乙) and Wending (文丁), representing the Dynasty's old religious faction. During the reign of King Diyi (帝乙), a new religious sect emerged, implicating Ji-Li in factional conflicts and leading to his death. The strange record of "Zhou people attacked Shang" (周人伐商) in *The Bamboo Annals* might have been a forced move to react to this religious conflict. Cf. Li-Shuo 2022, 322–3. Ji-Li's death is also mentioned in *Lüshi Chunqiu*, *Xiaoxinglan*, *Shoushi*, 1.

¹² Di Xin and his father Diyi carried out religious reforms in the Shang Dynasty, deifying the ruling king and using this sacred authority to enact large-scale conquests. Cf. Li-Shuo 2022, pp. 322–3, 455.

¹³ *Diwang Shiji*, p. 40; *Fengshen Yanyi* (*The Investiture of the Gods*), a novel written by Xu-Zhonglin during the Ming Dynasty, provides a more detailed narrative of this event (*chap. 19–20*).

¹⁴ *Heshuo Fangguji*, chap. 2, p. 19a. *Fengshen Yanyi*, chap. 22.10.

2. From Omission to Diversification: The Reception History of Wenwang's Progeny-eating

In view of the abundant literature discussing Wenwang in ancient China, this section traces the transmission and transformation of the progeny-eating narrative across Chinese literature. In short, the Chinese narrative prioritizes the treatment of the event, namely the omission, acceptance, critique, and moral elevation.

In the Chinese intellectual tradition, reflections on Wenwang's progeny-eating follow a four-stage trajectory:

1. **Prior to the Han dynasty** (pre 3rd century B.C.), textual silence dominates. While records on Wenwang's life are abundant, there is little to no surviving mention of the progeny-eating episode. This silence is difficult to interpret with certainty, but it may indicate that the story had not yet taken shape in the transmitted tradition, or that later compilers found it troubling or unsuitable for inclusion.
2. **From the Han to the Tang dynasty** (3rd century B.C. – 10th century A.D.), the narrative receives into broader acceptance. Wenwang's consumption of his son is interpreted as a manifestation of moral endurance and virtuous restraint, aligning with a broader political ethic that values sacrifice for the greater good.
3. **Between the Tang and Ming periods** (10th century – 17th century A.D.), two contradictory currents emerge. Official discourse and mainstream scholarly opinion tend to dismiss the episode as apocryphal and avoid direct engagement. However, among the popular classes and in unofficial narratives—drawing upon Han and Tang material—the story gains renewed traction, often reimagined as a trial that confirms and magnifies Wenwang's sagely virtue.
4. **From the Ming dynasty onward** (17th century A.D. – present), interpretations diversify. With the advent of modern archaeology—particularly the deciphering of oracle bone inscriptions and the excavation of the Shang capital at Yinxu—the historicity of Wenwang's progeny-eating has gained indirect empirical support. This renewed interest raises fresh questions: Why did early, ostensibly more historically proximate sources choose to obscure the event? Why did later Chinese thought not only accept but seamlessly integrate this disturbing act into the sanctified image of Wenwang?

These shifting responses invite a deeper inquiry: what kind of moral evaluation does Chinese thought attach to progeny-eating? What does it mean that one tradition chose to repress, then sacralize, an act that another tradition explored in all its psychological and ethical ambivalence? The case is especially revealing because the act is represented not as inadvertent, but as knowingly and voluntarily undertaken. To interpret such acts exclusively through the categories of ignorance or unintended action is already to adopt a distinctly Greek, rather than neutral, conceptual framework. Wenwang's progeny-eating matters precisely because it unsettles that assumption: although conscious and deliberate, the act remains charged with tragic force and ethical conflict. By placing this trajectory, it shows to us not a universal model of tragic error, but culturally divergent ways of construing conscious wrongdoing, suffering, and moral legitimacy. It therefore compels us to ask how Chinese thought responded to an action that could not easily be dismissed as either innocent error or straightforward crime. This chapter does not claim that Wenwang's progeny-eating can stand for "Chinese thought" as a whole. Yet the long history of its suppression, acceptance, reinterpretation, and sanctification reveals certain distinctive tendencies within the Chinese moral imagination. What is most revealing is not simply the act itself, but the fact that later tradition could incorporate so troubling a narrative into the sanctified image of a sage-king with remarkably little resistance.

Classical Chinese literature, as it survives today, can be traced with relative clarity back to the Zhou dynasty (c. 10th century B.C.), while archaeological discoveries—particularly oracle bone inscriptions—have extended our understanding as far back as the Shang dynasty (c. 14th century B.C.). Yet, efforts to reconstruct earlier periods remain fraught with difficulty, largely due to the retrospective embellishments of later generations. Gu-Jiegang famously characterized this historical layering as the "Layered Formation of Ancient Chinese History" (層累地造成的中國古史), suggesting that the further back a legend is set, the more recent its textual origins tend to be—and the more elaborate its central figures become.¹⁵ While illuminating, Gu's model overlooks a crucial point: the Zhou dynasty itself serves as the point of departure for this layering process. All subsequent reconstructions of antiquity were undertaken by thinkers living after—or within—the Zhou era, primarily because the transmission of historical material only begins in earnest from the Zhou period onward.

¹⁵ Gu-Jiegang 1981, p. 60

Caught between the currents of recorded history and retrospective myth-making, Wenwang—founder of the Zhou dynasty—emerges as a paradigmatic figure in the Chinese tradition of sage-making. He stands not merely as a historical ruler, but as the cultural template upon which later generations would project ideals of moral governance, political wisdom, and ethical endurance.

Omission: Prior Han Period

From Pre-Qin to the early Han periods, the mainstream narrative posits that Boyikao died young, so “Wenwang **passed over** (舍) Boyikao” and enthroned Wuwang:

At the funeral of (the primary son of) Gongyi-Zhongzi (公儀仲子), Tan-Gong (檀弓) resigned. Zhongzi chose to pass over his primary grandson and appointed one of his (younger) sons as the successor. Tan-Gong said, “How can this be? I have never heard of such a thing before.” He hurried to consult Zifu-Bozi (子服伯子) at the right side of the gate and asked, “Why did Zhongzi choose his younger son over his primary grandson?” Bozi replied, “Zhongzi is also following the ancient ways. In the past, Wenwang passed over Boyikao and appointed Wuwang, and Weizi (微子) passed over his primary grandson Tu (臚) and appointed Yan (衍, a younger son). Thus, Zhongzi is also following the ancient ways.” Ziyou (子游) asked Confucius about this, and Confucius said, “No! The primary grandson should be appointed.”

— *Liji (Record of Rites), Tangong Shang*, 1.

Guan Shu Xian (管叔鮮) and Cai Shu Du (蔡叔度) were sons of Wenwang and brothers of Wuwang. Wuwang shared the same mother, Tai Si (太姒)—Wenwang’s primary wife—with ten siblings. The eldest son was Bo Yi Kao (伯邑考), followed by Wu Wang Fa (武王發), Guan Shu Xian, Zhou Gong Dan (周公旦), Cai Shu Du, Cao Shu Zhen Duo (曹叔振鐸), Cheng Shu Wu (成叔武), Huo Shu Chu (霍叔處), Kang Shu Feng (康叔封), and lastly, Ran Ji Zai (冉季載) as the youngest. Among these ten maternal siblings, only Fa and Dan displayed exceptional virtue, providing valuable support to Wenwang. Consequently, Wenwang passed over Boyikao and designated Fa as the crown prince. Upon Wenwang’s demise, Fa ascended the throne and became Wuwang. Boyikao had predeceased his father.

— *Shiji, Guancai Shijia*, 1.

Beginning with the Western Zhou Dynasty, China implemented a family inheritance system based on primogeniture.¹⁶ In the *Liji*, Gongyi-Zhongzi, a noble officer of the State of Lu, violated the ritual norm of his time by appointing his young son, rather than his eldest grandson in the direct line, as

¹⁶ Li-Feng 2013, pp. 140–3.

his heir after the death of his eldest son. Consequently, Tan-Gong questioned Zifu-Bozi, the funeral master, about Zhongzi's unusual decision. However, Bozi's answer was astute. He used the term "also" (亦, *yì*) to indicate that Zhongzi's behaviour was not aberrant but rather aligned with ancient precedents, and cited the deeds of Wenwang and Weizi, stating that these two sages acted similarly, and Zhongzi was just emulating them.

Nonetheless, Bozi's justifications serve to excuse Zhongzi's behaviour. Firstly, both Wenwang and Weizi passed away before the Western Zhou Dynasty established the concept of primogeniture, suggesting they may not have held this cultural norm strongly. Secondly, the term "passed over" (舍, *shě*) carries dual meanings of passive and active abandonment. In the *Shiji*, it is clear that when Boyikao predeceased Wenwang, thus necessitating Wenwang to "pass over" Boyikao and designate his second son, Fa, as his successor. Here Bozi deliberately uses the word *she* ("舍") to obscure the compelled and helpless nature of Wenwang's decision to appoint his second son. His aim is to make the listener assume that Wenwang intentionally abandoned Boyikao and chose Wenwang instead.

Precisely because of Bozi's defense, many later readers came to believe that Wenwang had intentionally abandoned Boyikao, and the story was gradually distorted in subsequent accounts. It shifted from "passed over" (舍) to "Wenwang abolished (*fei* 廢) Boyikao, appointed Fa as the crown prince"¹⁷. It even progressed to politicised¹⁸ works like *Chunqiu Fanlu* (春秋繁露, 33. 1), where it morphed into, "Aware of the divided loyalty among the populace, Boyikao voluntarily stepped aside and withdrew (自引而激), thus submitting to divine will." By the Song Dynasty, in texts like *Hu's Spring and Autumn* (春秋胡氏傳, p. 300) and *Cefu Yuangui* (冊府元龜, 148. 1–4), Boyikao was even ranked alongside Danzhu (丹朱) and Shangjun (商均),¹⁹ becoming a prince with poor moral

¹⁷ *Shangshu Zhonghou*, compiled in Yasui and Nakamura 1994, p. 412. Other examples of "abolished", see *Hanshu, Tradition of Huo-Guang Jin-Midi* (chap. 38), 9; *Hanji, Annals of Xiaozhao Emperor*, 14.

¹⁸ Dong-Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179 B.C. – 104 B.C.)'s advocacy of "discarding all schools but honour Confucianism alone" was accepted by Emperor Wu of Han (漢武帝). Dong spent his life integrating Confucianism, ethics, theology, and imperial politics, thus establishing Confucianism as the orthodox ideology for ruling the country in Chinese society. Although some parts of his *Chunqiu Fanlu* may have been forged by later generations, the general ideologies and teachings can be found within this work. For more information on Dong-Zhongshu and his works' influence on the political thoughts of the early Han Dynasty, cf. Michael Loewe 2011, *Dong Zhongshu: A 'Confucian' Heritage and the Chunqiu Fanlu*. Leiden.

¹⁹ Dan-Zhu and Shang-Jun, respectively the sons of Yao (堯) and Shun (舜), were traditionally considered unvirtuous. Hence, power was passed on to virtuous individuals unrelated by blood, a practice known as the "abdication system" (禪讓製). However, this portrayal is likely a later glorification of the power transfer process. In *Guben Zhushu Jinian* p. 1, a historical book unaffected by Confucian influence, we find an alternative account where Shun imprisons Yao and his son to seize power.

character. These (mis)interpretations serve political ends and have veered far from the original text, but fortunately, they have not become the mainstream of Boyikao's narrative.

The early demise of Boyikao is mentioned in many Pre-Qin texts. The *The Extra Book of Zhou* (*Yizhoushu* 逸周書) recorded that when Wuwang successfully overthrew the Shang Dynasty and held sacrifices, Boyikao was listed as an object of sacrifice along with his ancestors such as Wenwang (40. 3). This also signifies that his status as the eldest son was not discarded. If Boyikao had been an actively disinherited crown prince, he would not have been allowed to enjoy sacrifices amongst his ancestors.

Sima-Qian, when discussing the enfeoffment of the Zhou royal family's descendants, stated that "it is unknown where the descendants (of Boyikao) were granted a fiefdom" (*Shiji*, *Guancai Shijia*, 22). This kind of unknown enfeoffment was already present during the Spring and Autumn period. The *Zuozhuan* (左傳, *The Commentary of Zuo*) recorded the enfeoffment of 16 children of Wenwang, 4 children of Wuwang, and 6 children of Zhougong, but does not mention Boyikao (*Year 24 of Xigong*, 4). Even Caishu, who rebelled with the descendants of the Shang Dynasty in the early Western Zhou period, was pardoned and granted a fiefdom. Boyikao, as the eldest son of Wenwang in the legitimate line, left no enfeoffed descendants can only indicate one thing: he died without any heir. Hence, the historical texts cannot document his fiefdom.

The fact that Boyikao died early without descendants can also be inferred from his name. According to the *Shiji* (*Guancai Shijia*, 1), Boyikao's brothers are called Wu Wang Fa, Guan Shu Xian, Zhou Gong Dan, Cai Shu Du, Cao Shu Zhen Duo, Cheng Shu Wu, Huo Shu Chu, Kang Shu Feng, and finally, Ran Ji Zai. In the given names or courtesy name²⁰ of the Pre-Qin period, Bo (Meng) Zhong Shu Ji often indicates the ranking in the family.²¹

²⁰ The Chinese courtesy name "Zi" (字) is given to a man after his coming-of-age ceremony at twenty, often related to his given name. "At twenty, a male receives his cap and a courtesy name." *Liji*, *Quli Shang*, 44. "Individuals derive courtesy names from their given names, allowing for mutual deduction between the two, as if the given name confers the courtesy name." *Baihu Tongyi*, *Xingming*, 11. "In the coming-of-age ceremony, the cap-putting rite occurs, and a courtesy name is formed to show respect for the person's given name." *Yili*, *Shiguanli*, 29.

²¹ The Chinese term Bo (伯), Meng (孟), Zhong (仲), Shu (叔), and Ji (季) denote the eldest son of the legitimate wife, eldest son of a concubine, second son, third son, and fourth or youngest son, respectively. If a family has more than five sons, the third son and those younger are all referred to as Shu, down to the youngest son, *Yili*, *Shiguanli*, 27.

In the title of Wu Wang Fa, Zhou Gong Dan, Guan Shu Xian, and others, the first character typically represents the name of their fiefdom (e.g. Zhou²², Guan²³) or the posthumous title (e.g. Wu²⁴); the second character refers identity (e.g. “Wang” means ‘king’, “Gong” means ‘duke’, “Shu” and “Ji” means family ranking); and the last character is their given name. However, the name Boyikao is an exception as it does not have a character before Bo (伯, ‘the first-born son’). Considering the last character of his nine brothers’ names, Boyikao’s given name is likely Kao (考). Therefore, the middle character Yi (邑) should be a term for his identity, or a posthumous honorific title.²⁵ Yi in the Pre-Qin period often refers to a small city or a fiefdom (*Shuowen Jiezi*, s.v. 邑), and sometimes it specifically indicates a small city without an ancestral temple of the ruler (*Zuozhuan*, *Year 28 of Zhuanggong*, 2).

If Yi was an identity title, Boyikao may have managed a small city during his lifetime. But the name of the city should be added before Bo. However, because there is no city name, Yi might refer to a special official position in the early Zhou Dynasty, as suggested by Ban-Gu in *Baihu Tongyi* (*Xingming*, 25). Yet, as far as we know, there is no such official position for any other person in the Zhou Dynasty. It therefore seems relevant that the only official position we know of Boyikao during his lifetime is “serving as the charioteer for Tyrant Zhou” (*Diwang Shiji*, p. 40). The word “御” (Yu, ‘drive (v.); charioteer (n.)’) may have been misconstrued as “邑” (Yi) due to their similar pronunciation. It is also possible that the word “Yu” was changed to “Yi” to avoid mentioning the perceived indignity of Boyikao, as the eldest son of the Zhou royal family, serving as a charioteer for the tyrant of the late Shang Dynasty.

If, on the other hand, Yi is understood as an honorific title, it may represent a posthumous bestowal upon Boyikao, who died in his prime and left no fief, as though to grant him an estate in the other world. Yet the absence of an ancestral temple attached to this “fief” would imply that he died without offspring, since no future descendants would be available to perform sacrifices there.

²² *Shiji*, *Luzhougong Shijia*, 6.

²³ *Shiji*, *Guancai Shijia*, 2.

²⁴ The posthumous title “Wu” (武), “Being resolute and righteous is called Wu. Being powerful, wise, and virtuous is called Wu. Overcoming chaos and calamity is called Wu. Punishing people and achieving conquest is called Wu. Having a bold ambition and overcoming adversity is called Wu.” *Yizhoushu*, *Shifajie*. 1.

²⁵ There is also a possibility that Yi Kao is his given name, considering among the ten brothers, Caoshu’s given name is two characters: Zhen Duo.

Boyikao's name itself, in fact, forms part of this mechanism of concealment. On the one hand, he was not erased from the record like figures who were wholly forgotten. References in sacrificial accounts, genealogical narratives, and later attempts to explain the absence of descendants and enfeoffment all show that both his person and his status remained within the historical memory of the Zhou. On the other hand, his designation is marked by a clear incompleteness and ambiguity. Unlike most of his brothers, whose titles combine a fief-name, rank or status, and personal name, the *Yi* in "Boyikao" appears neither to be a clear fief-name nor a commonly attested official title in the later tradition. Instead, it occupies an unstable position somewhere between a marker of status, a corrupted graph, and a posthumous compensatory honorific. In other words, the tradition did not erase Boyikao altogether, but neither did it preserve him in the clear and stable form one would expect of a legitimate eldest son.

For this reason, what Boyikao's name reveals is not merely a problem of nomenclature, but a broader mode of early historical representation. His designation preserves traces of his existence while muting the full dynastic and ritual weight that should have attached to his position. The premature death of the legitimate eldest son, his dying without issue, and the absence of an enfeoffed line should all have constituted a significant rupture in the logic of patrilineal succession; yet pre-Qin texts generally preserve only scattered traces rather than developing them into a full narrative. In this sense, Boyikao's name itself resembles a fragment of historical memory: it remembers him without fully explaining him; it preserves his existence while concealing his fate. This condition—neither erased nor fully articulated—is precisely the most distinctive form of concealment surrounding Boyikao in the pre-Qin.

In formal documents from the Pre-Qin to the early Han Dynasty, one finds only scattered indications that Boyikao died prematurely, with no explicit mention of cannibalism. This phenomenon has led most scholars to conclude that the story of Wenwang's progeny-eating is a fabrication from later generations. Liu-Zili, for example, argues in his *A Brief Examination of the Origins of the Story of Boyikao*, that the cannibalistic narrative only began to take shape and circulate during the Wei-Jin period.²⁶ Yet such a conclusion is too categorical. Sporadic and oblique references to Wenwang's progeny-eating can in fact be found in a number of less formal classical texts,

²⁶ Liu-Zili 2016, p. 31. "Although the story of Boyikao is suspected to be unofficial history or folklore, its influence is still significant, with many people even believing it to be true." Liu-Zili 2016, p. 33.

especially those later classified under *Zi Classification* (子部) and the *Ji Classification* (集部).²⁷ Although a systematic scheme of textual classification was first formalized in the Western Han, the underlying distinction between different kinds of texts surely predates that period. This suggests that even in the pre-Qin era, intellectuals may already have distinguished between textual strata and accorded them different degrees of authority. As a result, certain kinds of texts received less attention and were therefore less likely to be interpreted, preserved, and transmitted with the same care as more canonical materials.

One of these as seen in chapter 642 of *Taiping Yulan* (太平御覽, *Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era*), is corroborated by a citation from *Taigong Jingui* (太公金匱, *The Golden Casket of Duke Tai*). The text reads, “文王问太公曰: 天下失道, 忠谏者死。予子伯邑考为王仆御, 无故烹之, 囚予於羑里, 以其羹餽予。” (‘Wenwang asked Taigong: when the world loses its way, those who give loyal advice die. My son Boyikao was serving as a royal charioteer, but he was unjustly cooked. I was imprisoned in Youli, and they offered me his soup to consume.’)²⁸ While *Taigong Jingui* (occasionally conflated with *Six Tactics* (六韜)) is lost to us, a substantial body of evidence, including the bamboo slips unearthed at Yinqueshan, affirm its authenticity and its date of completion during the Warring States Period.²⁹ The expression “serving as a royal charioteer” aligns with the account in *Diwang Shiji*, and this could very well be the source that Huangfu-Mi cited.

Among the materials excavated in 1973 from the Western Han tomb of King Huai of Zhongshan at Dingzhou (55 B.C.), bamboo slips of *Six Tactics* no. 2264 and 2263 record the following: “.....質子于殷, 周文王使伯邑巧 (“考”)” (‘.....hostage at Yin, Zhou Wenwang dispatched Boyikao.....’), “.....死, 有詔必王食其肉, □免其血。文王食其肉, □免其.....” (‘.....upon death, a decree was issued to compel the king to consume his flesh, abstain

²⁷ During the Western Han period, Liu-Xiang (劉向) and Liu-Xin (劉歆) compiled *Qilüe* (七略, *Seven Classifications*), which laid the foundation for Chinese bibliography. Books were classified into Liuyi Lue (Confucian Canons), Zhuzi Lue (Secondary Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, etc.), Shifu Lue (Poetry), Bingshu Lue (Military Strategy), Shushu Lue (Astronomy, Arithmetic, Divination), Fangji Lue (Medicine, Technique). By the time of the Western Jin period, this bibliographic classification was revised to Jing (Confucian Canons), Zi (The combination of Zhuzi Lue, Shushu Lue and Fangji Lue), Shi (History), Ji (Literary Collection). In the Eastern Jin period, the order was changed to Jing Shi Zi Ji, and this classification was sustained until the Qing Dynasty’s *Siku Quanshu* (*The Complete Library in Four Classifications*). This sequence has significantly impacted the enthusiasm and effort of later Chinese scholars in researching classical literature.

²⁸ *Taiping Yulan*, chap. 642, p. 10a.

²⁹ Wang-Zhen 2022, pp. 116–26.

from his blood. Wenwang ate his flesh, abstained from his.....’).³⁰ Though some words are missing, the overarching narrative is discernible: this is a tale regarding Wenwang’s act of progeny-eating.

Both the literary tradition and the Han slips indicate that the accounts of Wenwang’s act of consuming his own son predate the period of Huangfu-Mi, posing a challenge to the prevailing scholarly opinion.

Additional evidence may be derived from Qū-Yuan’s (屈原, c. 340 B.C. – 278 B.C.) *Chuci*, *Tianwen* (楚辭, 天問, *Verses of Chu, Questions to Heaven*). The particular verse in consideration, “受賜茲醢, 西伯上告” (‘Receiving this granted minced meat, Xibo protests to the upper’),³¹ has traditionally been understood through the lens of Wang-Yi’s (王逸, c. 2nd century A.D.) annotations. His annotation of this phrase is, “It is said that Tyrant Zhou made minced meat from Meibo and offered it to his vassal lords. Wenwang received it as a sacrifice, addressing his protest to the celestial.”³² The majority of annotators, following his footsteps, construe “this minced meat” (茲醢) as referring to Meibo instead of Boyikao.³³

Wang-Yi’s annotation is sometimes misleading, largely due to the nuanced complexities within *Questions to Heaven*. His comprehension hinges on the preceding context, “Meibo suffered mincing fate, Jizi feigned madness to evade” (*Chuci Buzhu*, chap. 03, p. 87), and probably a historical record in *Lüshi Chunqiu* (呂氏春秋, *Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn*), that “In days of yore, Tyrant Zhou wielded power recklessly, slaughtering Meibo and mincing him, slaying Guihou and turning him to jerky, using these as offerings to his vassal lords in the temple.”³⁴ Thus, annotators like Wang-Yi interpreting “this” (茲, *zi*) in “Receiving this granted minced meat” would naturally associated with Meibo.

Wen-Yiduo, in his comprehensive analysis of *Questions to Heaven* exposed a significant flaw in Wang-Yi’s annotations. Wang-Yi, in his endeavour to parse the text, created two-line units with annotations underneath, inadvertently fostering the misperception that *Questions to Heaven* should be interpreted in these dual-line segments. This resulted in distorted interpretations, as subsequent annotators were likely to jumble the semantic value of individual words and phrases, overlooking

³⁰ Hebei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics Dingzhou Han Tomb Bamboo Slips Sorting Group 2001, p. 80.

³¹ *Chuci Buzhu*, chap. 3, p. 89.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Liu-Zongyuan (柳宗元, 773 – 819) and Zhu-Xi (朱熹, 1130 – 1200) both adhered to this interpretation. Cf. *Liu-Zongyuan Quanjì*, chap. 14, *Tiandui*, p. 931; *Chuci Jizhu*, chap. 3, p. 68.

³⁴ *Lüshi Chunqiu*, *Shijunlan*, *Xinglun*, 3.

the cohesiveness of the text.³⁵ Consequently, due to the absence of contextual understanding, their studies often strayed from the text's original meaning.

Contrarily, Wen-Yiduo audaciously discarded this restrictive approach, preferring to interpret the contentious sentence in coherence with the subsequent phrases, “何親就上帝罰, 殷之命以不救?” (‘Why did Wenwang personally implore the god’s punishment to himself, yet in turn, Shang’s fate was not saved?’). Wang-Yi’s annotation for these two phrases is, “言天帝亲致紂之罪罰, 故殷之命不可复救也” (‘Saying God imposed the punishment upon Tyrant Zhou, hence Shang’s destiny could not be restored’),³⁶ appears rather vague. Given the complexities of interpreting these phrases, Wang-Yi resorted to inserting historical facts as a gap-filling mechanism. On the contrary, Wen-Yiduo just provided a direct corrected translation without delving into semantic explanations, resulting in an oversimplification.³⁷

The understanding of this phrase indeed hinges on the accurate identification of its semantic subject of “何親就上帝罰”. The primary mistake of Wang-Yi and other annotators lies in their decontextualized interpretations, leading them to identify the subject of this phrase as “上帝” (‘God’), the verb as “就” (‘to approach’), and the direct object as “罰” (‘punishment’), with Tyrant Zhou implied as the omitted indirect object. This led to the interpretation that God personally imposed punishment on Tyrant Zhou, which resulted in the decline of the Shang Dynasty. However, the actual subject should be the previous sentence’s subject — Wenwang (Xibo), with “上帝” considered as the indirect object. This assertion is justified for three main reasons:

Firstly, the meaning of “就...罰” is to approach punishment or accept punishment. “就” originally means to approach. Wang-Yi’s interpretation of “就” as “致” (‘to impose’) is fundamentally flawed, leading him to misinterpret the subject of “致” as “上帝”, since it is evident that only God can impose punishment, unavailable *vice versa*. Therefore, in Wang-Yi’s interpretation, the indirect object of God’s punishment must be Tyrant Zhou. It is crucial to note that “就...罰” here merely indicates a bottom-up approach to punishment, rather than a top-down approach to (impose) punishment. From this, it can be deduced that the subject should be a role who is accepting the punishment, with God as the punisher. Consequently, the subject could only be either Wenwang or

³⁵ Wen-Yiduo 1934, p. 873.

³⁶ *Chuci Buzhu*, chap. 03, p. 89

³⁷ Wen-Yiduo 1985, p. 620.

Tyrant Zhou. But in this interrogative phrase, Tyrant Zhou cannot be the subject due to the presence of the word “親” (‘in person’). “親就...罰” signifies that the subject personally gets close to or accepts punishment. Yet, according to historical records, Tyrant Zhou, characterized by his hybris and self-proclaimed divinity, would never voluntarily seek God’s punishment. So the subject of this phrase can only be Wenwang.

Secondly, *Questions to Heaven* as a whole represents a series of inquiries about ancient events, intending to pose these questions to heaven, hence the title. However, Wang-Yi completely disregards the strong interrogative word “何” (‘why’), interpreting the sentence as a declarative one. Even if he might have deliberately omitted the interrogative word for paraphrasing, following Wang-Yi’s interpretation, the question posed by this sentence would be why Tyrant Zhou was punished by God, leading to the downfall of the Shang Dynasty. This interpretation shifts the subject of this question to Tyrant Zhou, viz. Qū-Yuan is questioning why Tyrant Zhou would personally receive or approach God’s punishment, a query that is too obvious to answer. Any attempt to answer this question would be redundant, given the Western Zhou Dynasty has already abundantly documented the reasons. Moreover, as a poet imbued with romantic sentiments, Qū-Yuan would disdain to pose such a question; and if it is a strong query, it implies Qū-Yuan’s attempt to exonerate Tyrant Zhou, which contradicts the previous text criticising Tyrant Zhou.

Lastly, the sentence should ideally include a conjunction “而” (‘yet’) for better comprehension, i.e., “何親就上帝罰, (而)殷之命以不救?” (‘Why did he personally approach God for punishment to himself, yet in turn, Shang’s fate was not saved?’) In this way, the entire sentence is more fluent and coherent. The conjunction might have been omitted during transcription, or it might have been purposefully excluded due to the necessity for the text to maintain its rhyme (or equal number of words), but this is uncertain. From a phonetic perspective, the seven-words phrase “(而)殷之命以不救?” seems to exhibit a more balanced rhyme. Therefore, the sentence should be read as: “何|(文王)|親就|上帝|罰, (而)|殷之命|以不救?” (‘Why | (Wenwang) | personally approach | God’s | punishment, (but) | Shang’s fate | not saved?’)

What Qū-Yuan wants to ask is why Wenwang, after eating “this minced meat” (茲醢), personally pleaded to God to punish him for this action, but God did not punish him but abandoned Shang instead? After understanding the semantics of the two latter phrases, one might infer that if

the minced meat consumed by Wenwang was Meibo's, the content of his prayer should be for God to punish Tyrant Zhou (As Wang-Yi and his followers interpret). But since his prayer was for self-punishment, it shows that Wenwang considered his error graver than Tyrant Zhou's killing and mincing, hence sought divine retribution.

Therefore, this minced meat should belong to Boyikao, not Meibo; or in historical records, the two may have been conflated. If it were otherwise, Wenwang would not have felt guilty enough to seek God's punishment. Wen-Yiduo also interprets "this minced meat" as Boyikao's, but his reasoning is that "茲" ('this', *zi*) is a misrepresentation of "子" ('son', *zi*) due to homophony in later transcriptions.³⁸ Although many ancient Chinese texts have been reproduced through oral recitation after the burning of books during the Qin Dynasty, leading to numerous homophonic substitutions, this assumption seems rather adventurous. However, even if the character is "茲", it undoubtedly refers to Boyikao rather than anyone else in this context.

As a poet steeped in romantic style, Qū-Yuan was inclined towards incorporating mysterious and bizarre incidents in his works, drawing inspiration from folk poetry more than official records. The event of Wenwang consuming his son indeed fits his selection criteria. Wang-Yi in his preface to *Questions to Heaven* recorded Qū-Yuan's encounter with a long-abandoned temple dedicated to the former kings of Chu while traveling in the Chu region. He was inspired by the fantastic frescoes depicting the deeds of ancient sages and mythical creatures, prompting him to ask questions about these narratives and subsequently compose *Questions to Heaven*.³⁹

As the region of Chu maintained loose ties with the Zhou royal family in the Central Plains and was never under Zhou rule, the story of Wenwang's progeny-eating might have been preserved. In contrast, in the Central Plains, this event was deliberately avoided and even unrecorded in an attempt to forget it, as it would have been detrimental to the image of the royal house. As a result, this incident may have been deliberately excluded from official records and only hinted at in more literary or private works such as *Six Tactics* and *Questions to Heaven*.

During this period in China, the prevailing ideological stance towards Wenwang's progeny-eating was one of silence and omission. However, this does not necessarily imply a conscious value

³⁸ Wen-Yiduo 1985, p. 620.

³⁹ *Chuci Buzhu*, chap. 03, p. 67.

judgment towards this tragic error, opting for avoidance and deliberate omission. The reason lies in the fact that the Zhou royal family, being the primary political authority, controlled the documentation and preservation of historical records. Not until the late Spring and Autumn period did private historiography begin to emerge, and even these private historiographers largely relied on official records, meaning their works could not be detached from the official narrative. The ancient texts that have survived till today paint a meticulously curated picture: the great Zhou Dynasty received the mandate of heaven, eliminated the atrocious Shang, and established a harmonious and prosperous new world. In such a relatively serene political setting, it is unsurprising that the rulers would avoid recording early dynasty founders' illicit and horrifying incidents. Therefore, due to the decisive influence of political considerations, the recording of this incident remains ambiguous, in turn affecting subsequent generations' judgment of this event.

Acceptance: From the Han to the Tang Dynasty

In the second phase, starting from the middle of the Han Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty, the incident of Wenwang's progeny-eating was no longer concealed and at times even entered official historical records.

The most notable example is in the private historical work *Diwang Shiji* by Huangfu-Mi (215–282). It is the earliest existing document recording Wenwang's act of progeny-eating during this period and is also the most frequently cited source in later official histories:

紂既囚文王，文王之長子曰伯邑考，質于殷，為紂禦，紂烹以為羹，賜文王，曰：“聖人當不食其子羹。”文王得而食之，紂曰：“誰謂西伯聖者？食其子羹尚不知也。”

(Tyrant) Zhou imprisoned Wenwang, Wenwang's eldest son, Boyikao, as a hostage to serve Zhou's chariot. Zhou executed Boyikao and served him as a meal to Wenwang, saying, "A sage would never eat his own son as a meal." However, Wenwang consumed the meal. Zhou retorted, "Who claims that Xibo is a sage? He ate the broth made from his own son and yet remained unaware of it."

— *Diwang Shiji*, chap. 05, p. 40.

In contrast to earlier documents such as *Taigong Jingui* and *Six Tactics*, Huangfu-Mi added an intriguing detail: Tyrant Zhou intended to use the act of progeny-eating as a test of Wenwang's sagacity and divination skills. It remains unclear in the earlier sources whether Tyrant Zhou

intentionally concealed the meal's key ingredient, i.e., Tyrant Zhou might have coerced Wenwang to eat his son, as suggested in *Lüshi Chunqiu*, where Mei-Bo's mince is presented to everyone in the temple (122. 3). Regardless of whether Wenwang genuinely possessed the ability to divine his eldest son's fate, Huangfu-Mi's account effectively reorients the core of the Wenwang progeny-eating incident. It transitions the narrative focus from demonstrating Tyrant Zhou's cruelty to underscoring Wenwang's resilience and acceptance, attributes considered virtuous in a sage. This core sentiment continued all the way to the famous vernacular novel *Fengshen Yanyi* (封神演義, *Investiture of the Gods*) by Xu-Zhonglin (許仲琳, c. 1560–1630), which took the portrayal of Wenwang as a sage to an extreme.

After Huangfu-Mi, Emperor Xiao-Yi (蕭繹, 508–555), used the same text to recount the story of Wenwang's progeny-eating in *Jinlouzi, Xingwang Pian* (金樓子, 興王篇, p. 143). Zhang-Shoujie (張守節) in his commentary of *Shiji*, named *Shiji Zhengyi* (史記正義, 736 A.D.), supplemented the sentence “紂囚西伯姜里” (‘Tyrant Zhou imprisoned Xibo in Youli’) with the citation from *Diwang Shiji*.⁴⁰ The Song Dynasty's encyclopaedic work *Taiping Yulan* (太平御覽, 983 A.D.) also adopted this view.⁴¹ Liu-Shu (劉恕), in his supplement to the ancient part of *Zizhi Tongjian* (資治通鑑, 1084 A.D.), titled *Tongjian Waiji* (通鑑外紀, 1078 A.D.), quoted the same text.⁴²

Huangfu-Mi's account might have referenced not only *Taigong Jingui* and *Six Tactics*, but also some *Chenwei*⁴³ books that have now been lost. *Chenwei* texts are not simply “forgeries” or absurd, delusive writings. Rather, they constitute a body of texts attached to the classics while simultaneously claiming to disclose the hidden meanings of the classics and the mandate of Heaven. *Chen* (讖) is associated primarily with prophecy and portent, whereas *wei* (緯), set against *jing* (經), the “warp,” implies the supplementation, explication, and extension of canonical texts. Their

⁴⁰ Cf. Zhang-Shoujie's Commentary in *Shiji, Annals of Yin* (chap. 03), 31.

⁴¹ *Taiping Yulan*, chap. 84, p. 11a.

⁴² *Tongjian Waiji*, chap. 02, p. 27b.

⁴³ *Chenwei* (讖緯) or *Tuchen* (圖讖) is a special type of annotation and prophecy for ancient classics that emerged during the Spring and Autumn periods, thrived during the Han Dynasty, faced challenges from metaphysical studies in the Wei Jin dynasties, and faded into oblivion due to the Tang and Song Dynasties' “Revival of Antiquity” (古文運動, a literature reform movement). The field encompasses three components: Tu, portraying universal mysteries graphically, e.g. *Hetu* and *Luoshu*; Chen, forecasting national and imperial destinies; and Wei, interpreting ancient classics, often involving astronomy and supernatural entities. Critics during the Revival of Antiquity denounced *Chenwei* for their supernatural elements. After the Southern Song Dynasty, *Chenwei* no longer existed as independent books. Some scholars compiled *Chenwei* from other texts into volumes since the Ming Dynasty. The most complete extant compilation is the *Compilation of Weishu* (1971, translated in Chinese in 1994), edited by Yasui Kozan and Nakamura Shohachi. For the scholarly history of *chenwei* studies, see Zhao-Lu 2019, pp. 209–11; for a more comprehensive overview of *chenwei*, see pp. 49–78, 213–16.

significance, therefore, lies not only in mystical prediction, but also in a distinctive mode of classical interpretation.⁴⁴ Since the modern period, scholars have often treated *chenwei* as products of Eastern Han political opportunism, eclectic classicism, or theological superstition. More recent scholarship, however, has substantially revised this view. Michael Loewe has shown that the importance of *chenwei* and related materials lies precisely in their capacity to illuminate dimensions of thought neglected or suppressed in official histories.⁴⁵ Michael Nylan, for her part, has criticized the older tendency to assign *chenwei* mechanically to the side of “*New Text* mysticism,” demonstrating that Eastern Han scholars associated with the *Old Text* tradition were by no means uniformly hostile to such materials, while some *New Text* scholars openly questioned them. It is therefore misleading to map *chenwei* onto the *New Text/Old Text* divide without further ado.⁴⁶

We learn from the *Jinshu* that Huangfu-Mi was a widely learned scholar known for his voracious reading and refusal to hold office.⁴⁷ Kong-Yingda (孔穎達, 574–648) noted in *Shangshu Zhengyi* that “Huangfu-Mi’s cousin Liang-Liu obtained *Guwen Shangshu* (‘*Old Text Shangshu*’), therefore, he compiled *Diwang Shiji*.”⁴⁸ Later historian Liu-Zhiji (劉知幾, 661–721) stated in *Shitong* (史通) that “Huangfu-Mi’s *Diwang Shiji* draws heavily from the *Tuchen* of the *Six Classics* (六經).”⁴⁹ These accounts indicate that Huangfu-Mi’s record of this event probably came from *Guwen Shangshu* or other *Chenwei* sources.

It is unfortunate that due to literary reform and social upheavals during the Tang and Song Dynasties, many parallel documents have been lost, altered, or removed. As a result, almost no extant ancient texts preserve accounts of Wenwang’s progeny-eating that predate the *Diwang shiji*, thereby creating a misleading impression among later scholars that the story was a spurious fabrication of the Eastern Han, produced under the flourishing influence of *Chenwei* studies.⁵⁰

Seen in this light, the account of Wenwang’s progeny-eating in the *Diwang shiji* need not be dismissed as Huangfu-Mi’s careless incorporation of absurd or delusive material. It may instead preserve traces of *chenwei*-type sources that have since been lost. Zhao-Lu has argued that the

⁴⁴ Zhao-Lu 2019, pp. 213–5.

⁴⁵ Loewe 1994, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Nylan 1994, p. 110–2.

⁴⁷ *Jinshu*, chap. 51.

⁴⁸ *Shangshu Zhengyi*, chap. 02, p. 30.

⁴⁹ Liu-Zhiji, *Shitong*, *Caizhuan*, p. 116.

⁵⁰ Cf. Liu-Zili 2016.

influence of this body of texts in the Eastern Han derived from its combination of “the interpretation of the classics” with “direct guidance from Heaven,” while also claiming not merely to explicate the classics but to embody a revelatory source earlier and more authoritative than the classics themselves.⁵¹ If the Wenwang progeny-eating narrative did indeed circulate within such a textual network, then the later claim that it was an “Eastern Han forgery” can hardly be accepted as a reliable account of its origin. It may instead reflect a historical illusion produced by the large-scale loss of parallel materials.⁵² Put differently, the question should not be framed simply as whether Wenwang’s progeny-eating was fabricated in the Eastern Han. Rather, we should ask whether the narrative may originally have existed in a more marginal and less explicit form within the intertwined traditions of classical exegesis and *chenwei*, only to survive in scattered later witnesses after textual purges, bibliographic reorganization, and changing scholarly tastes had rendered most of the relevant materials no longer extant.

By the Wei Jin period, however, the story of Wenwang’s progeny-eating appears to have gained much wider circulation and acceptance. This development can be related to two broader shifts in the socio-political and literary climate. First, with the Zhou royal house long withdrawn from the political stage, authors were less constrained by the sensitivities that had once surrounded narratives about its founders. Second, Wei–Jin literary culture increasingly moved away from an explicitly practical social mission toward more speculative, romantic, and metaphysical modes of expression.⁵³ The growth of *Chenwei* studies, the rise of Daoism, the introduction of Buddhism, and the political turmoil of the age all contributed to a milieu in which stories of the strange and extraordinary could circulate with new force.⁵⁴ Within this context, the tale of Wenwang’s progeny-eating could be more readily preserved, repeated, and accepted.

The wider acceptance and circulation of the Wenwang narrative gave rise to a unique attitude towards tragic errors in Chinese thinking, a phenomenon I have labelled as “Transformational Acceptance”. Cannibalism would normally be regarded as an abhorrent and unacceptable act. For this reason, narratives often reduce its moral severity by presenting it as something committed under coercion, in ignorance, or under the pressure of extreme circumstances. Yet in the Chinese textual

⁵¹ Zhao-Lu 2019, pp. 55f.

⁵² Cf. Zhao-Lu 2019, pp. 209–11.

⁵³ Liu-Dajie 2015, p. 208.

⁵⁴ For a comprehensive study on supernatural tales during the Wei Jin periods, see *ibid.* pp. 208–33, esp. pp. 229–33.

treatment of Wenwang, these very conditions were gradually transformed: what was originally represented as a forced and tragic situation came to be recast as a conscious and voluntary act of endurance. Far from increasing Wenwang's guilt, this reinterpretation aligned the act with virtues such as self-sacrifice, forbearance, and submission to a larger moral order, so that the tragic error became not only tolerable, but even praiseworthy.

Critique and Novelize: Between the Tang and Ming Period

The third phase of this textual progression presents an intriguing anomaly: the co-existence of two contrasting perspectives.

Skepticism and rejection mark the official stance. The era spanning the mid-Tang to the Northern Song Dynasty saw Chinese literature undergo a 300-year intermittent "Revival of Antiquity" movement. The goal of this movement was to move away from the flamboyant, romantic style prevalent during the Wei Jin periods and to return to the essence of literature, emphasizing its practicality.⁵⁵ A caveat to note is that many scholars have disproportionately focused on stylistic and formative transformations, thereby inadvertently sidelining the equally significant attribute of "rationalization".

During this era, proponents of the prose movement (represented by Liu-Zongyuan⁵⁶ and Ouyang-Xiu⁵⁷) sought to purge the influence of *Chenwei* on Chinese intellectual thought. As *Chenwei* often contains farfetched political prophecies that can be misinterpreted as political instruments, it became the object of disdain among intellectuals. Therefore, the literary reform of this era advocated for the complete removal and eradication of *Chenwei* from classical literature. Concurrently, efforts were made to critically scrutinize the irrational components of ancient legends, leading to an escalating skepticism toward Wenwang's act of progeny-eating within the official narrative.

⁵⁵ For a comprehensive study on the "Revival of Antiquity", cf. Kubin 2008; Liu-Dajie 2015, pp. 353–62; Shields 2017, pp. 387–98. Some scholars believe that the literary reform in this 300-year period cannot be generalized as a restoration, but should be divided into detailed categories, cf. Dong-Yingshou 2005; Zhu-Gang 2013.

⁵⁶ Liu-Zongyuan (771–819) vehemently criticised the absurdity of the predecessors' fascination with astronomical phenomena in his work *Zhenfu* (貞符), deeming it a shameful foolish act to perceive them as divine signs, cf. Liu-Zongyuan *Quanji*, chap. 1, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Ouyang Xiu (歐陽修, 1007–1072) proposed *Discussing the Removal of Chenwei from the Exegesis of the Nine Classics* (論刪去九經正義中讖緯札子), which marked that *Chenwei* was no longer officially recognised, Ouyang-Xiu *Quanji*, chap. 112, p. 1707. For a detailed discussion on Ouyang Xiu's impact on Revival of Antiquity, cf. Chen-Yushih 1988, *Images and Ideas in Chinese Classical Prose: Studies of Four Masters*, Stanford.

In his work *Shitong*, Liu-Zhiji writes, “Huangfu-Mi’s *Diwang Shiji* relies heavily on the *Tuchen* of the *Six Classics*. the work’s errors in citation stem precisely from this” (p. 116). Liu-Zhiji saw books like *Chenwei* as mostly deceptive and deemed Huangfu-Mi’s selection of sources deficient in discernment. This led future generations to cite *Chenwei* in their works, which Liu-Zhiji believed caused harm to intellectual history. A similar position appears in Zheng-Qiao’s (鄭樵, 1104–1162) *Tongzhi* (通志): when discussing Huangfu-Mi’s account of Wenwang, Zheng-Qiao dismissed such materials as “altogether incredible statements.”⁵⁸ It is important to note, however, that their criticism was directed less at Huangfu-Mi himself than at the absurdity of *Chenwei*-type writings more broadly. What they advocated instead was a more rationalized and critically disciplined historiography.

Huangfu-Mi’s *Diwangshiji*, as the first historical work to detail and record ancient history (Pre-Zhou Dynasty) after Sima-Qian, inevitably included legends and anecdotes. But his employment of *Chenwei* was rational and restrained. A noteworthy illustration is his reference that Wenwang had four nipples (p. 39), which was intended to highlight Wenwang’s virtues of kindness and benevolence rather than engaging in strange curiosities. This interpretation had already matured within the now-lost *Chenwei* book titled *Chunqiu Yuanmingbao* (春秋元命苞), stating, “Wenwang has four nipples, signifying an embodiment of innate excellence”⁵⁹. Huangfu-Mi largely discarded prophecies and unpredictable divine powers, demonstrating his ability to use historical materials discriminately far exceeded the general assessment of him.

In the aftermath of *Chenwei*’s fading prominence during the late Southern Song Dynasty, and its subsequent exclusion from official texts, Wenwang’s progeny-eating was hardly seen in official records. Folk literature, in contrast, saw an increasingly rich proliferation of retellings and interpretations of the episode.

⁵⁸ *Tongzhi*, chap. 03, p. 9a. While *Diwang Shiji* remains a contentious historical work, its scholarly value has gained increasing recognition in modern historiography. For example, An-Zhengfa, in his article *Exploring the Historical Achievements of Huangfu-Mi: A Case Study on Diwang Shiji* (2009), eloquently demonstrates how the work boldly embraced diverse opinions on archaic history, preserving a myriad of perspectives for posterity; it employed *Chenwei* judiciously to compensate for shortcomings in official historical accounts; and it conserved a rich collection of historical materials and distinctive insights on the evolution of historical geography. For further information on the transmission and research history of *Diwang Shiji*, cf. An-Zhengfa 2015, pp. 39–48; An-Zhengfa 2016, pp. 87–98.

⁵⁹ *Taiping Yulan*, chap. 84, p. 6b; also compiled in Yasui and Nakamura 1994, p. 594. *Chunqiu Yuanmingbao* is speculated to be a book of *Chenwei* that was not later than the early Eastern Han Dynasty.

Benefiting from the flourishing urban culture of the Song dynasty, folk literature began to prosper, and *pinghua* (平話, also known as *Huaben*, 話本) gradually gained popularity.⁶⁰ To a degree, *Pinghua*, focusing on distinctive story units, can be regarded as a parallel progenitor of Chinese drama. Ordinarily, a solo narrator performs these stories accompanied by simple music. The narrative predominantly employs vernacular language, intermingled with passages of classical Chinese to lend the performance greater stylistic texture. Its subject matter, drawn largely from well-known myths and historical episodes, was presented in public entertainment spaces through oral storytelling rather than in printed form for private reading. Subsequent vernacular novels from the Ming and Qing dynasties (such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West*) extensively incorporated *Pinghua* elements.

The earliest identifiable *Pinghua* text discussing Wenwang's progeny-eating is *Wuwang Fazhou Pinghua* (武王伐紂平話), published during the Zhizhi Era (1321–1323) of the Yuan Dynasty. The text reads:

(費孟言) “今賜肉與姬昌食之，如食了肉羹時，姬昌去國。你兒百邑考見在朝歌等候。”遂取肉與姬昌。姬昌心內思惟：此肉是我兒肉，若我不食此肉，和我死在不仁之君手也。姬昌接得此肉，喜而食之。姬昌告來使曰：“此羹甚肉？此肉甚好。”費孟聞言，心內思之。姬昌非是賢人也！

(The messenger says,) “Now the King grants meat to you, when you finish the meal, you can leave. Your son Boyikao now is waiting in Zhaohe (the capital of Shang).” Then the messenger offers the meal. Ji-Chang realized that the meat was from his own son, and he knew that if he did not eat it, he would be killed by the Tyrant. He chose to eat the meat, and expressed his enjoyment of it to the messenger by saying, “what is this meat? It is fabulous.” Fei-Meng concluded that Ji-Chang was not a sage.

— *Songyuan Pinghua Ji*, p. 442.

Evidently, this narrative corresponds with Huangfu-Mi's account, displaying Wenwang's realisation that he has been served a meal prepared from his own son. Faced with such a monstrous manifestation of tyranny, Wenwang chose to endure, patiently waiting for future opportunities. However, we observe the tale becoming increasingly detailed in its folkloric transmission, with

⁶⁰ For more on the rise and spread of *Pinghua* during the Song and Yuan periods, cf. Wu-Yenna 2002, “Vernacular Stories.” In Victor Mair (ed.), *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, New York: pp. 595–619. For more on how the urban economy of the Song Dynasty impacted folk literature, cf. Lin-Shunfu 2013, “The Pleasures of the City.” In Stephen Owen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, Cambridge: pp. 533–41.

dramatic elements introduced. Previously, the narrative simply entailed Wenwang's premonition of his son's fate, and the real source of the meat presented to him. Yet, this evolved version portrays Wenwang as not only accepting the meal but doing so while maintaining a facade of gratitude and delight.

This paradoxical representation, where he feigns delight while tasting the horror before him, serves a dual function. On one side, it highlights the brutal repression inflicted by the despotic authority — his necessity to feign delight to preserve his own life; on the other side, it underlies Wenwang's resilience and wisdom amidst profound despair and sorrow. This depiction of delight does not alleviate the tragedy; instead, it intensifies the sense of oppression and tragic struggle. Here, the narrative method of "Transformative Acceptance" escalates, turning a tragic error from active acceptance to (feigned) delightful acceptance, thereby emphasising that Wenwang's enduring legacy was forged upon tribulations beyond the endurance of ordinary individuals.

The principal factors catalysing this shift are twofold: on the literary sphere, as Pinghua are performed by storytellers in public entertainment spaces aiming to captivate audiences, this dramatic, conflict-ridden narrative style meets their interest;⁶¹ historically, the flourishing urban culture emboldened the public to engage in further metaphorical contemplations of their resistance against tyrannical politics and social injustices.⁶²

Similar narratives appear in the archaeological compilation *Heshuo Fangguji* (1363 A.D.) by Naxin from the Yuan Dynasty. Notably, this anthology verifies the so-called "Tomb of the Vomited Son" (嘔子冢), essentially a memorial built by later generations at the spot where Wenwang regurgitated the consumed meat due to distress.⁶³ Today, the Wenwang Temple in Youli, maintained since its restoration for worship in the Dade Era (1297–1307) of the Yuan Dynasty and subjected to several renovations during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, stands as a testament to this history.⁶⁴ This location is likely the same one investigated by Naxin. Although his verification methods, primarily relying on field visits, may lack credibility, they nonetheless attest to the fact that the spread and veneration of Wenwang's cannibalistic act reached a substantial scale. The reasons for this localized worship likely extend beyond mere admiration for Wenwang, presumably encompassing blessings

⁶¹ Liu-Dajie 2015, p. 748–9.

⁶² Ibid. p. 749–51.

⁶³ *Heshuo Fangguji*, chap. 02, p. 19a.

⁶⁴ Nie-Yuhai 1983, pp. 121.

sought for the eldest son within families. Regardless, such reverence and ritual practices appear to be contained within Youli, and have not transcended regional boundaries.

One of the most exhaustive renditions of Wenwang's progeny-eating is found in Xu-Zhonglin's (c. 1560–1630) fantastical novel of the Ming Dynasty, *The Investiture of the Gods*. The narrative, especially its initial half, draws heavily from *Wuwang Fazhou Pinghua*. Xu-Zhonglin reinvents the political strife between the Shang and Zhou Dynasties as a collision between the archaic religious powers backing them, interspersing an array of Daoist mythological elements to captivate the readers.

In Xu-Zhonglin's version, Boyikao learns of his father's incarceration at Youli due to a villain's plot, and personally journeys to Zhao to entreat Tyrant Zhou. However, he becomes entangled in a predicament reminiscent of the biblical story of Joseph, finding himself unjustly accused by Daji (妲己, Tyrant Zhou's concubine), which results in his execution to satisfy Tyrant Zhou's rage. At Daji's urging, Tyrant Zhou orders to cook Boyikao and serve his flesh as a meal to Wenwang, intending to test his prophetic abilities (*chap. 19*). Meanwhile, Wenwang learns of Boyikao's fate through divination while in Youli:

姬伯不觉流泪曰：“我儿不听父言，遭此碎身之祸！今日如不食子肉，难逃杀身之祸；如食子肉，其心何忍？使我心如刀绞，不敢悲啼，如泄此机，我身亦自难保。” … 使命曰：“主上见贤侯在羑里久羁，圣心不忍。昨日圣驾幸猎，打得鹿獐之物，做成肉饼，特赐贤侯，故有是命。”姬昌跪在案前，揭开膳盒，言曰：“圣上受鞍马之劳，反赐犯臣鹿饼之享，愿陛下万岁！”谢恩毕，连食三饼，将盒盖了。使命见姬昌食了子肉，暗暗叹曰：“人言姬伯能知先天神数，善晓吉凶，今日见子肉而不知，速食而甘美，所谓阴阳吉凶，皆是虚语！”且说姬昌明知子肉，含忍痛苦，不敢悲伤，勉强精神对使命言曰：“钦差大人，犯臣不能躬谢天恩，敢烦大人与昌转达，昌就此谢恩便了。”姬伯倒身下拜，“蒙圣上之恩光，又普照于羑里。”

Ji-Chang could not contain his tears, lamenting, “My son disregarded his father's advice and met such horrible fate! Today, if I don't consume my son's flesh, I risk death; if I do, how can my heart endure it? It feels like a knife twisting within me, and I dare not wail. Should I reveal this secret, I cannot protect myself” ... (Later,) The messenger relayed, “The king, aware of the kind marquis⁶⁵ prolonged detainment in Youli, could not bear it. Yesterday, he hunted deer and other game, prepared meat pies, and specially granted them to the kind

⁶⁵ In the *Investiture of the Gods*, Wenwang was a marquis at this time and was later promoted to Xibo (‘Western Duke’) after being released in Youli.

marquis. That is the order.” Ji-Chang knelt before the table, opened the food container, and exclaimed, “While Your Majesty bears the hardships of the saddle and horse, you instead grant this offending servant the favor of venison cakes. May Your Majesty live long!” Having expressed his gratitude, he consumed three pies and closed the box. The messenger, witnessing Ji-Chang eating his son’s flesh, secretly sighed, “People claim Ji-Chang knows the secrets of heaven and can foresee good and ill fortune. Yet today, he fails to recognize his son’s flesh and willingly consumes it. The supposed Yin and Yang fortunes are mere fabrications!” Ji-Chang, aware it was his son’s flesh, stifled his anguish and maintained composure. He forced himself to address the messenger, stating, “Honorable envoy, as a criminal, I cannot personally thank the king for his grace. I beseech you to convey my gratitude. I will thank the king here.” Ji-Chang prostrated himself, declaring, “The king’s grace shines upon us in Youli.”

— *The Investiture of the Gods*, chap. 20.2–3.

Xu-Zhonglin presents Wenwang as a sage able to distinguish fortune from calamity, yet this capacity brings him no benefit. Rather, it subjects him to a threefold ordeal: he knowingly consumes his own son in a shocking violation of ethical norms, while forcing himself to display gratitude and serenity so as to mask an inner grief and revulsion that cannot be expressed. In this way, the narrative pushes Wenwang’s virtuous endurance to its furthest limit. Because the novel reached a broader readership than earlier *pinghua*, readers were more likely to identify with the humiliation he suffered and to draw from it the conviction that hardship and oppression may become the ground of future restoration. This emotional identification may in part explain the wide circulation of the Wenwang progeny-eating episode among popular audiences, and even the reverence it sometimes inspired.

The first three phases in the development of the narrative of Wenwang’s progeny-eating correspond closely to Gu-Jiegang’s theory of the “layered formation of ancient Chinese history.” As the story evolves over time, its plot grows increasingly elaborate, while Wenwang’s image becomes progressively more elevated. Through the process I label “transformational acceptance”, an act originally marked by coercion, horror, and ethical tension is gradually recast as a conscious and even affirmatively embraced form of moral endurance. Cannibalism is thus integrated into one of the virtues most deeply prized in the Chinese tradition, with the result that a profoundly tragic error becomes not only acceptable, but morally exemplary.

Diversity: After the Ming Dynasty

Contrastingly, the fourth phase does not follow the tradition of “Layered Formation”. Instead, it turns back to the event at its root. With the decipherment of oracle bone inscriptions and archaeological excavations at the Yin Ruins in Anyang since the early Republic of China, our view breaks through the central point of “Layered Formation of Ancient Chinese History” — the Zhou Dynasty. This allows us to observe, comprehend, and interpret Wenwang’s progeny-eating from an entirely new perspective.

Contrary to the brutality depicted in traditional texts, interpretations from oracle bone inscriptions and archaeological evidence suggest that the Shang Dynasty was a period typified by widespread human sacrifices.⁶⁶ This sacrificial system was well-established and mature, characterized by an extensive scale, divergent purposes, and varied forms.⁶⁷

Substantial archaeological data points towards the Shang people conducting large-scale human sacrifices, which involved more than 300 victims each time and occurred with notable regularity.⁶⁸ Human remains in sacrifice pits exhibited evidence of dismemberment, sectioning, and the removal of limbs.⁶⁹ A 2013 report by the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (IACASS), unveiled a significant correlation between the count of individual human bones in the Yin Ruins sacrificial pits and the number of Qiang (羌) people mentioned in oracle bone inscriptions.⁷⁰ In the extant oracle bone inscriptions, the Qiang people were the primary offerings in human sacrifice divination.⁷¹ According to Tang-Jigen’s statistics on extant oracle bone inscriptions, at least 6,834 Qiang people were sacrificed by the Shang people.⁷² The Qiang people inhabited the northwest of the Shang Dynasty, in what is now Shǎnxi and Gansu provinces, near the Zhou people’s

⁶⁶ Shaughnessy 1997, p. 47; Keightley 1999, pp. 263–4, 266–7.

⁶⁷ For comprehensive research on human sacrifice during the Shang Dynasty, cf. Lewis 1990, pp. 26–8; Wang-Ping and Kubin 2007.

⁶⁸ Cf. IACASS, Anyang Excavation Team 1977, pp. 20–36, 73–7.

⁶⁹ Tang-Jigen and Niu-Hairu 2013, p. 425.

⁷⁰ Tang-Jigen and Tang-Yuyun 2014, pp. 24–8.

⁷¹ Hu-Houxuan 1974, pp. 56–67.

⁷² Tang-Jigen and Tang-Yuyun 2014, p. 24. Li-Feng estimates that at least 30,000 human sacrifices were made in the sacrificial pits of Shang royal tomb area, Li-Feng 2013, p. 71.

settlement.⁷³ While the specific identity of the Qiang people remains undetermined, it is safe to say that the Zhou and Qiang peoples shared close ties.⁷⁴

Human sacrifices in the Shang Dynasty, besides involving slaves and common war prisoners, also featured leaders and young children from other nations.⁷⁵ Various sacrificial methods were employed, including cooking (and after cooking to share the sacrificial meat is normally acknowledged a social blessing).⁷⁶ In 1999, the Anyang Excavation Team discovered a Shang Dynasty noble tomb M1046 (belong to the fourth phase of Yin Ruins) in the north of Liujiazhuang, where a “bronze pot” (甗, *yan*) with a female skull was found. The connection of the skull showed smooth fissures, suggesting they were not caused by external strikes, but naturally separated due to high temperatures from boiling.⁷⁷

It is believed that many oracle bone inscriptions dedicated to “Father Ding” for human sacrifice, who might have been Tyrant Zhou’s father — Wending.⁷⁸ Hence, subsequent historical documentation of Tyrant Zhou’s brutality, such as making human into minced meat, opening the chest, hanging human flesh to dry, putting people on a pole to roast over a fire,⁷⁹ could be an indirect depiction of his excessive human sacrifices.

In Li-Shuo’s *Cutting off Shang* (2022), which posits that the *Yijing* was Wenwang’s notes from his lifetime, he interprets the “Yaoci” (爻辭, ‘six lines under hexagram’) in “Hexagram of Harm” (損卦), “Hexagram of Mountain” (艮卦) and “Hexagram of Thunder” (震卦) to reconstruct the incident of Wenwang’s progeny-eating and his psychological response innovatively and distinctively.⁸⁰ Although the view that the *Yijing* records historical information is not innovative (cf.

⁷³ For a discussion on the identity of the Qiang people and their sacrificial situation, cf. Wang-Ping and Kubin 2007, pp. 49–57; Yang-Shengnan believes that the identity of human sacrifices in the Shang Dynasty should be limited to slaves, while the Qiang people were slaves for herding offered to the Shang kings by other ethnic groups. However, his definition of slaves is quite broad, as it is obvious that anyone sacrificed would inevitably be a “slave” who lost their freedom, but captives and slaves should not be mixed up, so his discussion on slaves is slightly less rigorous. Nevertheless, his further classification of identify of human sacrifices is worth reading, Yang-Shengnan 1988, pp. 134–46.

⁷⁴ Li-Shuo proposes a new viewpoint in his *Cutting off Shang*, suggesting that the Zhou people were a branch of the Qiang people, and their main occupation was capturing and offering Qiang people to the Shang kings after migrating eastward and approaching the Central Plains, pp. 287–95, 311–25.

⁷⁵ IACASS, Anyang Excavation Team 1985, pp. 33–88; Wang-Ping and Kubin 2007, pp. 69–78; Li-Shuo 2022, pp. 1–23. In the oracle bone inscriptions of human sacrifice, “白” (*bai*) generally refers to the leader of another country, e.g. *HJ*, 26925, 28086; “囟” (*xin*) generally refers to the leader’s skull, a special sacrificial method, e.g. *HJ*, 28092, 28093.

⁷⁶ Wang-Ping and Kubin 2007, p. 118.

⁷⁷ IACASS, Anyang Excavation Team 2004, p. 365.

⁷⁸ Wang-Ping and Kubin 2007, pp. 162–165. e.g. *HJ*, 13384, 22549, 22550, 22555, 32054, 32055, 32057, 32070, 32071.

⁷⁹ Sima-Qian, *Annals of Yin* (vol. 03). 30–3; *Lüshi Chunqiu*, 140. 1; *Hanfeizi*, 3.1.

⁸⁰ Li-Shuo 2022, pp. 441–7.

Gu-Jiegang 1929, pp. 967–1006; Gao-Heng 2010, pp. 40–3), Li-Shuo’s approach is much adventurous and more innovative, viewing nearly the entire *Yijing* as the notes of Wenwang and his son Zhougong. Although this interpretation is controversial and the historical research cannot wholly rely on this adventurous approach, in my opinion, it provides a new perspective for thinking about the transition between the Shang Zhou period and is worth consulting at least for the details of the narrative of Wenwang’s progeny-eating.

Based on these insights, we have reason to infer that the record of Wenwang’s progeny-eating is a response to the consumption of human sacrifices during the Shang Dynasty. Although the tradition of human sacrifice lingered into the early Western Zhou Dynasty, the gradually established rites and music institution clarified new rules and regulations for sacrifice, leading to the eventual renunciation of human sacrifice.⁸¹ Despite later historical texts continuing to document Tyrant Zhou’s cruel human sacrifice practices, they were reticent when it comes to the sacrifice of Wenwang’s eldest son, ensuring that the image of the Zhou royal family remains untarnished; or according to Li-Shuo, the new regime was committed to eliminating all records of the outdated and brutal customs of the past Dynasty.⁸²

Summary

Although later official histories vividly record Tyrant Zhou’s cruelty and his frequent use of human sacrifice, the incident involving the execution and ritual consumption of Wenwang’s eldest son by the Shang regime is treated with striking vagueness—mentioned only in passing or veiled in euphemism. This deliberate textual obscuration appears intended to shield the moral sanctity of the Zhou dynasty’s founding figure from the potential taint of such a disturbing episode. In contrast to the silence of official discourse, however, the story persisted in the popular imagination, preserved in local legends and sacrificial rites, even extending as far as the ancestral temples of the Chu region. Especially after the Zhou royal house receded from the center of political power, interpretations of this event gradually shifted away from dynastic preservation and instead began to orbit around the ethical construction of Wenwang as a sage. In other words, once the act of teknophagy was subsumed

⁸¹ Cf. Li-Shuo 2022, pp. 509ff.

⁸² Ibid.

within a transcendent moral framework, it no longer constituted a moral stain but instead became a hallmark of sanctity.

This cultural transvaluation reveals a distinctive Chinese mode of engaging with tragic error. Rather than fixating on the moral status of the act itself, Chinese narratives tend to prioritize its broader political and symbolic ramifications. That is, they do not inquire into the psychic disintegration or ethical rupture inflicted upon the subject by such a tragic act, but instead explore how the act serves the architecture of political legitimacy, contributes to the preservation of social order, or becomes integrated into the hagiographic script of a sage king whose virtue is meant to inspire emulation. Within this interpretive structure, tragic error is transformed into a crucible for moral refinement—a necessary ordeal on the path to the highest form of virtue.

The reception history of Wenwang's teknophagy offers a vivid demonstration of this structural logic. From its omission in the early texts of the pre-Qin period, to its tentative acceptance under Han influence, from the rationalist critiques of the Song to its symbolic amplification in the allegorical and vernacular literatures of the Ming, the narrative underwent a gradual metamorphosis: from historical trauma to ethical emblem, and ultimately into political myth. It ceased to be a contingent wound and instead became a ritual through which civilization narrates and affirms its own ethical ideals.

This mechanism of “transfigurative acceptance” allows tragic error to evolve narratively—from passive endurance, to active assumption, and ultimately to a posture of seemingly joyful sacrifice. The severity of the act is not denied but is instead elevated through the lens of sanctity; suffering is no longer the endpoint of moral crisis but a radiant expression of virtue. The story of Wenwang's consumption of his son thus represents one of the most thoroughgoing examples of how Chinese political culture reinterprets extreme acts—not as aberrations to be rejected, but as opportunities for ethical subsumption, symbolic mastery, and moral transformation. It stands as a testament to the institutional imagination and narrative ingenuity through which ancient Chinese civilization absorbed, domesticated, and ultimately sanctified the tragic.

3. Sage Beyond Pollution: The Political Logic of Ethical Purity

The legend of Wenwang consuming his own son presents one of the most striking paradoxes in the political-ethical imagination of ancient China. A father who partakes in the flesh of his own progeny

is not vilified as a transgressor of familial or ritual norms; rather, he is exalted as the archetype of sage kingship, the founding figure of Confucian benevolent rule. This narrative provokes three foundational questions: How can such an act of ethical extremity be absorbed into, rather than dismantle, a moral order? Why does this motif persist—veiled yet never erased—within the Confucian imaginary? And most critically, is it precisely the extremity of the act that compels its sacralization, requiring interpretive frameworks to redeem it as a site of political necessity?

To approach these questions, we must first recognize a structural premise: within the Confucian political cosmos, Wenwang functions not merely as a historical figure but as a symbolic anchor of moral legitimacy. As Confucius famously remarked, “Had Heaven wished to destroy the Way, it would not have glorified Wenwang” (*Analects*, *Zihan*, 5). In this view, Wenwang is more than a virtuous ruler; he is the originary embodiment of wen (文⁸³), or civilization itself. His actions cannot be judged within the confines of personal morality, but must be interpreted through the prism of dynastic virtue and political orthodoxy.

Thus, Wenwang’s act is never directly confronted in the textual tradition; instead, it is subjected to a series of calculated symbolic transpositions. In official histories, the incident is either recast as a succession decision or elided altogether. In vernacular literature, it is reframed as a moment of sacrificial endurance or saintly restraint. These divergent strategies serve a unified function: to manage the disruptive charge of the narrative within a politically acceptable frame. Where silence disarms, elevation redeems—together enacting a mechanism of ideological containment that neutralizes the threat of moral dissonance without effacing the memory of the act itself.

Confucian political ethics is not governed by an intrinsic standard of right and wrong, but by the structural function of conduct in upholding order. So long as a given act consolidates the authority of the Way, even behavior that appears ethically indefensible in the private domain may be reclassified as morally instrumental. In this light, Wenwang’s progeny-eating is no longer a collapse of kinship, but a trial of virtue—less a scandal, more a sanctification.

The viability of this non-polluting progeny-eating narrative hinges on what might be termed Confucian symbolic priority: actions are meaningful before they are moral. Once inscribed into a symbolic system, even the most transgressive behavior can be reframed as a moment of ethical

⁸³ See chap. IV. n. 1.

transcendence. This reveals a fundamental logic in early Chinese political culture: impurity need not be expunged—it can be reorganized and absorbed into the symbolic apparatus of legitimacy.

Wenwang’s “purity,” then, is not a matter of moral innocence but of systemic function. His sageliness does not lie in evading pollution, but in transmuting it. This capacity to convert ethical extremity into political allegory exemplifies the symbolic elasticity of the Confucian tradition, and reflects how Chinese thought sustains equilibrium between moral coherence and political necessity in the face of tragic error.

Ultimately, the enduring legitimacy of this narrative derives not from the act’s moral justifiability, but from the structural imperative to preserve Wenwang’s sanctity within the Confucian imaginary. It is not an ethical judgment but a symbolic arrangement. Here lies one of the most enduring paradoxes in Chinese intellectual history: moral purity is not the absence of defilement, but the power to traverse it—and to integrate it into a higher moral vision. In this sense, Wenwang’s story is not an aberration but the very grammar of Confucian political myth.

4. Conclusion

The narrative of Wenwang’s progeny-eating, through centuries of cultural recitation and symbolic transfiguration, has undergone a gradual metamorphosis—from an initial site of ethical shock to an emblem of sagehood. This transformation from “pollution” to “paradigm” did not occur instantaneously. Rather, it unfolded across a clearly traceable trajectory of reception, moving through four phases: omission, acceptance, critique, and diversification—a path through which a historical trauma was ultimately reborn as a political myth.

During the pre-Han phase of omission, orthodox historiography veiled the event in silence—an evasion not only of ethical contradiction, but also a deliberate strategy to preserve dynastic legitimacy. In the Han to early Tang phase of acceptance, as royal authority receded and hagiographic literature flourished, the story of Wenwang’s tragic act was explicitly recorded and reinterpreted as a test of moral endurance—absorbed into the framework of virtuous rulership. This gave way to a phase of critique in the Tang-Song period, when rationalist historiography and the *Guwen* (ancient-style prose) movement rejected the Chenwei tradition, relegating the story once more to the margins of canonical discourse. Yet in the void left by official silence, popular narrative took hold: by the Song-Yuan period and beyond, the tale entered a diversified stage, animated by

storytelling traditions, novels, and temple cults, where Wenwang's restraint and sacrifice were further dramatized and sanctified. Recent archaeological discoveries—including oracle bones and bamboo manuscripts—have added material weight to this symbolic legacy, suggesting that the narrative was never mere invention, but one embedded within the ritual logic of Shang religious and political culture.

These four phases of reception are not merely diachronic layers of textual variation; they reveal an underlying ideological resilience—a capacity to absorb ethical extremity through symbolic recalibration. The reason Confucian political ethics could accommodate so radical a tragic error was not because the act was morally justified, but because it was symbolically indispensable. Wenwang was never merely a moral agent in Confucian discourse; he functioned as the anchor of dynastic legitimacy. His act, therefore, was lifted from the register of private morality and restructured within the ideological logic of kingly virtue. In this logic, pollution is not denied, but tamed—converted into a necessary counterpoint that enhances, rather than undermines, the sanctity it shadows.

In this process, ethical judgment is not abolished but displaced—sublimated into a higher plane of political value. Confucian discourse never explicitly legitimized progeny-eating, yet it could not allow the act to blemish the image of the sage. Through a complex matrix of redaction, substitution, and symbolic elevation, a subtle reconciliation is forged—one that allows the saint and the stain to coexist in a non-antagonistic register. This reconciliation is not a rhetorical sleight of hand, but a paradigmatic instance of how Confucian culture manages the deep tension between political necessity and moral coherence.

Ultimately, Wenwang's non-polluting progeny-eating becomes possible not because it escapes ethical scrutiny, but because the entire cultural edifice reorganizes itself around its symbolic necessity. It is, at once, a reception history of tragedy and a self-defensive architecture of ideological control. Confucian political thought does not seek to expel pollution as an alien force, but to interiorize and redirect it—embedding it within the moral syntax of civilizational order.

The enduring power of Wenwang's story lies precisely in this capacity for cultural reinvention. It reflects a civilization's ability to negotiate the fraught intersection of virtue and violence, to absorb the most transgressive rupture into a renewed ethical framework. And it is through this mode of tragic containment that the ideal of *Wangdao*—the kingly way—is not only preserved but

continually reanimated. In the shadow of ultimate suffering, moral clarity is sharpened, and political sanctity—paradoxically—reaffirmed.

V. Convergence and Divergence of Progeny-eating in Ancient Greece and China¹

物無非彼，物無非是。自彼則不見，自知則知之。故曰：彼出於是，是亦因彼。彼是，方生之說也。

All things are inescapably 'that', and all things are inescapably 'this'. To perceive from the perspective of 'that' is to remain blind; to know through self-referential awareness is to attain genuine understanding. Thus, it is said: 'That' arises from 'This,' and 'This' is reciprocally conditioned by 'That.' 'That' and 'This' constitute a doctrine of co-emergent relativity—simultaneously generated and mutually defining.

— Zhuangzi, *The Adjustment of Controversies* (chap.2), 5.

Lévi-Strauss argues that many cultures display a strong tendency to associate incest with cannibalism. In his structural triad of “Incest—Cannibalism—Totemism”, these two taboos form the twin pillars of cultural order, regulating marriage networks and food systems respectively. As Lévi-Strauss observes: “In the language of the Koko Yao of the Cape York Peninsula, the word *kuta kuta* has the double meaning of incest and cannibalism, which are the hyperbolic forms of sexual union and food consumption.”² This semantic overlap reveals a profound structural isomorphism: incest disrupts the regulated exchange of kinship, while cannibalism transgresses the fundamental divide between human and non-human. The reason these violations evoke powerful emotional responses lies precisely in their assault on two core dimensions of human cultural classification: the ordered

¹ Sino-Hellenistic comparative studies have developed considerably in recent decades, drawing increasing scholarly interest through interdisciplinary collaboration. Scholars in this field generally adopt one of two main approaches. The first, “Active Comparativism”, aims to “identify contrasts within parallels and commonalities within divergences”. It uses cross-cultural comparison to generate fresh perspectives on individual cultures (*comparanda*), while also exploring broader trans-cultural patterns in an anthropological sense. Foundational work by Granet 1934; Northrop 1946; 1947; and Needham 1969 established this approach, later expanded by the Paris School Vernant and Detienne 1974; Vernant and Gernet 1974. More recent figures such as Jullien 1999; 2000; 2004; Lloyd 1990; 1996; 2004; and Raphals 1992; 2002; 2003; 2013, exemplify distinct comparative styles: Jullien emphasizes broad cultural contrasts, Lloyd focuses on detailed cross-contextual analysis, and Raphals centres on conceptual interpretation. The second approach, often termed “Cautious Negative Comparativism” (with “negative” not implying disapproval), questions the possibility of meaningful comparison between fundamentally different cultures. Some scholars focus on mutually influential civilisations as the basic units for comparison, examining paradigms of interaction between parallel cultures, such as the comparison between Sino-Japanese and Greco-Roman traditions, Denecke 2013. Others argue that deep conceptual divergences may render comparisons between disparate cultures untenable, raising questions like “Is there such an object as Chinese science/philosophy”, Defoort 2001; Denecke 2010. Still others caution against the essentialism that often accompanies reductive comparisons. As a result, many scholars take a reserved or skeptical stance toward cross-cultural comparison. This cautiousness has limited broader academic engagement and contributed to the relative scarcity of sustained critical debate in this field. For overviews of the history of Sino-Hellenistic comparative studies, see Tanner 2009, Beecroft 2016, and Raphals 2018. For methodological discussions, see Cai-Zongqi 2002; Lloyd 1994, pp. 23–36; 1996, pp. 1–4, 20–46; 2018, pp. 1–30; and Weber 2013.

² Lévi-Strauss 2021, p.117. The Toradja in the Central Celebes say *mantjisi tojoenja* for cannibalism and incest, Adriani 1951, p. 397; the Tahiti use ‘*ai ta’ata*’ or ‘*amuta’ata*’ for cannibalism and incest, Levy 1973, p. 108; cf. Wolf 2014, pp. 85–91.

exchange of kinship (incest taboo) and the fundamental distinction between humans and non-humans (cannibalism taboo). The incest taboo marks the point of transformation from natural kinship to cultural order through exogamous marriage, while the cannibalism taboo establishes the fundamental boundary that prohibits consuming one's own kind. Together, these taboos establish the essential cultural logic of "inside/outside".

At the same time, Lévi-Strauss's emphasis on structural commonalities leaves less room for cultural specificity. Greek and Chinese traditions can be read within this broad framework, but they do not organize these violations in the same way. Both treat incest as a grave transgression, and both can present progeny-eating as an extreme sign of human collapse. Yet their narrative and symbolic emphases differ sharply. In Greek materials, myth, ritual, and tragedy tend to frame such acts within a religious-cosmic order, drawing attention to pollution, divine anger, and the catastrophic consequences of breached boundaries. In Chinese materials, by contrast, extreme violence is more often absorbed into historical and ethical discourse, where its significance is determined by questions of political legitimacy, dynastic order, and moral exemplarity. Greek narratives thus tend to dramatize the rupture of order through mythic and tragic structures, whereas Chinese narratives more often embed the same kind of horror within a discourse of ethical causality and political judgment.

This leads to an intriguing phenomenon: deep structural convergence coupled with surface-level divergence. Both traditions manifest profound anxiety over progeny-eating, treating it as a radical violation of human boundaries. Yet they mobilize distinct narrative strategies and philosophical frameworks to address it.

This chapter examines this convergence-divergence dynamic through four sections:

The first section discusses the universality and specific expressions of the binary concept of "purity and pollution" across cultures. Drawing on cultural anthropology and theories of religious symbolism, it analyzes how the Greek Thyestes narrative and the Chinese story of Wenwang embody divergent paths of pollution and purification.

The second section explores the symbolic differences in narrative strategies and bodily ethics adopted by Greek and Chinese traditions in response to ethical extremity and tragic events. Greek narratives emphasize the mechanisms of moral transgression and the substantial reality of bodily

pollution, whereas Chinese narratives treat the body as a symbolic vehicle for virtue, transforming the consequences of the event into a foundation for moral and political legitimacy.

The third section reflects on the dialectical relationship between philosophy's critical stance toward social norms and the need for social stability. It compares Platonic, Cynic, and Stoic reflections on taboo with Confucian moral pedagogy and Daoist naturalism, revealing a complex tension between the rationalization of taboo and the elasticity of ethical order.

The fourth section investigates the political functions of heroic representation, analyzing how narratives of "humanized" versus "idealized" heroes serve distinct cultural-political agendas. Heroes in Greek tragedy often meet a humanized, tragic end that exposes ethical crisis, while Confucian narratives idealize sage-kings to establish the moral legitimacy of political rule.

In conclusion, the narrative destinies of "tragic errors" across civilizations depend not on the inherent nature of the events themselves, but rather on how distinct cultures interpret, utilize, and ultimately transcend these extreme transgressions.

1. The Polluted Thyestes and the Purified Wenwang: Diverging Paths of Taboo and Redemption

As the anthropologist Mary Douglas states: "dirt is essentially disorder".³ This definition implies the existence of both order and the violation of that order. Pollution disturbs the existing classificatory system and disrupts the symbolic order of society. Consequently, the pursuit of purity represents a cultural defense mechanism, an attempt to forcibly incorporate experiences of chaos, contradiction, and disorder into a logically coherent framework, thereby eliminating ambiguous states (liminality) to solidify existing classifications and value systems.⁴ The binary distinction between purity and pollution, therefore, is not confined to the physiological or religious realms but functions more as a social control mechanism, demarcating boundaries between "self and other", "normal and abnormal", and "order and chaos".

The Greek concept of pollution (*μίασμα*, *miasma*) resonates with Douglas's mechanism. *Μίασμα* is not merely filth, but a "contagious pollution" with religious and social implications,

³ Douglas 1984, p. 2.

⁴ Ibid. p. 163.

possessing its own autonomous power.⁵ The Greeks believed that major crimes, such as parricide, murder, incest, and sacrilege, generate miasma that has the power to spread and infect, endangering the individual and the community. This pollution can only be cleansed through ritual purification (*κάθαρσις*, *katharsis*) or by the atoning cost of the criminal. Once pollution is generated, it is often cumulative and transgenerational, requiring religious rituals for its resolution, rather than mere personal moral repentance.⁶

In Chapter Three, we analyzed mythological narratives of similar structures, such as those of Thyestes, Tereus, and Clymenus. These narratives collectively portray progeny-eating as an irredeemable *μίασμα*. According to Gipson, cannibalism signifies two traits: the sacrilege against the gods and a dissolution of the divine-mortal hierarchies.⁷ However, Gipson fails to recognize the inherent polluting nature of this act, which stems from a dual violation of both sacred law and kinship ethics.

In Greek mythology, the “sacred” (*ιερός*) is manifested as external and rigid religious laws, such as those governing hospitality and family relations, which are inviolable. Violating these laws triggers divine wrath. Progeny-eating is viewed as a public defiance of divine law (*θεσμός*), and Plato refers to Thyestes’ act as “hated by the gods” (*θεομισής*, *Laws* 838c). The progeny-eating of Thyestes even leads to supernatural phenomena, such as the sun’s chariot being reversed in terror and Zeus causing the day to turn back, which clearly express the divine fury over the human tragedy.⁸ For the Greeks, cannibalism undermines the core foundation of the contract between gods and humans: when kinship ethics and sacrificial norms are destroyed, human reverence for the gods inevitably crumbles. Therefore, this pollution must be remedied by the gods or their representatives

⁵ Moreover, *μίασμα* can also metaphorically describe morally corrupted leaders or enemies in the Greek political context. For instance, Aeschines condemned Demosthenes, referring to him as the “polluting demon of the city”, using the metaphor of pollution to portray him as the source of disorder and chaos. By stigmatizing the opponent as the “source of pollution”, this establishes their threat to social order and, in turn, provides legitimacy for their elimination or punishment in public discourse. Aesch. *In Ctes.* 57, 114, 131, 157f, 253. We have analyzed how Aeschines integrates supernatural forces into his accusations in Chapter I when discussing *ἀπυχία*. Cf. Dem. *De cor.* 159, 296; Eur. *Or.* 1584; Soph. *OC* 788; Eupolis, *fr.* 120.

⁶ Herodotus records that those stained with the blood of hands and feet were excluded from religious life in the city-state because their pollution could spread to others through contact (1.35); Plato, in his *Laws*, emphasizes that crimes of pollution must be purified through communal rituals involving all citizens to restore the order between the city-state and the gods (865d–e).

⁷ Gipson 2022, pp. 46–7.

⁸ In different versions, Zeus performs two miracles where the sun goes backward. One occurs when Thyestes acquires the golden fleece through incest with his brother’s wife, leading Zeus to promise Atreus a greater miracle to confirm the legitimacy of his power, Σ. Eur. *Or.* 811; Σ. *Il.* 2.105; Eur. *El.* 699–739; *Or.* 1001–6; *Ap.E* 2.12–3; *Pl. Plt.* 269a. The other happens during the progeny-eating feast, Soph. *Anth. Pal.* 9. 98; *Ov. Tr.* 2. 391–2; Sen. *Thyestes*, 776ff; Hyg. *Fab.* 88, 258.

to uphold the authority of the divine order. This divinity is absolute and heteronomous, meaning individuals must submit without negotiation.

The reason Thyestes is regarded as irredeemably polluted lies in the fact that he has violated the sanctity of the cosmic order itself, rather than merely infringing upon human legal disputes. Greek myths often carry religious-political warnings, as seen in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, where the cycle of familial revenge is finally ended by Athena's establishment of the court, symbolizing how Athens internalized divine laws into legal systems, replacing private vengeance with law and thereby achieving fundamental purification.⁹ Thus, myths like that of Thyestes carry the dual meaning of preserving religious commandments and the legal traditions of the city-state.

Moreover, progeny-eating signifies not only a loss of personal control but also but also a radical inversion of the reproductive logic encoded in the Greek metaphors of seed and field (*σπέρμα* – *ἄρουρα*). Offspring, originally symbols of bloodline continuity, become victims of power struggles, their flesh consumed, symbolizing the self-destruction of the family lineage and the collapse of the city-state order. Meanwhile, in Greek literary narratives, progeny-eating also serves as an expulsion of incest, a crime of pollution, meaning the polluting nature of eater is twofold.¹⁰

The pollution embodied in Thyestes' forced progeny-eating has strong ethical implications: consuming human flesh erases the boundary between humans and beasts, reducing the individual to a "non-human" state. Greek religious rites strictly distinguish the food of the gods from that of humans. For example, when sacrificing animals, the bones and fat are burned for the gods, while humans are only allowed to consume the cooked meat (Hes. *Theog.* 532–44).¹¹ This ritualistic food distribution reflects a clear distinction between divine and human orders, and cannibalism destroys this fundamental rule. Scholars like Vernant, through structural analysis of Greek sacrifices, have pointed out that cooking (civilized) and raw consumption (barbaric/taboo) are a key opposition. In Greek culture, "what is eaten" and "with whom one eats" are crucial markers of distinguishing civilized order from chaotic disorder.¹² Thyestes, unknowingly consuming the flesh of his progeny, violates both the dietary and kinship boundaries: not only does he engage in anthropophagy (breaking the boundary between humans and other humans), but he also consumes his own kin

⁹ Parker 1983, pp. 386–8.

¹⁰ See Chapter III.

¹¹ Cf. Clay 1989, p. 37.

¹² Detienne and Vernant 1989, pp. 40, 178. Cf. Detienne 1979, pp. 53–67; Versnel 1989, pp. 121–52.

(violating the familial ethical boundary). According to Douglas's theory, this is a dual inversion of basic classifications—father and child relations are reversed (the nurturer becomes the predator), and human beings are reclassified as food (those who were not meant to be eaten became food). This dual inversion touches upon the core taboos of Greek culture, inevitably triggering intense feelings of pollution and religious dread.

The Greeks viewed the tragedy of Thyestes' progeny-eating as a causal "chain of pollution": an individual's *ἁμαρτία* (error) angers the divine law, leading to divine retribution (*ἄτη*) and curses. This concept reflects a trait of "guilt-culture"¹³ inherent in Greek religious culture: even if the error is not intentional, once it violates an inviolable boundary, the individual objectively bears the stigma and consequences of offending the gods. In this view, moral responsibility has been materialized as the "dirt" of pollution, and the power of tragedy arises from the protagonist's inability to escape the entanglement of fate and the pollution of bloodline. Vernant notes the tension in Greek tragedy's "tragic guilt": on one hand, it preserves ancient religious views, seeing sin as "a defilement attached to an entire race and inexorably transmitted from one generation to the next in the form of an ate or madness sent by the gods"; on the other hand, it also reflects the city-state's legal humanism, where "the guilty one is defined as a private individual who, acting under no constraint, has deliberately chosen to commit a crime".¹⁴ Thyestes is clearly caught in this combination of states: for religious view, his guilt exceeds the limits of individual will, becoming a curse shared by the family and the earth; for humanism, his actions are a reflection of his character, and "character is divine destiny" (*ἡθὸς ἀνθρώπων δαίμων*, DK 22 B119)¹⁵, signifying that the actor is the cause of their own actions. Whether the act is voluntary or involuntary, the actor bears responsibility.¹⁶

¹³ When we refer to a "guilt-culture", we do not suggest that (a certain period of) Greek society fully adheres to either guilt-culture or shame-culture. Rather, these two cultural models should be seen as an inductive tool for understanding cultural characteristics. The complexity of culture shows us that it can, simultaneously, encompass both types of cultural features in different proportions. This balanced perspective was elaborated by Lloyd-Jones 1983 and further argued by Williams 2008. However, for a more specialized examination of Greek guilt-culture, see Dodds 1964; Sewall-Rutter 2007; for shame-culture, see Adkins 1960; 1970.

¹⁴ Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988, p. 81.

¹⁵ Winnington-Ingram remarked: Tragedy is based on the dual interpretation of Heraclitus' famous statement on character and fate, Winnington-Ingram 1965, pp. 31–50.

¹⁶ In a sense, the actor is merely the executor of their actions, just as a craftsman or poet (*ποιητής*) in creating (*ποίησις*) a work does not truly create but merely materializes the pre-existing "form" through material or language. The "form" that already exists is independent and superior to the "art" (*τέχνη*) of creation. In other words, the work is more perfect than its creator, and the person is inferior to their work. In practical activities, the person is also subordinate to what they do, cf. Vernant 1971, p. 63. In contrast, Confucianism holds that objects are created by the sages, and the person surpasses their work, *Zhouli, Kaogongji*, 5. See Chapter II for Zheng-Xuan's discussion of "an axe slipping and causing injury".

In contrast to the Greek emphasis on external religious order, ancient Chinese discourse on taboo and order focuses more on the intrinsic purity of moral ethics, with less development of an independent and ritualized concept of “pollution” like the Greek miasma.¹⁷ In ancient Chinese texts, actions such as kin killing each other or cannibalism within the family are certainly seen as extreme violations of filial piety and humanity. However, religious terms such as “impurity” are rarely used to describe the status of the individuals involved. The consequences of progeny-eating are typically judged within the realm of social ethics rather than the domain of sacred order. This concealment of the “pollution” aspect partly stems from the distinct cosmological and religious views of Chinese culture. According to Yu-Yingshi, in his exploration of the transformation of the “Heaven and Man” concept during the Axial Age, Chinese theology and divine punishment from the Zhou dynasty onward were primarily aligned with ethical order, maintained through interpersonal relations (such as the “Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues”¹⁸) and the state’s legal teachings.¹⁹ Consequently, when extreme events such as progeny-eating occur, the focus of judgment often rests on the moral legitimacy of the motives behind the actions, rather than the supernatural consequences of the actions themselves.

The concept of the “sacred” in ancient China significantly differs from that in Greece. In Pre-Qin philosophy, “Heaven” is not a personified divine lawgiver but rather the highest principle that sustains moral order. The concept of “Mandate of Heaven” (天命) contains the idea of moral permission: only those with virtuous conduct are favored by Heaven, while the tyrannical and immoral inevitably lose their Mandate. Therefore, the sacredness in the Chinese context carries an intrinsic moral quality: it does not demand adherence through specific commandments but rather encourages virtuous action through the belief that “Heaven shows no favoritism, but always favors

¹⁷ Ancient Chinese texts are not entirely devoid of descriptions of pollution or unclean states. In fact, terms such as “穢”(filth), “汙”(dirt), and “祓”(purification) frequently appear in pre-Qin and Han texts, as well as in later literature. For example, in *Shangshu, Taishi Zhong*, 2, it states: “The innocent cry out to Heaven, while the vile have their depravity proclaimed abroad (無辜籲天, 穢德彰聞)”, addressing moral impurity. Similarly, *Zhouli, Chunguan*, 143 reads: “The female shamans presided over seasonal exorcisms and ritual lustrations (女巫: 掌歲時祓除, 釁浴)”, referring to religious purification rituals as “祓除”. However, these concepts do not form a clear, unified, and systematic religious ritual and cultural mechanism like the Greek theory of *μίασμα*. Instead, they more often appear as rhetorical ethics, political metaphors, or tools for social education, rather than as independent and strongly supernatural objective entities.

¹⁸ Three Fundamental Bonds (三綱): Hierarchical relationships—ruler/subject, father/son, husband/wife—emphasizing obedience and duty. Five Constant Virtues (五常): Core virtues—benevolence (仁), righteousness (義), propriety (禮), wisdom (智), and fidelity (信)—guiding ethical behavior.

¹⁹ Cf. Yu-Yingshi 2014, pp. 152–78.

the virtuous” (*Daodejing*, 79). As a result, the narrative of Wenwang’s progeny-eating in Chinese tradition adopts a nearly opposite narrative strategy. Unlike Greek myths, where progeny-eating is portrayed as a permanent, irredeemable “pollution” that cannot be atoned for by the individual, Chinese tradition transforms the act into a stage for demonstrating Wenwang’s moral will and internal virtue. It constructs an ethical narrative of “overcoming pollution through virtue, transforming disaster into blessing”. As discussed in Chapter Four, the narrative of Wenwang’s progeny-eating has been continuously reshaped over centuries, with its value lying in the ethical and political implications ascribed to it in this process.

From an ethical perspective, Confucian “retracing heart for guilt conviction” theory provides a unique interpretive framework for Wenwang’s progeny-eating. In *Mengzi* (*Lianghuiwang Xia*, 15), when discussing the legitimacy of the rebellion of Tang (湯) and Wu (武) against tyrannical rulers, Mencius expounds on this principle:

King Xuan of Qi (齊宣公) asks, “Is it acceptable for a minister to kill his ruler?”

Mencius replies, “One who violates benevolence (ren 仁) is called a bandit; one who violates righteousness (yi 義) is called a mutilator. A person who is both a mutilator and a bandit is called a solitary scoundrel (yifu 一夫). We have heard of the execution of the solitary scoundrel Zhou (the last tyrant of Shang), but never of the killing of a legitimate ruler”.

According to Mencius, when a tyrant loses his benevolence and righteousness, he no longer retains the title of “ruler”, and it is therefore morally justifiable to overthrow him, an act that cannot be regarded as “killing a ruler”. Through this redefinition of “name” and “substance”, Mencius categorizes the tyrant as “not a ruler” (a solitary scoundrel), thereby exonerating the rebellion of Wu. This reveals that Confucianism defines guilt and justice more by the internal motivations and the morality behind an act, rather than its formal observance of rituals.

The case of Duke Huan of Qi (齊桓公) and Yi-Ya (易牙) can be seen as another interpretation of the Confucian “retracing heart for guilt conviction” theory. During the Spring and Autumn period, Yi-Ya, a minister of Qi, in an attempt to please Duke Huan, went so far as to cook his own child for a feast. Unaware of the true nature of the dish, Duke Huan was deeply moved after tasting it and praised Yi-Ya’s loyalty. Although this act involved the extreme taboo of cannibalism, later historical records did not criticize Duke Huan’s actions as unclean or morally reprehensible. The decline of

his reign was solely attributed to his misplaced trust in such ministers and was never associated with the concept of “pollution”. In contrast, historians strongly condemned Yi-Ya’s voluntary act, stating, “If he does not love his own child, how can he love his lord?” (弗愛其子，安能愛君)²⁰

This contrast reveals that in the Chinese context, the moral judgment of the “cannibalism” is not based on the external nature of the act itself, but on the motivations and original intention behind it. If such an act arises from selfish desires (as in the case of Yi-Ya), it is regarded as an extreme violation of filial piety and moral integrity, leaving a permanent stain on the individual’s reputation. However, if the act is driven by ignorance, filial piety, loyalty, or even compassion, narrators often depict it with great sympathy and respect, deliberately downplaying the bloody and impure elements, elevating it to the ultimate manifestation of virtue. This approach reflects the ethics of Chinese culture, which centers on the motivation behind the action as the primary basis for moral evaluation.²¹

In the case of Wenwang’s progeny-eating, whether as described in the *Diwang Shiji* (“Wenwang did not know he was eating his son”) or in later Yuan and Ming novels where he knowingly but tearfully consumes his son’s flesh, Confucian “retracing heart” interpretation provides a strong justification for his moral exoneration. In the first case, though he violates external taboos, his intentions are not malicious; in the second, despite knowingly violating ethical rules, he places his true intentions within the broader framework of social ethics. This highlights the benevolence and responsibility of a person who cares for the well-being of the people. Wenwang’s “intentional transgression” contrasts starkly with Thyestes’ “unintentional error” — the former emphasizes inner moral commitment and responsibility, while the latter exposes the loss of control in the face of desire and power.

The Confucian standard for evaluating Wenwang’s actions does not lie in whether he physically consumed something forbidden, but rather in whether his internal benevolence was shaken. If the motive behind the action is to safeguard family and the people’s welfare, a violation of ethical norms may be morally pardoned, and even transformed into an opportunity for moral practice and personal growth. This interpretative strategy of intent reversing the value shifts the

²⁰ *Hanfeizi*, *Erbing*, 3; *Shiguo*, 9; *Nanyi*, 5; *Lüshi Chunqiu*, *Xianshilan*, *Zhijie*, 2; *Shiji*, *Qitaigong Shijia*, 40.

²¹ For a similar value judgement in ancient China, see Zhang-Xun’s (張巡) cannibalism in *Xintangshu*, *Zhangxun Zhuan*.

concept of pollution from the violation of external taboos to an evaluation of the subject's internal virtues. Specifically, external physical desecration can be mitigated by inner spiritual loyalty; Wenwang does not require external ritual purification, as his inner benevolence and sincerity remain untainted. His actions embody the ancient saying "Only virtue moves Heaven" (惟德動天, *Shangshu, Dayumo*, 20), proving that ultimate sincerity and goodness can move Heaven and earn its favor, thereby neutralizing the pollution caused by the external tragedy of kinship.

Summary

Chinese tradition demonstrates a typical logic of "moral transcendence" in redemption: when faced with an irreparable tragedy, the key is not the removal of material pollution, but rather the moral interpretation and elevation of one's virtue after the fact, transcending the guilt and difficulties brought by the tragedy. This logic forms a sharp contrast to the Greek cultural path, which emphasizes objective pollution and ritual purification to cleanse the sin. In this sense, Chinese culture's treatment of progeny-eating aligns more with a trait of "shame-culture" that focuses on moral honor and reputation, transforming the suffering into an opportunity for moral sublimation. In contrast, Greek culture is closer to a trait of "guilt-culture", emphasizing the individual's transgression of external supernatural laws and the ritualistic atonement to alleviate the internal burden of guilt.

2. Narrative Elements and Strategies: The Cycle of Pollution, Body Ethics, and the Reversal of Consequence

These divergent logics are further reflected in the different narrative emphases of the two traditions. The core conflict in the Greek progeny-eating narrative lies in the fundamental clash between its inherent magical logic and ethical judgments. Atreus' act of vengeance clearly illustrates the logic of sympathetic magic outlined by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, particularly the "law of similarity-opposition"²²: Atreus avenges Thyestes' previous act of "knowingly committing incest" (γνώσις) by using "unknowing progeny-eating" (ἀγνώσῖα). Through the symbolic link of "seed" (σπέρμα), he recreates the intimate scene of the marriage bed (ἐὐνάς) in the form of a banquet (δείπνον, Aesch. *Ag.* 1193). This violent, magical revenge fails to restore ethical order and, instead, reinforces the essence of pollution, triggering a vicious cycle: "pollution—purification (expel)—new pollution".

²² Frazer 2002, pp. 15–7, cf. Mauss 2001 pp. 78–91, Watson 2019, pp. 1–3.

Seneca's *Thyestes* further intensifies this despairing cyclical image: Atreus deliberately claims, with an Oedipal sense of self-destruction, "You do not avenge crimes unless you top them" (*scelera non ulcisceris nisi uincis*. 195–6). This sharp statement reveals the deep anxiety and terror behind the tragedy: once pollution arises, it cannot be undone, and all attempts to purge it through violence or magic only intensify and spread the consequences of pollution.

In Parker's study, bodily boundaries play a key role in the Greek religious symbolic system. Skin, the mouth, and sexual organs are seen as gateways through which individuals interact with the outside world, thus the guarding or transgressing of these boundaries carries profound cultural significance.²³ The story of *Thyestes* involves multiple violations of bodily boundaries: incest transgresses the sexual boundaries within the family, and progeny-eating violates the boundary of food and the integrity of the human body. The overlapping of these two taboos deepens the complexity of pollution. In Greek ritual practice, bodily boundaries are also strictly regulated; for example, murderers are deemed "impure" due to the blood of others upon them, requiring purification with cleansing water and the blood of a sacrificial pig before they can reintegrate into society.²⁴ Women in childbirth and newborns also require special rituals to purify themselves before participating in social activities, as they break the closed state of life and the body.²⁵ These customs underscore the importance of boundary maintenance to avoid pollution. What *Thyestes* endures is the most extreme invasion of bodily boundaries: crossing the sexual boundaries within the family, sowing the seed in forbidden territory; and consuming, through the digestive organs, the flesh of a kinsman that should not enter the body. This act causes the individual to temporarily exit the "human community", becoming an aberrant other. Greek texts often describe such figures in extreme language²⁶.

From the metaphorical structure of "body–ethics–state", Greek incest and progeny-eating are often used to symbolize the disarray of political communities or struggles for power. Cronus' myth reflects ancient Greek contemplation on the succession of kingship and the power struggles between fathers and sons: the desire of the father to "devour" the offspring symbolizes a refusal to relinquish

²³ Parker 1983, p. 99.

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 370–4, esp. 372.

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 50f.

²⁶ For instance, the curse on Thebes and the depiction of Oedipus, cf. Aesch. *Sept.* 653–5; *Eum.* 280–2; Soph. *OT* 25–8; Eur. *Phoen.* 17–20.

power, while the escape of the child symbolizes the rise of a new regime (Hes. *Theog.* 487ff).²⁷ Such myths metaphorically equate the body with the political body, and the struggle between father and son mirrors the power struggles within the state. In Greek tragedy, the mutual destruction of family members often directly leads to, or symbolizes, chaos in the city-state (e.g. Aesch. *Sept. Soph. Phil.*). Similarly, in the *Oresteia*, the bloodshed within the Atreus family leads to the disruption of the state order, which must eventually be ended through the court system of Athens to restore order; Oedipus' bodily impurity directly symbolizes the illness of the city of Thebes, which must be healed through his exile. These narratives reflect the typical ideology of the body politic: the king or father's body is the body of the state, and internal transgressions within the family inevitably affect the stability of the state.

The focus of the Thyestes narratives lies in the difficulty of seeing personal repentance or transformation of virtue; the characters are more often reduced to mere mediums of supernatural forces (curses, vengeance), highlighting the helplessness and insignificance of humans in the face of fate. However, we cannot overlook the complexity and contradiction within Greek narratives: although, in general, they emphasize the "polluting" and "contagious" nature of taboo actions, and often focus on external rituals and oracles to purify, certain texts also reveal the possibility of transformation through the individual's internal virtue. The trajectory of Oedipus' narrative is a typical example: in *Oedipus Rex*, he unknowingly commits "a great error" (*ἀμαρτίαν μεγάλην*), becoming a bearer of *μίασμα* and bringing a plague to Thebes, leading to his exile; however, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the now blind and aged Oedipus, after enduring years of suffering in exile, transforms from a tragic figure who made errors out of ignorance into a "sanctified old man", steadfast in his personal belief despite the torment of fate (*OC* 110).

The key to this transformation lies in Oedipus' clear recognition of his own transgressions and his moral perseverance amid suffering and stigma. He neither evades his responsibility nor submits to the moral judgment of others; rather, he voluntarily assumes the role of the "source of pollution" (*OC* 595), choosing exile and distancing himself from public life. In doing so, he rejects any political manipulation with a steadfast moral consciousness and reverence for the oracle, firmly awaiting the divine revelation. Ultimately, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the civic rationality of Athens enters into a

²⁷ Glenn 1978, pp. 143–5.

dialectical synthesis with the moral transcendence embodied by Oedipus' personal *κάθαρσις*: the oracle declares that his tomb will be a source of welfare for the city-state, and Oedipus no longer symbolizes pollution but becomes a sacred symbol protecting Athens (1518ff). This turning point marks the presence of a narrative mechanism in Greek tragedy that suggests a potential for individual salvation: through voluntarily assuming guilt, maintaining moral integrity, and adhering to the oracle, the individual can overcome pollution and ultimately receive the ultimate blessing from the gods—entering the underworld without the suffering of death (*ἀνὴρ γὰρ οὐ στενακτὸς οὐδὲ σὸν νόσοις ἀλγεινὸς ἐξέπεμπετ', ἀλλ' εἴ τις βροτῶν θαυμαστός*, 1663–5).

Thus, even in Greek tragedies that emphasize the transmission of taboos and sins across generations, there is not an outright rejection of the narrative mechanism of “inner repentance and moral elevation”. However, it should be noted that Oedipus' purification relies less on an entirely internal transformation of personal virtue than on the interaction with Athens, a symbol of democratic rationality. His transformation must be recognized by the oracle and accepted by the political body of the city-state to endow religious and political legitimacy to his personal moral change.

In the exception of Oedipus, we see the dual tension within the Greek tragic tradition: on the one hand, traditional tragedies like *Thyestes* depict the individual's helplessness and struggle when caught in the web of oracles and curses; on the other hand, works like *Oedipus at Colonus* show the possibility of symbolic redemption for the individual through moral will and personal resolve in interaction with the oracle and the political context of the city-state.

Chinese

Unlike the Greek narrative, which is trapped in the cyclical dilemma of magical logic, the Chinese narrative strategy regarding Wenwang transforms extreme trauma and taboo events into resources for the reconstruction of moral and political order, thereby imbuing them with higher symbolic meaning.

Firstly, in terms of bodily ethics, Wenwang completes a thorough “physical expulsion and spiritual purification” through the highly symbolic act of “vomiting the child and turning it into a tomb”²⁸. The act of vomiting, as a central action, not only directly rejects the physiological pollution

²⁸ The first reference to the “vomiting the child and turning it into a tomb” is found in *Heshuo Fangguji*, chap.

but also symbolizes the moral subject's active control over their bodily boundaries. This act declares Wenwang's inner virtue to be impervious to external pollution or defilement. The mouth, in this case, no longer serves as an entrance for pollution but becomes an outlet that demonstrates moral will. The blood and flesh that are expelled solidify into a tomb, transforming the physiological impurity into an ethical memorial.

This narrative strategy of "reopening and closing the body orifices" reflects the philosophical premise in Chinese thought of "the unity of body and mind"²⁹, in which bodily actions are directly linked to the moral purity of the soul. The body is no longer viewed as a permanent container of pollution but as a medium to verify the moral cleanliness of the inner self. From the Confucian perspective, the physical body is essentially only a form or vessel, and it does not ultimately define one's personal value, as demonstrated in the *Liji* (*Daxue*, 2), where "sincerity in intention and rectification of the heart" (*Chengyi Zhengxin* 誠意正心) is the true determinant of one's moral purity, not the external body itself. Through the dematerialization of the body, Chinese narrative shifts the focus of pollution to the domain of ethics and will.

Chinese culture reflects the metaphorical structure of "body-ethics-state" in a way as a model of "homology of family and state" that emphasizes moral education and historical cycles, as opposed to Greek mythological symbolism.³⁰ Confucian thought bases the governance of a state on family ethics, as exemplified in the saying "cultivate oneself, regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world".³¹

In Chinese historical narratives, the symbolic significance of "father eating child" carries dual meanings: on the one hand, it serves as a warning of the collapse of political order and the disintegration of ethical norms. Ancient texts often recount horrific instances of progeny-eating or cannibalism during the end of dynasties or in times of war and famine, revealing the chaos brought about by rulers' loss of virtue and misgovernance.³² These accounts collectively serve a political-ethical purpose: when societal chaos reaches the point of breaching the fundamental taboo of

02, p. 19a.

²⁹ Cf. *Analepts*, *Yanyuan*, 1; *Liji*, *Daxue*, 2; *Mengzi*, *Gongsunchou Shang*, 2; *Jinxin Shang*, 38.

³⁰ Regarding the homology of family and state and the theory of heaven-man correspondence, see Chapter II.3 *guo* and II.5 *jiu*.

³¹ *Liji*, *Daxue*, 2.

³² e.g. *Chunqiu Fanlu*, *Zhulin*, 2; *Hanshu*, *Wangmangzhuan Zhong*, 73; *Lüshi Chunqiu*, *Shijunlan*, *Xinglun*, 5; *Zuozhuan*, *Year 15 of Xuangong*, 2; *Year 8 of Aigong*, 2.

progeny-eating, it signifies that the political order has lost the Mandate of Heaven and urgently needs to be replaced by a new ruler of virtue. “Cannibalism” and “progeny-eating” thus become formal symbols of tyranny and chaos.³³

On the other hand, such narratives can also be used to praise extreme filial piety or loyalty, as seen in stories of self-sacrifice for one’s parents. In the Yuan Ming novels, Boyikao is portrayed as a person who voluntarily sacrifices himself for his father, embodying the ideal of filial piety. In the *Twenty-four Filial Exemplars*, many stories involve people offering their own flesh and blood to nourish their parents, such as cutting their flesh to feed their mother or tasting excrement for concern of their parents. These actions, though transgressing bodily boundaries and ceremonial propriety, are praised as virtuous due to their underlying filial piety and are not regarded as “impure,” but rather are given high moral esteem.³⁴

Sophocles in *Oedipus at Colonus* employs a strategy of consequence transference, shifting focus away from the origin of pollution and towards the symbolic conversion and sublimation of its consequences. In Chinese narrative logic, this is a typical and long-standing approach, manifesting in four core characteristics:

- **De-specification of the narrative:** The progeny-eating narrative abstracts or generalizes the specific violent details of the event, avoiding explicit depictions of violence or impurity. This de-specification narrative strategy effectively prevents the reader from experiencing physiological and psychological aversion, thus creating greater interpretative space for moral and political transformation in the subsequent narrative.
- **Structural contrast of “revealing goodness through evil”:** In the Wenwang narrative, Tyrant Zhou’s atrocities are deliberately set as an extremely negative

³³ In Greece, there are also historical records of cannibalism during famine. In 432 B.C. Athens besieged Potidaea, located southwest of the Chalcidice Peninsula. Two years later, due to a food shortage, the people began to eat one another to stave off hunger (*καὶ τινες καὶ ἀλλήλων ἐγέγονοντο*), Thuc. 2.70.1. In a declamation by Libanius, we see the “litigant of Corinth” expressing sympathy and pity for the cannibalism of the Potidaeans, while vehemently criticizing Athens’ actions, denouncing them as even less humane than barbarian behavior (13.1). The cannibalism is attributed to the siege, since the besieging force failed to show mercy (*ἐλεῆσαι*) and allowed the tragedy to unfold (13.16). Eventually, Potidaea became a city that “was nourished without food, and meals were found without grains, and sacrifices were made without the presence of sacrificers” (13.48). Russell argues that this article by Libanius should be viewed as a mimicry or re-enactment of the Panhellenic court’s (e.g. Amphictyons’) lawsuit against Athens, or at least it was supposed to be, cf. Russell 1983, pp. 117–8.

³⁴ For Chinese filial cannibalism see Lu 2008, pp. 163–74.

backdrop to highlight Wenwang's benevolence and righteousness. As stated in the *Mengzi* (*Gaozi Xia*, 35): "Therefore, when Heaven is about to confer a great task upon a man, it must first harass his mind, exhaust his bones, starve his body, make him suffer, and disrupt his actions, so as to move his heart, toughen his character, and increase his abilities." This binary opposition structure indicates that suffering is not the ultimate aim of punishment but rather a necessary condition to highlight the hero's moral elevation and resolute will. The tyrant's evil deeds not only fail to pollute the hero but rather become an important reference point for the hero's moral transcendence.

- **Moral responsibility of "knowing but not avoiding"**: In the progeny-eating narrative, Wenwang, despite knowing that he is transgressing moral norms, persists in doing what he believes to be the right thing, embodying the Confucian principle of value hierarchy. Wenwang endures the pain of progeny-eating in order to preserve his family, shouldering the grand responsibility of the people. In this way, the individual's physical trauma is reframed as a political sacrifice for the survival of the collective. This act highlights the Confucian ethic that "public righteousness exceeds private virtue", reinterpreting the impure event as a stage for demonstrating moral responsibility.
- **Ethical sublimation of "turning pollution into virtue"**: In the Chinese narrative tradition, saints are not those who are not polluted but those who maintain their virtue and righteousness in the face of pollution. The *Yijing* in the Kun Gua (Hexagram of Difficulty) states, "One who is in difficulty but does not lose his place, fortune, is a noble man (困而不是其所, 亨, 其唯君子乎)". This reflects the idea that physical suffering is an opportunity to understand the Mandate of Heaven and refine one's virtues. In Youli, Wenwang composed the *Yijing*,³⁵ employing the abstract dialectics of Yin-Yang philosophy to transform the specific scene of progeny-eating into a symbolic representation of moral self-preservation, ultimately achieving the path of ethical redemption in which "extreme adversity leads to great success" (否极

³⁵ According to Li-Shuo's research and speculation on the Hexagram Kan, Shike, Kun, and Buo, many aspects of the *Yijing* are related to Wenwang's experiences in captivity at Youli, Lishuo 2022, pp. 361–73. While Li-Shuo's historical deductions are based on reasoning, the search for historical information in the *Yijing*'s hexagram texts has long been a subject of study, see Gu-Jiegang 1929; Gao-Heng 1984.

泰来)³⁶. This idea transcends the binary opposition of pollution and purification found in Greek tragedy, suggesting that “things cannot remain in difficulty forever, thus (the hexagram) resolution follows” (Yijing, Xugua Zhuan, 39), thus providing a philosophical and ethical pathway for the transformation of suffering and pollution.

Wenwang’s wisdom and saintly status were established through such extreme trials, which aligns with Confucian definitions of the sage king: A true sage is not one who avoids suffering but one who can bear the difficulties of the world and accept the world’s pollution.³⁷ The progeny-eating incident thus becomes a pivotal moment in the construction of political legitimacy—Wenwang’s suffering is sculpted as the core anchor for the great enterprise of “cutting off the Shang dynasty” (翦商, cf. *Shijing*, *Lusong*, *Bigong*, 2).

Summary

The narrative strategies employed in Greece and China regarding the progeny-eating event reflect the different cultural understandings and expressions of pollution, ethics, and political order. Greek tragedies, particularly works related to Thyestes, present the helplessness of individuals constrained by fate and divine will through the dual tension of magical and ethical conflict. Through the recurring cycle of pollution, these tragedies explore the entanglement of morality and fate. Once pollution arises, the violence of revenge and the ritual of expulsion only exacerbate the cycle, exposing the collapse of ethical order. However, *Oedipus at Colonus* illustrates that through inner repentance and moral steadfastness, individuals can transcend pollution and achieve symbolic redemption by assuming responsibility for their guilt and submitting to the oracle, revealing the complexity of ethical transformation in Greek tragedy.

In contrast, Chinese narratives, grounded in Confucian ethics, view the progeny-eating event as a resource for the reconstruction of moral and political order, emphasizing the symbolic expulsion of pollution from the body and spiritual purification. In Chinese culture, the body is no longer merely a vessel of pollution but becomes a medium of moral purity. Through the endurance of suffering and commitment to moral duties, individuals realize self-transcendence and fulfil their social responsibilities. The suffering of Wenwang is portrayed as the core pivot of political sacrifice and

³⁶ In the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Yijing*, the hexagram of Pi (否 ‘adversity’) is followed by Tai (泰 ‘good-fortune’), symbolizing the dialectical development of events.

³⁷ Cf. *Shangshu*, *Dayumo*, 13; *Xunzi*, *Jundao*.

the “homology of family and state” model. Together, these narratives reveal the dual nature of pollution as a discourse of power in civilizational narratives: it is both a threat to disrupt order and an opportunity to reconstruct orthodoxy. The difference lies in the fact that the Greek authors we have surveyed view the body as the physical battlefield of political metaphor, while China transforms it into the conceptual vessel of moral metaphysics.

3. Philosophical Reflection: From Defilement to Rationalization

In the Greek philosophical tradition, there are rational reflections that run parallel to, and even conflict with, this religious understanding of pollution. Philosophers began to transcend the traditional thinking of condemning solely based on outcomes, emphasizing the role of motive, will, and moral cognition in judging guilt. They sought to bring extreme taboos like incest and progeny-eating into more rational ethical debates.

Plato represents certain “mainstream” social value: in *Laws* 838c, he lists Thyestes’ progeny-eating as the primary example of an act “hated by the gods” (*θεομισής*), arguing that the image of progeny-eating reflects the extreme manifestation of a tyrant’s desires. In *Republic* 571c–d, Plato describes how after people have had their fill of food and drink (*ἡ σίτων ἡ μέθης πλησθέν*), their beastly nature awakens, and there is nothing they would not dare to think or do, including but not limited to sleeping with their mothers and “not refraining from any food” (*βρώματός τε ἀπέχεσθαι μηδενός*). In 574c, he describes tyrannical erotic desire as one that “will not refrain from any terrible bloodshed, or any food (*βρώματος*) or act”. Plato deliberately distinguishes between *σίτος* and *βρῶμα*: the former refers to grain-food, whereas the latter is semantically broader, referring more generally to what is eaten. Precisely for that reason, *βρῶμα* is more readily available, in these contexts, to suggest forms of consumption that exceed ordinary nourishment and move toward the transgressive. One may further note, though only as a suggestive resonance rather than a strict etymological argument, the proximity of *βρώ-* to *βροτός* (mortal man), the mortal as one subject to consumption, decay, and death rather than *ἄφθιτος* (imperishable). Through contextual comparison, we can discern that these two types of “food” appear under different premises. In 571c, Plato first describes how, after eating and drinking, a person’s barbaric nature awakens. This implies that the initial type of food (*σίτος*) refers to everyday sustenance, while in 571d and 574c, *βρῶμα* refers to the flesh consumed when a person has lost all restraint—human flesh. In 565d–566a, Plato uses the

metaphor of the Arcadian sacrifice to Zeus Lycaeus (*Republic*, 565d–566a) to highlight the curse of those who become wolves through cannibalism, mirroring the tyrant’s politics of devouring the people. The “wolf” (λύκος) not only symbolizes violence itself but represents the ultimate form of violence, where the tyrant, in a bestial manner, transcends human ethics and civic order, ultimately becoming a beast.³⁸ Thus, for Plato, progeny-eating is not merely a taboo but a political philosophical metaphor: the tyrant’s swollen desires undermine the foundation of ethical and social order, leading both the state (πόλις) and the family (οἶκος) to collapse.

Furthermore, in 619b–c, Plato emphasizes the determinative role of ignorance (ἀφροσύνη) and greed (λαιμαργία)³⁹ in shaping fate through the depiction of a soul choosing the tyrannical life during reincarnation. He clearly points out that if the soul, lacking wisdom, chooses a tyrannical life, he fails to foresee the tragic consequences he will face, including progeny-eating (παίδων αὐτοῦ βρώσεις καὶ ἄλλα κακά),⁴⁰ thereby suggesting that ignorance itself constitutes a severe ethical failing. Clearly, Plato aims to highlight that the ethical dilemma of the tyrant is not only externalized through political violence but internalized in the distortion of his own desire, leading him inevitably to devour his own bloodline. As Hook noted: “Their ignorance does not acquit them in any way; rather, to Plato’s mind, it indicts them, being equivalent to a lack of virtue”.⁴¹ Thus, while Plato acknowledges the absoluteness of traditional taboos, he introduces a rational perspective, placing an individual’s internal virtue, knowledge, and will at the core of judgment regarding guilt, thereby shaking the purely religious concept of pollution.⁴²

It is noteworthy that Plato’s emphasis on the cannibalism extends beyond the moral domain and deeply infiltrates the realm of political philosophy. As Parker points out, the Greek concept of μίασμα is inherently linked to the order of both the state and the family.⁴³ This framework reflects the tension within Greek thought: religious theories of pollution emphasize objective, material defilement, while philosophical reflection begins to introduce subjective will and moral cognition

³⁸ Cf. Burkert 1983, pp. 84–7.

³⁹ Λαιμαργίας refers to a strong desire for food. Here, it signifies a tyrant who, driven by his craving for food, makes a choice that leads to consuming his own children. This reflects Plato’s view on desire: the cost of satisfying immediate desires is the consumption of one’s future.

⁴⁰ Although Plato does not name the tyrant, it is clearly a reference to Thyestes, cf. Halliwell 1984, p. 50.

⁴¹ Hook 2005, p. 26.

⁴² Hook 2005, pp. 19–25. Cf. Irwin 1995, pp. 14–23; Dorian 2011, pp. 1–23.

⁴³ Parker 1983, pp. 126–8.

as crucial criteria for evaluating ethical responsibility. It is within this ongoing tension that Greek thought gradually moved from a polluted-based concept toward a more rational ethical reflection.

Building upon Plato's foundation, the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope and the Stoic Zeno of Citium proposed more radical ethical relativism and individualism. Though their aims were likely more to critique Plato rather than engage in theoretical discussion, their works reveal the centrality of these extreme cases in their thinking. "Incest and cannibalism, the 'unspeakables' of the tragic stage, appear with a direct and insistent regularity in Cynic and early Stoic writings. Diogenes, Zeno, and Chrysippus put these acts in the same context, as moral exempla of things permissible for the wise man, the one with 'right reason'."⁴⁴ They did not advocate for the normalization of incest and cannibalism but deliberately selected these extreme examples as philosophical tests of the boundaries of societal customs and taboos.

Diogenes of Sinope is believed to have written a tragedy entitled *Thyestes*.⁴⁵ In this play, he allegedly made clear that "nothing was unholy in the partaking of human flesh, as is clear from foreign customs; and he said also that for someone with the right reason all things are in every other thing and through every other thing" (Diog. Laert. 6.73). This chimes with Philodemus, according to whom Diogenes composed *Oedipus* and *Atreus* plays, which were thematically related to his philosophical work the *Republic*.⁴⁶ This *Atreus* may well be the *Thyestes* mentioned by Laertius. Although the existence of Diogenes' *Republic* was doubted in antiquity, Philodemus provides examples supporting its authenticity.⁴⁷ From these examples, Diogenes' *Republic* seems to have been a critique of Plato's *Republic*.⁴⁸ Thus, based on his dramatic works and Plato's discussion of incest and cannibalism in the *Republic* (565–619), it can be inferred that Diogenes may have provided a philosophical defense of incest and cannibalism as thought experiments. Considering that Cynicism's political principles are "negative and destructive rather than constructive", the

⁴⁴ Hook 2005, p. 17.

⁴⁵ *TrGF*^I, 88F 1d. = Diog. Laert. 6.73.

⁴⁶ *TrGF*^I, 88 T2 = Philodemus, *De Stoicis*, 16.29–17.4.

⁴⁷ Philodemus, *De Stoicis*, 15.21–31 (for the support from Cleanthes and Chrysippus) and 17.10–22 (for doubts concerning Diogenes' authorship of certain works). For a handy summary of Diogenes' *Republic*, cf. Erskine, 1990, p. 27; Goulet-Cazé, 2003, pp. 11–27, 33–8.

⁴⁸ *SVF* 1.260 = Plut. *De Stoicorum repugnantiis*, 1034e–f. Plato's *Republic* caused a stir upon its release in the ancient world, but this excitement may not have stemmed from the insights of the book, but rather from his appropriation of Socrates' character, which vexed other followers of Socrates, who felt Plato distorted his theories or exploited his teacher's fame to sell his own ideas. It could also have been due to jealousy and rivalry over the popularity of Plato's works, with other authors imitating or criticizing his work to enhance their own status. Whatever the case, the result was that many writers (e.g. Antisthenes, Diog. Laert. 6.15) began responding with works bearing the same title. For other Greek authors' responses to Plato's works, cf. Vander Waerdt 1994.

discussions of incest and cannibalism in Diogenes' philosophy seem to align more with "his general attack on all societal and religious conventions and laws".⁴⁹ The Cynic approach to "radical critique" is a methodology that tests the rigidity and reasonableness of boundaries by deliberately approaching societal taboos. Its aim is to explore the possibility of individual freedom, rather than to affirm these acts themselves.

Zeno of Citium, also, in his *Republic* (which aimed to refute Plato's work),⁵⁰ proposed shocking views: the wise man "may partake of human flesh in certain circumstances" (γεύσεσθαι τε καὶ ἀνθρωπίνων σαρκῶν κατὰ περίστασιν) and would not thereby be defiled in his wisdom.⁵¹ He also advocated for the sharing of property and spouses in an ideal society—a proposal that effectively included the possibility of incest.⁵² Regarding these two extreme scenarios mentioned by Zeno, I agree with Hook's interpretation: Zeno was not advocating or endorsing cannibalism and incest, but was offering a critique or improvement of Plato's *kallipolis*.⁵³ Zeno believed that sages might, under some "special circumstances"⁵⁴, transgress significant social taboos, but unlike the lottery winners in Plato's account, who cry and lament upon discovering their tragic fate (619b–c), they would calmly accept such violations due to their "perfect attunement to Nature". In other words, Zeno's portrayal of sages temporarily violating taboos while maintaining their moral purity pushes Stoic relativism to its extreme. He posed a more fundamental philosophical question: when taboos conflict with natural law, how should the wise man choose? This undoubtedly challenges Plato's rigid moral universe.

Overall, the differing views of Plato, Zeno, and Diogenes on the taboo of cannibalism reflect the complex relationships within Greek thought regarding pollution (μίασμα) and virtue (ἀρετή). Plato's cosmic worldview emphasizes the inviolability of objective order: violating taboos inevitably causes disorder and the spread of defilement, and any transgressive act is a *ἁμαρτία μεγάλη*, even if committed in ignorance. This view is clearly rooted in the daily practices of social life and political

⁴⁹ Hook 2005, p. 32.

⁵⁰ *SVF* 1. 259–71. For the discussion of its content and significance, cf. Vander Waerdt 1994, pp. 272–308; Goulet-Cazé 2003, pp. 38–60.

⁵¹ Diog. Laert. 7.121.

⁵² *SVF* 1. 269 = Diog. Laert. 7.131–3. Chrysippus said that there are sexual relationships (συνέρχονται) with mothers, daughters and sons. *SVF* 3. 744 = Diog. Laert. 7.188.

⁵³ For discussion of the meaning and role of "special circumstances", see Vander Waerdt 1994, pp. 298–301.

⁵⁴ Hook 2005, p. 37. Cf. Vander Waerdt 1994, pp. 300–1. This emotionless (ἄστοργος) and undisturbed (ἀφρόντιστος) state seems more appropriate for Pyrrho, cf. Diog. Laert. 9.63; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, 14.18.19; Long and Sedley 1987, *Early Pyrrhonism*, 2. D.

ethics.⁵⁵ In contrast, Zeno and Diogenes counter this by arguing that they do not deny the phenomenon of pollution itself, but rather redefine pollution as a relative construct of societal customs and cultural classifications.⁵⁶ According to Douglas' theory: pollution is "essentially disorder";⁵⁷ and without a given classificatory system, there is no such thing as absolute defilement.⁵⁸ Pollution, in this sense, is a contradiction, rejection, and confusion of normal categories.⁵⁹ Thus, in the vision of these radical philosophers, incest and cannibalism's pollution is not an inherent objective reality, but a cultural construct. This shift in perspective renders pollution no longer an absolute, untouchable evil within Plato's framework, but rather a vital tool for philosophical reflection and criticism of societal authority and traditional taboos.

Chinese

The ancient Chinese philosophical reflection on extreme taboos such as incest and cannibalism underwent a transition from instinctive prohibition to rational ethical reasoning, which both echoes and differs from the Greek cultural trajectory from religious theories of pollution to philosophical rationalization. On one hand, early thoughts regarded incest as a defilement of the patriarchal order, as seen in the *Guoyu* (*Jinyu* 4, 35), where it is stated: "Marrying avoids those of the same surname, for fear of calamity and disorder", indicating a deep-seated fear and condemnation of incestuous behaviour.⁶⁰ Similarly, cannibalism was viewed as a tragedy that transgresses the fundamental moral boundaries of humanity, and records from the Spring and Autumn period regarding "interfamilial child-exchange cannibalism" (易子而食)⁶¹ reflect a deep fear of the collapse of societal order.

However, in contrast to the absolute taboo of Greek pollution theory, the various schools of thought in ancient China attempted to incorporate these taboos into rational discourse, seeking ethical and institutional explanations and solutions. Confucianism stands out, emphasizing

⁵⁵ Such rites as the pharmakos expulsion and purification rituals in public ceremonies of city-states, cf. Parker, 1983, pp. 257–8.

⁵⁶ N.B. Diogenes and Zeno specifically targeted Plato's theories in opposition to his teachings. Therefore, to some extent, their radical views should not be seen as fully representative of their core philosophical beliefs.

⁵⁷ Douglas 1984, p. 41.

⁵⁸ Ibid. pp. 2, 36.

⁵⁹ Douglas 1968, p. 50.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Liji*, *Fangji*, 35; *Zuozhuan*, *Year 23 of Xigong*, 2.

⁶¹ *Zuozhuan*, *Year 15 of Xuangong*, 2; *Year 8 of Aigong*, 2; *Liezi*, *Shuofu*, 14; *Huainanzi*, *Renxianxun*, 8; *Guanzi*, *Canhuan*, 3; *Shiji*, *Songweizi Shijia*, 48; *Hanshu*, *Wuxingzhi Xia*, 13; *Lunheng*, *Fuxu*, 7. "Interfamilial child-exchange cannibalism" is a frequently recorded form of progeny-eating behaviour in Chinese historical texts. This act, which represents a minor concession made before extreme taboos of ethics, highlights the Chinese historical texts' unwavering commitment to ethical norms. Through such narratives, historians emphasize that, even under dilemma, people upheld the civilized veneer, thereby urging readers (rulers) to reflect on their social responsibilities.

“humanistic education” to replace mysterious fears and using rituals and norms to prevent taboo violations. In Confucian ethics, incest constitutes the ultimate moral breach precisely because it destabilizes the foundational relational hierarchies: the regulated affection in father-son bonds (父子有親) and the ritually-maintained division of spousal roles (夫婦有別). Both Confucius and Mencius prescribed ritual discipline (*li* 禮) as the civilizing instrument to fortify innate ethical awareness, serving simultaneously as prophylactic barrier and rectifying force.⁶² Regarding cannibalism, Mencius, in *Lianghuiwang Shang* (3-4), establishes a causal argument of “tyranny—famine—cannibalism”, criticizing the loss of virtue and governance by rulers as the fundamental cause of cannibalism. This perspective rationalizes what would otherwise be an incomprehensible taboo as a moral and political issue, using ethical reasoning to clarify the moral responsibility of rulers. It transcends mere fear of defilement and imbues the act with a function of social critique.

Mozi (墨子, 5th century B.C.), in advocating for frugal burial practices, distinguished between societal customs and objective truth by citing examples from other nations. “In the eastern part of Yue, there was a country where the eldest son was eaten when born, and this was called ‘appropriate for younger brothers’ (宜弟. *Mozi, Jieyang Xia*, 12)”.⁶³ This incident was meant to show that customs are not naturally reasonable, and that blindly accepting them as just and appropriate might actually go against true benevolence and righteousness. Through critiquing the barbaric custom of cannibalism, Mozi illustrates that moral judgment should transcend customs and be based on objective standards.⁶⁴ This approach, which analyzes taboos such as incest and cannibalism within a broader system of value judgments, exemplifies the rational universal principle (兼愛) advocated by Mozi.

Daoism, on the other side, approaches the issue from a different perspective.⁶⁵ While Daoist texts rarely discuss incest or cannibalism directly, the thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi emphasize transcending man-made rituals and rules, advocating for a return to the natural path of simplicity and authenticity. In *Zhuangzi, Gengsangchu* (2), a dialogue between Gengsangchu (a disciple of Laozi) and his student discusses the roots of social disorder, attributing them to the civilization and

⁶² *Liji, Quli Shang*, 9; *Liji, Sangfu Xiaoji*, 12; *Liji, Dazhuan*, 5; *Mengzi, Tengwengong Shang*, 4.

⁶³ Cf. *Mozi, Luwen*, 7.

⁶⁴ This is parallel of the Persian court debate described by Herodotus (3.38.4): whether Greek or Indian, each group considered its own customs as “civilized” while dismissing the “barbaric” practices of others. However, in Pindar’s view, “customs are the lord of both the decayed and the immortal” (Pind. *fr.* 169 = Pl. *Grg.* 484b), with customs preceding or even overshadowing the social ethical values.

⁶⁵ See chapter II.6. “The Daoist Ethical Concept of Error”.

education of the rulers Yao and Shun. In this context, “a thousand generations later, it is certain that there will be people who eat one another”. Daoism questions the relativity of ritual and taboo itself, suggesting that human-made distinctions and norms may actually lead to further chaos in society. *Daodejing* (2) states: “When everyone knows beauty as beauty, there is ugliness. When every knows good as good, there is evil.” This implies that the advocacy of ethical education leads people to pursue its opposites. This speculative reasoning aligns with a reflection on taboos: merely fearing “pollution” is insufficient to ensure virtue. Thus, Daoism offers a macrocosmic, anti-dogmatic rational tension: it neither condones behaviours like incest or cannibalism nor blindly adheres to rigid taboos, but instead seeks a higher level of natural harmony.

It is noteworthy that ancient Chinese philosophical rationalization of taboos consistently carried a strong ethical and practical concern, rather than abstract justification or indulgence. It sought to strengthen the ethical order by revealing the principles of human relationships and human nature. Confucianism’s principle of “retracing heart for guilt conviction” exemplifies this characteristic: Confucius advocated, “A father conceals (the faults) for his son, and a son conceals for his father, there is rectitude” (*Analects*, *Zilu*, 18), transcending general legal norms in certain circumstances and resolving conflicts through higher ethical principles. This seemingly paradoxical stance contains a higher level of moral rationality and reflects the dialectical wisdom of Confucianism in addressing extreme ethical issues. When facing conflicts between human relationships and other values, Confucius’ answer was not simply based on customary taboos, but on exploring the essence of “rectitude” (*zhi* 直), thus demonstrating the rational weighing of extreme ethical problems in Confucian thought. The same is true for the incest and cannibalism issue: Chinese intellects strive to identify the underlying causes of human relationships gone astray or human desires out of control, and prevent them through institutions and education, rather than merely invoking mysterious fear.

The rationalization process in Chinese philosophy regarding taboos is a process of seeking balance between the concept of pollution and ethical rationalization. On one hand, they clearly view these actions as severe disruptions to human moral order, establishing them as unbreachable ethical boundaries; on the other hand, they do not restrict themselves to religious punishment or terrified tactics, but instead engage in ethical rational analysis to uncover the causes behind these taboos, transforming abstract terror into specific moral education and institutional discipline. This effort

ultimately formed an ethical system centered on ritual and law, which remained sensitive to taboos while also fully discussing and examining them within a rational framework, thereby effectively maintaining and reinforcing the order of civilization.

Summary

When examining the philosophical responses to extreme taboos such as incest and cannibalism in Greek and Chinese intellectual history, we see two distinct yet complementary philosophical explorations of civilization.

A tension within certain strands of Greek philosophical discourse lies in the fact that they simultaneously seek to ground ethics and political order in rigid prohibitions, while also subjecting inherited taboos to radical critique. In Plato, one finds a strong drive toward absolute ethical boundaries; in Cynic and later Stoic thought, by contrast, those very boundaries may be exposed as conventional and historically contingent. When Diogenes asserts that “cannibalism is just a custom”, he does not merely deny the significance of civilizational taboos, but uses an extreme stance to question the authority and absoluteness of all moral norms. This intrinsic dialectic between the sacred and the profane shapes the deepest driving force of Greek rationalism: the pursuit of absolutes requires the questioning of absoluteness itself.

In contrast, Confucianism, through the interpretation of “retracing heart for guilt conviction” and Daoism, via its transcendental principle of “the *Dao* models itself after”, jointly constructed a dynamic ethical elasticity mechanism. This mechanism neither denies the destructive force of taboos nor turns them into untouchable absolutes — metaphorically embodied in the sequential progression from the Hexagram of Hardship (困) to that of Resolution (解) in *Yijing*, Confucian posits the transformative possibility expressed in the saying “When extremity is reached, transformation ensues; through transformation, continuity is achieved; through continuity, endurance prevails (*Yijing, Xici Xia*, 2)”. This dynamic elasticity continues to effectively address the complex conflicts between modern social ethics and law.

The differences between these Greek and Chinese narrative-ethical traditions are best understood as complementary rather than simply opposed. In the Greek materials discussed here, narratives of pollution repeatedly foreground the enduring trauma produced by boundary-crossing and thus expose the fragility of ethical and civic order; in the Chinese materials, by contrast, ethical

discourse more often reveals a capacity to reconfigure suffering through moral reinterpretation and normative transformation. This complementarity points to a deeper humanistic dialectic: amid the continuing tension between order and transformation, reverence and transcendence, moral dignity is sustained and the horizon of spiritual freedom expanded.

4. Humanized Heroes and Idealized Heroes

After the discussion of fourth-century philosophy, we may return to the fifth-century Athenian setting in which the Thyestes story carried a more immediate political charge. Fifth-century Athens was marked by the tension between democratic practice and imperial expansion. Within that context, the traumatic memory of the Peisistratid tyranny lent the struggle for power in the Thyestes narrative a profound civic resonance. Atreus' horrific act of serving Thyestes the flesh of his sons could thus function on the tragic stage as a figure for the abuse of tyrannical power. As Herodotus has Otares suggest, tyranny behaves like a destructive force that consumes all who come near it (Hdt. 3.80). The dismembered flesh accordingly symbolizes the destruction of civic personhood under autocratic rule, and the scene's performance in the Dionysian theatre may be read as a self-reflective allegory through which democratic Athens staged its opposition to tyrannical violence.⁶⁶

In this context, tragic heroes exhibited a narrative strategy of de-heroization, or "humanization". Tragic poets deliberately presented the moral flaws and errors of heroes, thereby diminishing the mythic perfection of heroes and making them more relatable to the ethical circumstances of ordinary people. By witnessing the downfall of these heroes, audiences experienced pity (*ἔλεος*) and fear (*φόβος*), which not only brought an awareness of human fragility and limitations but also fostered a profound understanding of political realities (Arist. *Poet.* 1452a). This "humanization" of heroes was closely connected to the critical thinking upheld by Athenian democracy: citizens, through watching the tragic dilemmas of heroes, became more aware of real-

⁶⁶ Greek tragedy emerged from and engaged deeply with its socio-historical milieu, serving as both a reflection and a mediated reinterpretation of contemporary cultural and ideological paradigms. The Parisian school of historical anthropology, notably represented in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988 and Vidal-Naquet 1986, alongside Gernet 1982, has significantly shaped scholarly understanding of tragedy's embeddedness in its historical context. Anthropological methodologies applied to Greek tragedy are critically examined in Goldhill 1997, pp. 331–6, Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, and Segal 1983. Goldhill 1990 advances the influential thesis of tragedy as a historically situated form of "civic discourse", a claim contested by Griffin 1998, who emphasizes the transhistorical universality of tragic conflict, prompting rebuttal by Goldhill 2000. Further debate surrounds Goldhill's assertion of tragedy's intrinsically democratic character, with critiques by Rhodes 2003, Carter 2004, Burian 2011. Theoretical frameworks interrogating tragedy's dialectical relationship with its historical contexts are explored in Goff 1995.

world transgressions and moral failings, thus strengthening the core values and moral boundaries of democratic politics.

The political critique embedded in these tragic narratives is also reflected in the negative portrayals of tyrannical rulers. In *Oedipus Rex*, the excessively proud Oedipus, and in *Antigone*, the obstinately authoritarian Creon, ultimately suffer tragic fates because they overstep boundaries, ignoring divine law and justice.⁶⁷ Their tragic endings resonate with the Athenian citizen's expectation that the rule of law should triumph over despotism.⁶⁸ At the same time, the Athenian democratic emphasis on equality among citizens and the moderation of desires is reflected in the tragic plots. While Greek heroic epics emphasized personal honor and competition, the Classical era valued moderation (*σωφροσύνη*) and adherence to justice more.⁶⁹ Euripides' depictions of Heracles and Jason, both of whom meet tragic destruction due to rage and greed, serve as warnings to the audience to replace ambition and excessive desire with fairness and restraint. This dramatic effect aligns with the goals of Athenian civic education: cultivating in citizens a fear of arrogance and indulgence to safeguard the collective interests of the city-state over personal desires.⁷⁰

As a public ritual of Athens, tragedy inherently served a strong political and ethical educational function. Athenian tragedies were performed during the Dionysian festivals, and as citizens collectively witnessed the tragic fates of heroes, they underwent an emotional *κάθαρσις* (*catharsis*, 'purification').⁷¹ This collective aesthetic experience was not purely individual but represented a moral exercise for the community: through tragedy, audiences were confronted with images of disorder leading to plague, fratricide, and the fall of the city-state, reinforcing their identification with social norms (moderation, reverence for the gods, obedience to the law) during emotional release.⁷² This structure provided a stark psychological contrast: the suffering of disorder emphasized the value of order. While releasing their emotions, the audience also became more attuned to the necessity of social norms. As Meinel points out, the law represented the collective will of the city-state in its pursuit of stability, while polluted transgressive behaviour was viewed as a serious violation of public order, requiring restraint by collective authority.⁷³ This structural

⁶⁷ Meinel 2015, pp. 46–73, 84–114.

⁶⁸ Ahrens Dorf 2009, pp. 55–8.

⁶⁹ Adkins 1972, pp. 48–50.

⁷⁰ Easterling 1997, p. 36.

⁷¹ Arist. *Poet.* 1449b25, cf. Golden 1976, pp. 437–52; Segal 1996, pp. 149–72.

⁷² Meinel 2015, pp. 175–181.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 77.

dramatic pedagogy made citizens appreciate the importance of the rule of law, further consolidating the core values of the democratic community.

From an ethical perspective, the tragic stage also functioned as a public space for citizens to practice moral judgment and value selection. By witnessing characters like Orestes and Atreus facing ethical dilemmas, audiences inevitably engaged with the complex tensions between law and revenge, family ties and justice, thus deepening their critical thinking on issues of civic ethics and politics. This cultivation of civic virtue was intrinsic to Athenian democratic practice. The contribution of tragedy is its creation of an imagined public space where people collectively confronted the limits of human nature and, through collective reflection, reaffirmed respect for ethical boundaries and legal authority, highlighting that the democratic city-state, while humble about human nature, was committed to balancing public order and individual freedom.

The “humanization” strategy in Greek tragedy is, to some extent, a self-enlightening ritual of the democratic city-state. When the audience gazes at the bloodstained platter in Atreus’ hand, they are not merely observing a metaphor for tyrannical oppression; they are undergoing a political and ethical ablution. By depicting the breakdown of order, tragedy allows citizens to emotionally identify with democratic values. This narrative wisdom, which demotes heroes to mere mortals, resonates with Heraclitus’ dialectic: “the road up and the road down are one and the same” (DK 22 B60). Only by letting the hero fall from his pedestal can the city-state establish a firmer foundation for the rule of law through collective recognition of human weaknesses.

Chinese

Unlike the de-heroization strategy adopted in Greek tragedy, the Confucian tradition in China tends to transform extreme tragic encounters into narratives that highlight moral ideals through the hero. The progeny-eating is incorporated into the Confucian historical-ethical narrative, becoming an important model for shaping his sage virtue. In the Confucian narrative framework, all the blame is placed on the Tyrant Zhou, while Wenwang is portrayed as the innocent and suffering righteous person, embodying moral purity and perseverance. Therefore, this tragic error does not fail to undermine Wenwang’s status as the “sage king”, but further highlights his moral steadfastness and self-restraint, making him a model of a sage ruler undergoing the test of the Mandate of Heaven.

In regarding this event, Chinese tradition intentionally avoids the sensory dramatization of the tragedy itself, focusing instead on extracting ethical insights from the tragic encounter. This “heroization” mechanism manifests in three main dimensions.

First, it is the creation of a moral exemplar. After suffering the pain of losing his son, Wenwang still maintains his benevolent heart, a virtue that is widely admired by later monarchs and the scholar-official class. Texts such as the *Shangshu* and *Shijing* extol Wenwang’s sage virtue. The line from *Shijing* (*Daya*, *Wenwang*, 1), “Wenwang ascended and descended, in the god’s presence”, indicates that his virtues were recognized by heaven. Confucius regarded Wenwang as the ideal model of his own moral pursuit, striving to inherit the “civil” (*wen* 文) way of governance.⁷⁴ Thus, Confucianism established a moral benchmark for the ideal ruler, centered around the qualities of benevolence, self-control, endurance, and an understanding of heaven's mandate.

Second, it reinforces the concept of familial ethics and loyalty and filial piety. The sacrifice of Wenwang’s son is interpreted as the extreme manifestation of Tyrant Zhou’s tyrannical and immoral nature, while Wenwang’s grief as a father further strengthens the values of filial piety and the parent-child bond. Wenwang becomes a symbol of both a loving father and a wise ruler, highlighting the Confucian ethical consensus of “love for family” (親親之愛) and “the unity of family and state” (家國一體). Even in the turmoil and suffering of a chaotic era, he maintains his commitment to the values of filial piety, loyalty, and righteousness.

Third, it reflects the political construction of dynastic legitimacy. Archaeological discoveries in recent decades have revealed close interactions between the Zhou royal family and the Shang dynasty, with oracle bone inscriptions first appearing during the reigns of Shang kings Kang Ding and Wu Yi (12th century B.C.). After the Zhou displaced the Shang, the Zhou royal family continued to employ Shang rites, even recording them in oracle bone inscriptions until the reign of King Mu (10th century B.C.).⁷⁵ Some scholars suggest that the two royal families frequently intermarried and shared ancestors.⁷⁶ Human sacrifice was a frequent ritual during the Shang period, and in the early

⁷⁴ Analects, *Zihan*, 5; Wang-Chong, *Lunhun*, *Chaoqi*, 12. Cf. Yu 2014, pp. 44–50.

⁷⁵ For archaeological report see Wang-Yuxin 1984, pp. 199–250.

⁷⁶ Wang-Hui 1998, pp. 6, 8–11; Guo-Jingyun 2013, pp. 361f. Opponents argue that the oracle bones from Zhou Yuan were not divinations from the Zhou royal family, Wang-Yuzhe 1982, p. 102. Some suggest these oracle bones may have been moved from Yin territory, Wang-Yuxin 1989, pp. 409–36. Others believe they reflect the Zhou royal family’s learning of Yin rituals, Li-Shuo 2022, pp. 287–326.

Western Zhou, the tradition continued.⁷⁷ The legitimacy of the Zhou's takeover of the Shang dynasty required the rulers to gradually build it after establishing their regime. For the early Zhou regents, such as the Duke Dan of Zhou (周公旦, 11th century B.C.), the practice of human sacrifice conflicted with the new dynasty's concept of heaven's mandate. As Qu-Yuan recorded in *Tianwen* (20), "(King Wu) struck at (the body of) Tyrant Zhou, but Dan was not pleased. Though intimately guiding King Wu campaign to decree Zhou's mandate, why did he sigh? When Heaven granted Shang dynasty the world, how was its power arranged? Yet in its triumph came collapse—what crimes brought its demise (列擊紂躬, 叔旦不嘉, 何親揆發, 定周之命以謠嗟, 授殷天下, 其位安施, 反成乃亡, 其罪伊何)".⁷⁸ Although scholarly opinions differ on whether the Duke Dan or King Mu implemented the Zhou rites and abolished Shang rituals, human sacrifice gradually disappeared from the historical stage during this period.⁷⁹

The Duke Dan, or the early Zhou rulers, were keen to conceal the fact that Wenwang had participated in human sacrifice in the Shang capital. Most oracle bone inscriptions discovered from the Shang period were from the reign of King Wu Ding, and the number of inscriptions from the last Shang kings, Di Yi and Tyrant Zhou, is scarce. However, it can be inferred from the records of Tyrant Zhou's continuous military campaigns that the divination records from his reign were quite numerous. Thus, it is reasonable to speculate that these divination records were deliberately destroyed by conqueror.⁸⁰ This official act of altering historical memory is also evident in the numerous imperial decrees found in *Shangshu*.⁸¹ What we see in classical texts is the Zhou royal family intentionally establishing a new concept of "Mandate of Heaven" to replace the previous human sacrifice ideology. Only by aligning Wenwang's image with the new system of Mandate of Heaven could the legitimacy of the dynasty's mandate be secured (cf. *Shijing*, *Daya*, *Daming* 6; *Shangshu*, *Zhonghui Zhigao*, 2). Thus, the story of Wenwang eating his progeny is not only an ethical allegory or a concealed historical event but is deeply integrated into the narrative framework of ancient Chinese political legitimacy, becoming an important symbol of "bearing Mandate of Heaven"

⁷⁷ Wang-Ping and Kubin 2007; Li-Shuo 2022, p. 526.

⁷⁸ Cf. *Yizhoushu*, *Shifujie*. Li-Shuo 2022, pp. 499–502.

⁷⁹ Cf. Wang-Hui 2000, pp. 19–33.

⁸⁰ Another possible scenario: based on stratigraphic relations, oracle bones from the reign of Tyrant Zhou should be located higher in the strata, making them more easily excavated. Moreover, prior to the late Qing and early Republic period, oracle bones were commonly used as medicinal ingredients in traditional Chinese medicine, leading to the depletion of oracle bones from the Tyrant Zhou period throughout history.

⁸¹ Few modern scholars have addressed the issue of human sacrifice records being intentionally altered. For discussion of this issue, see Tong-Enzheng 1980, pp. 98–104; Li-Shuo 2022, pp. 528–31.

and overthrowing tyranny. As the *Tianwen* (27) states, “Receiving this granted minced meat, Wenwang protests to the Heaven. Why did Wenwang personally implore the god’s punishment to himself, yet in turn, Shang’s fate was not saved?” This explicitly explains the violence faced by Wenwang as a symbol of the Shang’s moral decay and the transfer of Mandate of Heaven. The Tyrant Zhou and the virtuous conduct of Wenwang form a strong contrast, transforming the progeny-eating incident from an individual tragedy into a symbol of the birth of a new regime and the reconstruction of moral order.

Thus, in Wenwang’s narrative, the individual does not conflict with the system but is rather seen as the embodiment of moral and order. It is not that he was endowed with the mission and virtue to carry the world’s order, but that the order of the world was formulated according to him. As Confucius stated, “To govern by virtue is like the North Star: it remains in place while all the other stars revolve around it” (*Analects, Weizheng*, 1), Wenwang himself is the source of the legitimacy of the system. His personal will aligns with the way of heaven, and his actions are the moral standard. In this logic, the individual and the system are no longer in potential conflict but are highly unified: the sage ruler *per se* is the living embodiment of a righteous system, and his personal experiences and decisions acquire institutional significance.

From a broader cultural perspective, the heroized tragic narrative becomes part of the moral tradition of Chinese civilization: it shapes and transmits beliefs about ideal political order and profoundly influences the moral cohesion of the social community and the continuity of cultural values through ethics of “*Dao* of Heaven is cosmically legible” (天道昭彰).

Summary

By comparison, certain Greek tragic texts and certain Confucian narrative traditions both use scenes of extreme suffering or transgression to perform a social and ethical function, but they tend to do so in markedly different ways. Greek tragedy often works through critique and destabilization: by exposing the fallibility of heroic figures, it invites reflection on the fragility of human judgment, the limits of power, and the necessity of order. Confucian narrative, by contrast, more often works through moral elevation and exemplarity: by idealizing sage rulers or worthy sufferers, it directs attention toward benevolence, legitimacy, and ethical governance. Despite these differences, both traditions may be said to reinforce shared values through the representation of crisis. Greek texts

often do so by making audiences witness the collapse of heroic stature and the consequences of excess. Chinese narratives, by contrast, more often consolidate moral consensus through reverence for the suffering and endurance of exemplary rulers. The difference, then, lies less in whether values are shaped than in how they are shaped. Greek tragedy tends to work through warning, exposure, and the negative illumination of error; Confucian narrative more often proceeds through admiration, moral exemplarity, and the positive articulation of normative ideals. This divergence is reflected as well in narrative tone: Greek tragedy commonly mobilizes pity and fear to illuminate human vulnerability, whereas Confucian narrative more often organizes affect around reverence, admiration, and ethical aspiration.

Overall, while the narratives of Thyestes and Wenwang's progeny-eating share similar extreme circumstances, they are placed within different cultural value frameworks, reflecting the "humanized" hero narrative in Greek tragedy and the "idealized" hero narrative in Confucianism. Although these two narrative paths are opposites, they both achieve the necessary functional effects for their respective cultures: the former ensures citizens' awareness of the boundaries between individual and institution, while the latter strengthens societal reliance on the unity of moral and political belief. Tragic error can both be a tool for deconstructing the hero and reaffirming equal rule of law, as well as a bond for shaping sages and consolidating moral consensus.

5. Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of the Greek Thyestes and the ancient Chinese Wenwang progeny-eating narratives, this chapter reveals the divergence between the two cultures in their concepts of "pollution", "purification", and "moral redemption". While these narrative themes both center around the violation of taboos and society's response mechanisms, the philosophical, ethical, and political orientations they reflect are distinct.

Greek narrative primarily views *μίασμα* as an objectively existent material and cosmic impurity that originates from the disruption of both social and divine order. Once it occurs, it requires strict ritual *κάθαρσις* to restore balance. The tragedy of Thyestes vividly portrays the lasting pollution and divine retribution resulting from the violation of ethical order. At the same time, there is internal tension within the Greek philosophical tradition: on one hand, Plato emphasizes the absoluteness of taboo actions and the undeniable guilt that follows, while on the other hand, the

challenges posed by the Cynics and Stoics stress the importance of subjective motives and specific contexts, thereby undermining the absolute authority of the traditional concept of pollution.

In contrast, Chinese tradition constructs an ethical framework centered around internal virtue that does not rely on external purification rituals. The progeny-eating narrative of Wenwang, for instance, transforms an extreme taboo scenario into a moral trial and opportunity for transcendence, emphasizing the internal unity of personal virtue and political order. In this logic, physical impurity can be negated or even transformed by the moral subject's awareness. Pollution is no longer an irreversible guilt but becomes a test and a historical opportunity to manifest the sage's virtue and political legitimacy. Wenwang's suffering experience fails to damage his image as a sage king but contrarily becomes a core resource for constructing the legitimacy of Mandate of Heaven in Confucian ethical and political thought.

This narrative difference is also clearly reflected in the fundamental distinction between the two cultures' understanding of the "hero". Greek tragedy creates a "humanized" tragic hero: they are not flawless but fall through the conflict between desire, fate, and societal norms, thereby awakening the public's appreciation for moderation and order. Chinese tradition, on the other hand, strives to construct an "idealized" moral hero who, even in the most extreme circumstances, can uphold benevolence, loyalty, and heaven's mandate. This hero-building approach emphasizes the high unity of personal virtue and political order, possessing a powerful ethical educational and social integration function.

Ultimately, the different narrative treatments that Greek and Chinese traditions give to similar taboo acts reveal not only distinct understandings of pollution and redemption, but also deeper differences in their philosophical, religious, and political formations. Greek texts more often explore the problem of justice under conditions of tension between individual action, civic order, and divine sanction, whereas Chinese texts more often seek ethical constancy within a vision of harmony linking human society to Heaven. At the broadest level, this cross-cultural comparison returns to a persistent human question: how to situate embodied human existence, torn between the desire for taboo and the fear of losing control, between the shelter of order and the risks of freedom.

VI. At the Crossroads of Ancient Greece and China

ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὅση.

The road up and the road down are one and the same.

— Heraclitus, 22 B60 DK

This study has traced the symbolic architecture of progeny-eating as a tragic error within the moral and cosmological frameworks of ancient Greece and China. Through a five-part inquiry, it has revealed how these cultures name and classify “error”, as well as how they absorb the unthinkable—incest, infanticide—into coherent systems of meaning, redemption, and authority.

In the Greek materials examined here, progeny-eating is not a mere act of cruelty, but a structured reply to the transgression of incest. It operates within a symbolic economy governed by the laws of similarity and opposition, where ethical violations are not healed by negation but by intensification—one abomination answered by another, one pollution sealing the wound opened by the first. Atreus’s revenge, far from an outburst of rage, is a calculated inversion of the attributes of incest: by reversing the principles of consent, knowledge, and concealment, he transforms the eating of children into an act of ritual purification. In this framework, μῖασμα is not a moral stain, but the condensation of structural imbalance. Greek tragedy is not concerned with judging error as such; rather, by staging the inevitability of error, it compels the audience to confront the irreconcilable tensions among human nature, fate, and justice.

By contrast, the Wenwang narrative points toward a different mode of symbolic transformation. Here, progeny-eating is gradually stripped of its defiling force and recast as an instance of sacred endurance and self-sacrifice. This transformation does not occur through outright denial, but through a long process of concealment, acceptance, critique, and reconfiguration. Pollution is not treated as an enduring mark upon the body, but is progressively overwritten by ethical and political interpretation. In this narrative trajectory, Confucian moral discourse does not merely excuse the act; it absorbs and reshapes it, bringing it into relation with the ideal of sagely kingship. What is represented as a deeply troubling act thus becomes, in later reception, a means through which virtue is disclosed and political legitimacy reinforced.

Placed side by side, these two narrative trajectories illuminate a fundamental contrast. In the Greek case, progeny-eating remains bound to the logic of tragic conflict: it marks an ethical rupture

that cannot be neutralized except through suffering, reversal, and the continued circulation of violence. In the Wenwang case, by contrast, the same kind of act is progressively reinterpreted and incorporated into a moralized political order. Yet beneath these differences lies a shared recognition: at its most radical, transgression exposes the foundations upon which a civilization imagines justice, authority, and human order. It is at such points of extremity that cosmology, politics, and ethics come most sharply into view—not in harmony, but in tension.

The fundamental divergence between Greek and Chinese treatments of tragic progeny-eating serves as a reminder that cross-cultural comparison must remain alert to the value judgments and methodological problems that can hide behind simple juxtaposition. Approaches shaped by alterity tend to cast the other culture as opaque, even aberrant, treating difference less as something to be explained than as something to be judged. It then becomes easy to condemn ancient tales of progeny-eating through modern ethical categories, or to evaluate one tradition's narrative logic by the normative standards of another. Read in this way, the Greek and Chinese materials become mutually estranging: Greek readers may find it incomprehensible that Chinese tradition could moralize so cruel an act as virtue, while Chinese readers may find in turn be struck by the bleak fatalism that saturates Greek tragedy. Yet such a perspective, judging the other from within one's own assumptions, cannot illuminate the inner logic by which these differences are produced; it tends instead to reinforce stereotype and cultural self-assurance.

Yet this moralized lens obscures more than it reveals. It risks reifying cultural stereotypes—or worse, reproducing implicit hierarchies of moral or intellectual refinement. To consistently frame the other as strange and ethically deviant is to fall into the trap of seeing only difference, never structure. What is required instead is a shift toward a unjudgmental, structurally attuned perspective—one that brackets normative judgments and instead asks how each culture symbolically orders the same extreme experience and makes it available for thinking with.

In this study, “progeny-eating” functions as a liminal experience: an act universally disruptive, yet made intelligible in each culture through distinct symbolic systems. Once we suspend inherited moral reflexes, we begin to see how Greek narratives encode progeny-eating within a religious-cosmic schema: divine curse, ancestral guilt, inescapable fate, and forms of symbolic or ritual resolution often articulated through the language of *κάθαρσις*. By contrast, Chinese narratives embed

the same act within a political-ethical matrix: dynastic legitimacy, filial devotion, and the ritual logic of the Mandate of Heaven. The divergence lies not in the horror of the event itself, but in the narrative architectures through which horror is made meaningful.

This comparative framework revealed several unresolved questions that merit further investigation. First, this study has centered on value structures and heroic paradigms, yet the gender dimensions of progeny motif remain largely unexamined. What roles do women play in these narratives—Pelopia, the daughter of Thyestes, or the mother of Boyikao? Do different cultures respond differently to maternal versus paternal infanticide? These questions invite deeper reflection on patriarchy, kinship, and gender ethics. Second, questions of textual genre merit further analysis. While this thesis has focused on tragedy and moralizing history, other narrative forms may mobilize alternative logics to mediate transgressive events. Third, comparative work must continually grapple with the tension between internal diversity and cultural synthesis. Though this study adopts a structural lens, any synthesis risks flattening intra-cultural multiplicity into dominant patterns. This is not a flaw, but a structural constraint of comparison itself—one that demands ongoing reflexivity and critical precision.

Ultimately, progeny-eating is not simply the outer limit of moral horror; it is a prism through which each culture refracts its vision of legitimacy, order, and the permissible boundaries of human action. In the Greek imagination, the body is a site of guilt and ritual purification; in the Chinese, it becomes a vessel of virtue and dynastic sanctity. Yet both traditions converge on a single, existential question: when ethical order collapses beneath the weight of the unthinkable, how does narrative remake tragic catastrophe into structure—how does rupture give way to symbolic repair?

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VIII. Appendix A: The Ancient Greek Works About Thyestes¹

In the *Iliad*, Atreus and Thyestes, being sons of Pelops, seemed to have an amicable relationship, with power peacefully passed down eventually to Agamemnon (2. 105–7). However, later authors painted this family in a darker hue, detailing an atmosphere of hatred and insanity. Hellanicus might be the first writer to imagine the curse of Pelops, anticipating the future fratricide in this family.² Other narratives of Thyestes occurred in the epic *Alcmaeonis*, and authors like Archilochus, Dositheus, and Pherecydes.³

The immense popularity of Thyestes' feast in Greek literature of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. can only be glimpsed from the extant evidence. Sophocles wrote no less than three plays on Thyestes of which fragments remain today.⁴ At least one of these plays focused on the cannibalistic banquet.⁵ Sophocles also makes reference to “the most profane feast (*δυσσεβέστατον δεῖπνον*) made from his brother's children” in *Ajax* (1293–4). Notably, according to the *Anthologia Palatina* (9.98), Sophocles was the first poet to connect the sun's retrogression with the horrific banquet of Thyestes. According to Vermeule's reconstruction, recently supported by Suaria, Sophocles' tetralogy (with an unknown satyr play) on Thyestes was: 1. *Atreus* or *Mycenaeen Women*: adultery and feast. 2. *Thyestes I* / *Thyestes in Sicyon*: Thyestes, Pelopia and baby Aegisthus. 3. *Thyestes II*: Thyestes and Aegisthus' revenge over Atreus (who is married to Pelopia).⁶

Euripides wrote a play titled *Thyestes* from which fragments survive,⁷ and he also treated the brothers' feud in his *Cressae* (*Cretan Women*), which seems to have included the incest of Thyestes and Aerope.⁸ He also wrote a *Plisthenes*, presumably about the offspring of Thyestes' revenge on

¹ Regarding the Hellenistic period drama of Thyestes, cf. Kotlińska-Toma 2015, p. 82–3; Regarding the Latinised theatrical adaptation of Thyestes, cf. *TRF*², F132; Tarrant 1985, pp. 40–3; Boyle 2017, pp. lxxiii–viii. Among these Latinised theatrical works, the most renowned and the most frustrating of these losses is Varius' Thyestes, which inspired contemporary intellectuals to extol the Romantic masterpiece as a rival to the paramount Greek tragedies. Cf. Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.245–7; Mart. 8.18.7, 8.55.21, 12.3.1–6; Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.98; Tac. *Dial.* 12.6, cf. Leigh 1996.

² “ἐπαρασάμενος αὐτοῖς καὶ τῷ γένει, δι' αὐτῶν ἀναιρεθῆναι” (‘having impetrating curse upon them and the family, they were destined to be destroyed by each other’), *FGrH*, Hellanicus, 4F42, cf. *Thuc.* 1.9.2, Pl. *Crat.* 395b.

³ *GEF Alcmaeonis*, Fr. 6; Archil. Fr. 91; Dositheus *FGrH* 54 F 7, cf. Paus. 6.20.7; Pherecydes *FGrH* 3 F 133 = Σ. Eur. *Or.* 995, cf. *Ap.E* 2.10–2.

⁴ Suaria recently argued that Sophocles wrote no more than three plays about Thyestes, Suaria 2022.

⁵ *TrGF*⁴, F247–67. See Parian Marble in *FGrH*, 239, also in *TrGF*¹, Did. D1. p. 49. Cf. Lloyd-Jones 1996, p. 106f; Jebb, Headlam and Pearson (eds.) 2010, pp. 91–94, 185–97. Vermeule has argued that a vase by the Darius Painter (Boston MFA 1987.53) may illustrate a scene from this play, Vermeule 1987, pp. 122–52.

⁶ Vermeule 1987, p. 129; Suaria 2022, p. 379.

⁷ *TrGF*⁵, F391–7.

⁸ *TrGF*⁵, F460–70. Speculation regarding the play's focus on the relationship between Thyestes and Aerope is based on Σ. Ar. *Ach.* 433, “Thyestes' rags”: either in *Cretan Women* or in *Thyestes* itself.” Conjecture about the focus on Aerope's past in Crete stems from Σ. Soph. *Aj.* 1297a.

Atreus.⁹ Euripides' surviving plays, particularly *Electra* and *Orestes*, also reference facets of the narrative, such as Thyestes' "most piteous feast" (οἰκτρότατα θοινάματα, *Or.* 814). In Aristophanes' *Acharnenses* (433), we glean that Euripides brought Thyestes onto the stage in tatters. The context for this might have been of Atreus cunningly enticing Thyestes back, as portrayed by Seneca (*Thyestes* 524–6), or Thyestes' second banishment by Atreus, during which he sought refuge at the court of Thesprotus, as described by Ennius (*TRF*², F132).¹⁰

Thyestes plays by other playwrights, too, survive only in scant remains. Agathon produced a work surviving only in four lines;¹¹ Diogenes of Athens and Apollodoros of Tarsus each penned a *Thyestes* of which only the title remains; Apollodoros' oeuvre also included a *Child Slayer* (Τεκνοκτόνος);¹² Carcinus possibly authored one, but only the title is extant;¹³ Chaeremon crafted a drama, of which we have the title and a one-line fragment;¹⁴ Theodectes might have written a play, surviving merely in four lines;¹⁵ Kleophon or Iophon (Sophocles' son) created a Thyestes-drama, with only the title known;¹⁶ and Diogenes (of Sinope) composed a play, again surviving solely through its title.¹⁷ Persaeus, a disciple of Zeno of Citium, is credited with a work titled *Thyestes* which is *not* a drama.¹⁸ In his formative years, Aeschines might have acted in a play about Thyestes. The *TrGF* speculates that this performance was a revival of Euripides' version around 365 B.C.¹⁹ Comedic fragments from Aristophanes' *Proagon* offer a satirical glance at how other tragedians

⁹ *TrGF*⁵, F625–32.

¹⁰ Cf. Tarrant 1985, pp. 40–1.

¹¹ *TrGF*¹, 39F 3. = Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, 12.528D.

¹² For Diogenes, *TrGF*¹, 45T 1. = *Suda* δ 1142. For Apollodoros, *TrGF*¹, 64T 1. = *Suda* α 3406. See also, *IG II* 2325 IV.

¹³ *TrGF*¹, 70 F 1d. lists only the titles of *Thyestes* and *Aerope* without providing specific sources. However, given *Suda*'s (s.v. Carcinus, κ 394) mention of Carcinus having written 160 plays, many of which were frequently acclaimed, it is reasonable to assume that he likely explored the theme of Thyestes.

¹⁴ *TrGF*¹, 71 F 8. = *Ath.* 13.608 F.

¹⁵ *TrGF*¹, 72 F 9. = *Stob.* 1.8.6. In this passage, Stobaeus quotes what is likely a chorus's speech to Thyestes upon discovering that he has eaten his own children, "ἀλλ' ὃ τάλαν Θυέστα, καρτέρει δάκνων ὀργῆς χαλινόν. παρακελεύομαι δέ σοι τεθηγμένῳ νῶν. ἀλλ' ὁ μῦριος χρόνος τὰ πάντ' ἀμαυροῖ χυπὸ χεῖρα λαμβάνει" ('But oh, poor Thyestes, endure by biting the bridle of anger. I urge you, although you are now enraged. But the countless time blurs everything and takes it under its control.')

¹⁶ *TrGF*¹, 77 F 7. = *Suda* κ 1730 = ι 451. It is conjectured that Kleophon is none other than Iophon, the son of Sophocles.

¹⁷ *TrGF*¹, 88 F 1d. = *Diog. Laert.* 6.73. While in this passage Diogenes Laertius mentions that Diogenes was not averse to cannibalism and expressed his views on the subject in his play *Thyestes*, Diogenes Laertius doubts whether Diogenes was the actual author of the work, suggesting that it may have been written by his friends Philiscus of Aegina or Pasiphon of Eretria. Regardless, this attests to the popularity of Thyestes within the Cynic school.

¹⁸ *Diog. Laert.* 7.36.

¹⁹ *TrGF*¹, *Did. B.* p. 18. In his speech *On the False Embassy*, Demosthenes criticised Aeschines for being ridiculed and opposed by the audience during his early performances in *Thyestes*, ultimately putting an end to Aeschines' aspirations of becoming an actor. Demosthenes, 19.337.

portrayed Thyestes.²⁰ Diocles, too, penned at least two comedies focusing on Thyestes, although only the titles have withstood the passage of time.²¹

²⁰ *PCG*³, Aristophanes, 478 = Ath. 3.95 D. “ἐγευσάμην χορδῆς ὁ δύστηνος τέκνων· πῶς εἶδω ῥύγχος περικεκαμμένον;” (‘I tasted a sausage, wretched me, of my children, how could I see a roasted pig-snout in the face?’)

²¹ *CAF*, 1.767. = *Suda* δ 1155.