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Opinion Articles

Looking Backwards for a Way Forwards: Greek Tragedy and its Classification of Mental States

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Abstract

Greek tragedies have become synonymous with popular understandings of psychology. Amongst other themes, many of the storylines of these ancient tales centre on the decline and turmoil of their characters' mental states. Taking three famous narratives from two of the master tragedians, the classification of mental states and symptoms of mental ill-health will be analysed through more 'modern' terminology. Despite the persistent focus of Greek tragedies upon mental state, there seems to be a lack of distinct terminology for the classification of divergent conditions and symptoms. As contemporary psychology engages in the self-aware debate of the formulation and utility of diagnoses and conditions, looking retrospectively to how other societies offered a full exhibition of mental states without the use of such classifications may prove enlightening. The tragedies that are going to be examined are Euripides' Bacchae, Sophocles' Oedipus dramas and Sophocles' Ajax. These dramas all exhibit the use of mania as the overriding descriptive terminology – a term encompassing symptoms of psychological turmoil which have been assigned classifications such as 'psychosis', 'schizophrenia', 'bipolar disorder' and 'post traumatic stress disorder' within modern psychology's history. The ancient tragedians' aversions to distinct classification reflect an interesting expression of and sensitive appreciation for the interrelating factors at play in mental ill-health.

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Introduction

Greek tragedy is an artform obsessed with the human mental state (Segal, 1986; Most, 2013; Padel, 1992, p. 163: 'Madness is central to tragedy'). Taking their storylines from the myths of

their ancestors, the focus of these plays reflects the historic nature of people's fascination with mental and emotional distress (Campbell, 2010; Taplin, 1977, p. 126: 'behaviour that can be variously explained has great dramatic potential'; Gill, 1996, p. 265: 'The tragic genre displayed and *made real* for the Athenian community aspects of human pain and vulnerability for which, as they saw it, there was not any clear practical solution or intellectual explanation. These aspects include the phenomenon of madness, something for which the Greek world saw no reliable or effective means of cure, and which in real life one would shun or seek to contain'; Snell, 1953). The behaviour of heroes in many tragedies reflects a broad spectrum of the problems encountered with psychological ill-health (Settineri et al., 2019), yet tragedians (who may reflect contemporary views) make little effort to classify, through vocabulary and other literary signposts, the expression of mental distress as specific conditions (the ancient medical writer Aretaeus of Cappadocia was aware of this many exhibitions of madness as well as their underlying commonality: μανίης τρόποι εἴδεσι μὲν μυρίοι, γένεϊ δὲ μοῦνος εἷς – 'The modes of madness [*mania*] are infinite in form, but one alone in genus' [my translation] – Aretaeus, 1.6, "*Περὶ Μανίης*" ("*On Madness*") [Adams, 1856]; Lo Presti, 2013 notes a similar broadness in the application of terminologies with epilepsy). As modern psychology engages in the ongoing debate of the use and relevance of terms designating the effects, symptoms and signs of poor mental health, the tragedies of antiquity may offer a mirror of how a society explores a *full* expression of the symptoms and consequences of deteriorating mental states without the need for restrictive classifications (Dalgleish et al., 2020; Merlo et al., 2022; Scull, 2021a; Frances, 2013; Uher & Rutter, 2012; Myles, 2021a, 2021b; Pinquart et al., 2016; Von Sydow et al., 2010; Von Sydow et al., 2013; Johnstone & Dallos, 2006; Szasz, 1961, Fletcher, 2021, discusses how review of the original texts and modern day performances have proved useful in the understanding and treatment of psychological disorders; Williams, 1993; the genre of Greek epic poetry has also been viewed through a clinical psychological lens cf. Shay, 2002 & 2003, which are formative works in the application of Classical sources for the practical, therapeutic treatment of mental health conditions exhibited by post-combat veterans; [Gill, 1996, p. 252 highlights the close relationship between Homeric, epic poetry and Greek tragedy: 'Tragic madness incorporates the two stages of Homeric *atē*: it is both mental damage and disaster in events'; Goldhill, 1986, p. 168: 'the Homeric poems provide an important textual background to the workings of Attic drama'; Hershkowitz, 1998; Padel, 1992; Padel, 1995]; Shay, 2014; Ustinova, 2020; Hershkowitz, 1998). We might look to Athenian tragedy for comparable classifications of mental health due to their articulation of psychological turmoil to an engaged

audience which, similar to today's talking therapies, placed importance on the verbal expression and ownership of trauma by sufferers.

To explore this reflection, I will discuss three famous tragic storylines which have been subject to modern re-analyses through contemporary terminology (Fraguas, 2009, discusses the advantages and disadvantages of retrospectively applying modern terminology to the mental health of antiquity; Trembinski & Pickren, 2011, argue that the application of modern psychological terminology is helpful for scholarship and is not an ahistorical process; Padel, 1995; Harris, 2013; Hershkowitz, 1998; Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (whose titular figure, Orestes, is 'the paradigmatic example of Greek tragic madness' [Most, 2013, p. 398]) will not be discussed in this piece as it is a trilogy that would warrant lengthy analysis in its own right – analysis that is widespread already: cf. Most, 2013; Hershkowitz, 1998; Padel, 1992). I will look at Euripides' *Bacchae*, then Sophocles' Oedipus tragedies (*Oedipus Tyrannus* & *Oedipus at Colonus*), and finish with Sophocles' *Ajax*. Throughout their representations, these tragic characters express 'schizophrenic tendencies,' 'episodes of psychosis,' the 'extremities of bipolar disorder,' 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,' as well as depression and its behavioural impacts (Evans et al., 2003). Despite the lengthy portrayal of mental destabilisation that these tragedies afforded, there appears to be no attempt to classify or separate the symptoms and conditions which the characters display (The mis-match in the applicability of modern psychological terms upon our estimations of ancient Greek playwrights' conceptions of madness is not the takeaway of my discussion [Goldhill, 1986, p. 197: 'Judgements of Greek tragedy which derive from or are delivered to illuminate the profound and eternally fixed verities of human nature are commonplaces of Victorian and post-Victorian criticism'; I disagree with Devereux's [1970] generalising view of modern psychotherapy's direct methodological relevance with Euripides' dramas] – it would be a miraculous coincidence if modern psychology's conception of mental illness (a conception that is obviously constantly in flux) was able to be directly mapped onto ancient drama [Padel, 1995; Cole, 2019] – rather ancient drama's limited and inclusive vocabulary to describe mental distress could act as an example for modern terminology and practice; Hughes, 2013). That attempts to label psychological particulars are absent from a genre so dictated by mental disturbance implies an understanding of the interrelation of symptoms and impacts concerning psychopathy (Gill 1996, p. 251 describes the core characteristic of the Greek tragic thought-world as a belief that 'the relations between inner and outer form part of a world characterized by interconnection, and by shared procreation and mutual destruction, rather than a world consisting of stable entities and determinate categories'). For each tragedy discussed, I will first offer a small synopsis of the play and its narrative backstory (Stage 1).

Then, I will discuss the symptomatic episodes which present openings for modern terminology and compare these with the authors' classifications of mental state (Stage 2). After covering the plays themselves, I will discuss the role of the gods within mental health as explored by Greek tragedy, finishing with some thoughts on what these Greek tragedies may be able to offer to modern psychology (Stages 3 and 4).

Euripides' *Bacchae* (Stage 1)

The *Bacchae* is a tragedy written by Euripides in the late 5th Century BC which recounts the mythical fate of Pentheus, king of Thebes, and his divine cousin, Bacchus – also called Dionysus (Mills, 2006). Bacchus arrives in Thebes to make known his divine parentage and avenge the impious behaviour of his family towards him. He recounts that he was born of a mortal woman, Semele, and the most powerful god, Zeus. However, he is angry as even Semele's sisters – Autonoe, Agave and Ino – think that this is an untrue story to cover up Semele's pregnancy with some mortal. Bacchus describes that he has driven all the women of Thebes mad - including his aunts – and compelled them to go into the mountains to perform his religious rituals. He disguises himself as a mortal until the moment for his divine revelation and retires to the mountains to join the celebrating women – the Bacchae (/Bacchants). Pentheus, angry that the elders of Thebes have decided to take part in the licentious rituals, orders the foreigner (Bacchus) who has brought the rites to Thebes to be captured. Pentheus' guards return with Bacchus in his mortal disguise and Pentheus intends to have him stoned to death. Pentheus interrogates the stranger and, infuriated by his vague responses, has him led away and chained to a bull in the stables. Bacchus releases himself easily and destroys the palace with an earthquake and fire. Meanwhile, a herdsman from the mountains has brought a message to Pentheus: the women were roaming the mountain forests behaving strangely and, when confronted, chased the herdsmen and tore their livestock to pieces. Pentheus is determined to bring military action against the Bacchants but a still 'mortal' Bacchus re-enters the scene and persuades him instead to spy on the women and their rituals first. Bacchus insists that Pentheus should go in disguise and dress up as a Maenad (the name for his female followers). Pentheus agrees and, when this is completed, the two of them exit the stage to go off to the mountains with Pentheus already appearing to be deluded by the god's power. Then a messenger enters the stage and reports that when Pentheus and Bacchus reach the party of Maenads, Bacchus situates Pentheus in a tall tree so that he can have a good view of the rites. Bacchus then reveals himself in all his divine glory and shows the women where Pentheus is hiding. The women encircle Pentheus and, after bringing him down from the tree, they tear him apart. Agave now bustles on to the stage, the

head of her son in her hands. In a 'divine-induced *mania*,' she proudly shows what she believes to be the head of a mountain lion to her father and calls for Pentheus to come and marvel at her achievement. Becoming increasingly lucid with the waning of Bacchus' delusions and her father's horror at what she has done, she realises what she is holding. The play ends with the whole family being punished either through exile or metamorphosis into snakes.

Euripides' *Bacchae* (Stage 2)

The *Bacchae* as a whole seems to be a play concerned with portraying the bipolar arc of mental health on stage. The god, Dionysus, potent and excessive due to his divine status, presents the audience with a character who fulfils the extremes of ecstasy and depression. His cousin, Pentheus, who is punished at the close of the tragedy for his heresy, likewise seems a canvas for the highs and lows associated with bipolar disorder. Dionysus is the protagonist of the tragedy and his dangerously fluctuating mood is the driving factor in the plot's momentum. Alongside him, Pentheus and his family all experience extreme shifts in lucidity and emotion. It appears that for Euripides, there was no express difference between the bipolar-like mania that Dionysus experiences and the hallucinations (behaviours more closely associated today with 'schizophrenia') Pentheus suffers from. This lack of classification can be seen in the application of limited terminology to describe both good and poor mental health. *σωφρονεῖν* is the term which denotes right-mindedness. It is such a versatile classification that it is used to describe the correct practice of revering the new god Bacchus as well as the expectations of female chastity as approved by the tragedy's society (Eur. *Bacch.* 314; 316; 329; 940). The wide-range of intentions and behaviours which this term contains reflects a lack of concern for the segregation of different types of wisdom. However, in a tragedy that highlights the weaknesses in the human mindset, one could argue that there is little to glean from the author's lack of specificity concerning the positive applications of wisdom. Significantly, where we would then expect a plethora of terms to describe the faults and 'poor functioning' of human mental state, there is a similar scarcity.

μανία ('*mania*') has its first mention in the play within the first forty lines of the tragedy (*μανίαις* – Eur. *Bacch.* 33). It describes the madness which the god Bacchus has instilled in the Theban women so that they should leave their homes and celebrate his rites in the mountains (Howie, 1986; Fontaine, 2016). The stem of *μανία* is then swiftly seen a few lines later when it has been used to make a verb (*ἐκμαίνω*) which Bacchus uses to describe the effect he has had on Pentheus' female relatives (*ἐξέμηνα* – Eur. *Bacch.* 36; Thumiger et al., 2013). From the beginning of the tragedy, the audience has been introduced to the terminology that will express the mental

condition of characters suffering from poor psychological health (Tembinski & Pickren, 2011). Pentheus' bipolar tendencies are instrumental in the injury he does to his divine cousin that precipitates his personal downfall (Kaufman, 1966). Suffering in this way, at no point in the play does the Theban king appear to be totally lucid due to his swings from fury to ecstasy. Pentheus, disgusted by what he sees as the effemination of the city by a licentious, debauched god, agrees to cross-dressing which is in direct contrast to the anger which he held for the elders of Thebes when they decide to attend the rites (Eur. *Bacch.* 248-254; Henrichs, 1978; Sale, 1972). The extreme swing in his personality is expressed through his sudden change over a few lines from threatening to kill his female relatives to consenting to wear women's clothing (Eur. *Bacch.* 809-824; Segal, 1986; Sale, 1972). Pentheus also suffers from hallucinations when under Bacchus' spell (Gill, 1996). Emerging from the palace to spy on the women, Pentheus states that he now sees two suns and sees the 'stranger' (Bacchus) in the form of a bull (Eur. *Bacch.* 918-922; Padel, 1995). Such hallucinatory experiences and unusual beliefs are consistent with modern classifications of psychosis and schizophrenia but are given no particular terminology in the tragedy (Most, 2013).

Bacchus' own polar shifts in mood are evident through his change from a lenient god offering Pentheus another chance to repent (despite the king's disrespectful treatment of Bacchus) to a madness of his own when he reveals his vicious spite for the king and brings about his horrific demise (Eur. *Bacch.* 787-791; 794-795; 802 → 848-861; 1076-1143; Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Otto characterise Dionysus as the god of madness – Nietzsche, 2012; Nietzsche, 1908; [Carroll, 2015; Howie, 1986]; Otto, 1965; Dodds, 1951). Bacchus' fury is expressed through his wish to humiliate the king thoroughly before his gruesome death and he describes himself as a 'most dreadful' (*δεινότατος*) deity which clashes with his gentle beauty and his earlier magnanimity (Eur. *Bacch.* 861). Pentheus' mother and aunts, having been alerted of the king's presence at the sacred ritual, are described as being maddened (*ἐμμανεῖς* – again the same verbal stem as the other references to *mania*) by the god's influence (Henrichs, 1978; Ustinova, 2020; Padel, 1995). The hallucinatory extent of Bacchus' power is evident through Agave's inability to recognise her son's head which she believes is the head of a mountain lion (Eur. *Bacch.* 1139-1143; Hesk 2003; Padel 1995). Emotional instability appears to be characteristic to this mythologically-rich family: their inability to maintain some sense of mental balance drives their destructive choices (Sale, 1972). It is telling that the messenger who reports Pentheus' death announces that one of the best things for men to do is to practise 'moderation' (the verb *σωφρονεῖν* is used again here), in line with the ancient Greek maxim 'nothing in excess'

– *μηδὲν ἄγαν* (Eur. *Bacch.* 1150; *μηδὲν ἄγαν* is a maxim accredited to Chilon of Sparta, one of the seven sages of Greece, the phrase is said to have been inscribed in the forecourt of Apollo's temple at Delphi as is recounted in Plato's *Charmides*, 165a).

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Stage 1)

The character of Oedipus is renowned within Western thought and psychological schools (it is arguable that psychoanalysis's deep reception within 20th Century European popular culture means that we read the Oedipus myth through a Freudian lens, or at least with his theories in mind, cf. [Armstrong, 2005; Bourlot, 2019]). Sophocles is celebrated for his portrayal of the rise and mental collapse of this mythical character. Through the speeches of a number of different characters, *Oedipus Tyrannus* recounts the story of Oedipus' royal birth and the troubling prophecy surrounding his life – that he would kill his father and father children with his mother. We hear how Oedipus' father, Laius, orders for his son to be abandoned in the wild but via a selection of slaves who pity the infant, Oedipus ends up being raised as the son of the king of Corinth, Polybus, in his royal household. Growing up, Oedipus is insulted over his parentage and visits the oracle of Delphi to try and quell his suspicions over his relation to Polybus and Merope (the queen of Corinth). Oedipus only hears of the terrible prophecy surrounding his life and runs away from his home to avoid harming his, unknown-to-him, adoptive parents. On his way to Thebes, he encounters Laius and kills him following a misunderstanding and clash of fragile pride. Oedipus is unaware that he has killed the king of Thebes, let alone his own father. Arriving at Thebes, Oedipus finds the city at the mercy of the Sphinx, a mythical beast which is terrorising the city. He answers the riddle, defeating the beast, and in reward for freeing the city, he is permitted to marry the queen of Thebes, Jocasta. Years later in the narrative of Oedipus' life, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* starts its story when the city of Thebes is again in peril, this time from a plague. According to Apollo's oracle, the plague is affecting the city as it is harbouring the killer of the unavenged king Laius. Oedipus swears that he will pursue the matter and bring the murderer to justice. Throughout the play, details emerge which further implicate Oedipus as the murderer of his father and husband of his mother. He is warned by the famous seer, Tiresias, as well as his mother-wife, Jocasta, to not pursue the issue, but becomes further obsessed with finding out the truth. Finally, the whole truth comes to light and Oedipus, overwhelmed, rushes into the palace to find that Jocasta has killed herself. Taking the brooch from her dress, Oedipus blinds himself to prevent himself from seeing his hands that have committed such terrible acts. He begs to be exiled and relinquishes his throne to his brother-in-law, Creon.

Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (Stage 1)

Oedipus at Colonus continues the narrative, dramatising Oedipus' period of exile and the last days of his life. Oedipus is a wanderer who is accompanied and cared for by his daughters, Antigone. Being pursued by Creon and his soldiers whilst in exile, they find sanctuary in a grove sacred to the Furies at Colonus on the outskirts of Athens. The old men of Colonus, who form the chorus of the play, learn of Oedipus' identity and consequently wish to expel him lest his presence curses Colonus and Athens. He persuades them to let him meet the ruler of Athens, Theseus, as he is in possession of a great gift. Oedipus' other daughter, Ismene, arrives and tells her father that his son Eteocles has ousted his other son Polynices as king of Thebes. She recounts that Polynices has gone to Argives to gather support and later attack Thebes whilst Eteocles has sent Creon to find Oedipus as a prophecy states that the land which Oedipus is buried on will be granted invulnerability – this is Oedipus' gift for Theseus. Bitter that his own sons would not care for him in his misery and old age, Oedipus instead chooses to curse his sons to die at each other's hands (as attested in the last tragedy of Sophocles' Theban trilogy, *Antigone*). Then Theseus himself arrives and, pitying Oedipus, offers to help him in any way he needs. In response, Oedipus gifts Theseus and Athens his burial site, ensuring Athens' military protection. Eventually, Creon finds Oedipus and, feigning pity, demands that he returns to Thebes to die and protect the land under Eteocles' reign. When Oedipus refuses, Creon unleashes a torrent of abuse concerning Oedipus' depravity and threatens to harm his daughters unless he cooperates. As a suppliant to the gracious Theseus, Oedipus is actively protected by the king of Athens, who forces Creon to release Ismene and forgo his threats. Oedipus is then approached by his son Polynices, but Oedipus refuses to revoke his curse and condemns Polynices to death for casting out his own father. After an ominous thunderstorm, Oedipus interprets that his life is soon to end. He goes offstage with Theseus and it is reported that he has died, the exact location only known to Theseus who must keep it a secret to maintain its protective power for his city. Antigone seeks passage back to Thebes to try and prevent his brothers from fighting each other and fulfilling their prophecy.

Sophocles' Oedipus tragedies (Stage 2)

The character of Oedipus was an excellent canvas for Sophocles to display the stretching of mental states in an individual. His concerns over his parentage and his later staunch pursuit of the truth concerning Laius' murderer reflect his obsessive tendencies, despite the warnings from Teiresias, Jocasta and the shepherd who saved him as an infant (Soph. *OT* 132-146; 246-251; 320-321; 358; 435-438; 728-833; 911-923; 1056-1072; 1141-1185). From Oedipus' ecstasy over

his success with the riddle and his marriage to the beautiful Jocasta, Sophocles expresses the heights of satisfaction and pride which man can achieve. The gradual disclosure of vague information via different sources concerning Oedipus' guilt dramatises his suffering alongside his desperate hopes, giving a full portrayal of the hero's bipolar character (Soph. *OT* 345-462; 558-576; 707-770; 834-840; 950-974; 984-1050; 1121-1185). 'Fear' (*φόβος*) is the term consistently applied to describe Oedipus' overarching and momentary anxieties caused by the prophecies around his birth. His unstable reactionary mindset is exhibited throughout when he wildly accuses Creon of being Laius' killer and vows to put him to death (Soph. *OT* 532-542; 623). The gruesome and lasting harm that is enacted when he blinds himself highlights the hatred for self and situation, a reflection of his mental collapse at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Soph. *OT* 1255-1279; Fletcher, 2021; Kaplan, 2021; cf. Padel, 1995). Seeing this self-harm, the chorus asks Oedipus 'what madness [*μανία*] has come over him' (Soph. *OT* 1299-1300). As in Euripides' tragedy, the terminology applied to Oedipus' equally devastated by symptomatically different mental state is the same in Sophocles' tragedy. The power of Sophocles' use of this term comes not from its repetition, but from its rarity in Sophocles' Oedipus tragedies (it occurs only once in *Oedipus at Colonus*) but is applied at the crucial moment of the classification of Oedipus' mental distress. Throughout the play, shame, guilt, and suffering have been describing the nature of Oedipus' external afflictions, but only *mania* is used to determine his inner mental state (This view goes beyond Crichton's [2016] description of Greek tragedy's psychological terms). Whilst fear may be one of the feelings which contribute to Oedipus' ill-health, *mania* is given as the condition which he has succumbed to. Depression and its rigidity, a quality already present in the hero's character, soon dominate Oedipus' behaviour in *Oedipus at Colonus*. He refuses to reconsider his sons' fate, ensuring the next generation of his household the suffering and shame of fratricide. Such unresponsive behaviour is reminiscent of the negative symptoms of psychosis that have plagued Oedipus throughout Sophocles' tragedies. Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, when offering advice to Theseus and his daughters, describes himself as one who has turned to *mania* (Soph. *OC* 1537). This self-classification of his unstable but often disparately affected mind is made within his last speech of the tragedy. In this poignant sign-off, Oedipus' self-evaluation of the struggles he has had with his mental state, in all its various machinations and symptoms, requires no other classification other than *mania*.

Sophocles' *Ajax* (Stage 1)

Sophocles' *Ajax* is a moving depiction of the deterioration and suicide of one of the greatest Greek heroes to fight at Troy (Kaufman, 1966). When Achilles is killed at Troy in battle, Ajax

and Odysseus fight hard to recover the body of the paradigmatic Greek hero (the Greek epic tradition records this event – see Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Posthomerica*, bk. 3, 190-389). Ajax does the lion's work of the protection of Achilles' body and, afterwards, expects to be given Achilles' legendary armour in recompense. However, a contest for the arms of Achilles takes place with Odysseus – the master rhetorician – winning the weapons through his persuasive lies (Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica*, bk. 5, 1-332). Ajax is enraged with the Greeks and particularly their commanders – Agamemnon and Menelaus – and intends to kill them. Deluded by the goddess Athena, he is influenced to attack the Greek livestock instead and kills the herds and their herdsmen (Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica*, bk. 5, 352-486). Partially realising his failure to harm his enemies, Ajax is absorbed with shame and resigns himself to death at his own hand. It is at this point in Ajax's mythical story that Sophocles starts his dramatic portrayal of Ajax's deterioration. Odysseus enters the stage with the goddess Athena and they discuss Ajax's actions and mental state. Athena then summons Ajax out of his tent and he recounts how he killed Agamemnon and Menelaus yet is still looking for Odysseus. Ajax returns to his hut after expressing the fragility of humans and Odysseus and Athena exit the stage. The chorus of Ajax's sailors come on and discuss the rumours of Ajax's damage to the herds and hope they are false. Ajax's concubine Tecmessa comes on stage to confirm the truth of the rumours. Ajax then enters the stage, seemingly no longer under Athena's spell, and rants against the Greek commanders. He expresses his extreme despair and shame over his recent actions and states that, with his honour lost, his only recourse is to kill himself. Ajax is unaffected by Tecmessa's pleas for him to change his mind despite their son's presence and all characters exit. After the chorus commands the stage, Ajax comes back to deliver a speech in which he announces that he has changed his mind. He will purify himself, cede to the gods' will and honour Menelaus and Agamemnon. Exiting the stage, Ajax assures Tecmessa and the chorus that all will be well. Next, a messenger arrives who states that the prophet Calchas has issued a warning that Ajax must not leave his hut today if he should remain alive. It appears that Athena, having been wronged by Ajax in the past, will put Ajax in peril for that day only. Tecmessa organises a search to find Ajax. The performance then shifts to another scene in a remote grove by the sea. Ajax enters the stage and delivers his last speech in which he curses Agamemnon and Menelaus and invokes the Furies to exact his revenge. After his diatribe, he kills himself by falling on his sword. The suspense in the narrative is prolonged when Menelaus and Agamemnon demand that Ajax lay unburied but Teucer is finally allowed to bury his brother when Odysseus intervenes with the Greek commanders. The tragedy ends with Teucer, Tecmessa and the chorus lamenting Ajax's death at his funeral.

Sophocles' *Ajax* (Stage 2)

Sophocles' portrayal of Ajax's mental state may contain features to which modern psychological terminologies may be applied to aid a contemporary-audience understanding (Kaplan, 2021). The tragedy makes reference to 'psychotic episodes' in the hero's past as well as his ongoing 'schizophrenic and bipolar tendencies' which are exhibited in the play. In these episodes of 'psychosis,' he experiences both positive and negative symptoms (cf. 'Early Psychosis Intervention', *Symptoms of Psychosis*, https://www.earlypsychosis.ca/symptoms-of-psychosis/). From what we hear of his acts of violence towards the livestock and their herdsman, the hero has experienced hallucinations which are ongoing throughout the drama (Simpson, 1969). Within the opening scene of the play, Ajax is still delusional, unable to see Odysseus and the goddess Athena discussing his mental condition (Cf. Padel, 1992, 59-65 for the 'vulnerability of sight and hearing' especially when under a god's influence). Indeed, Athena herself describes this hallucination as a 'manic illness' [*μανιάσιν νόσοις* – again the '*μανι*' (manic) stem] which she stirred up in him (Soph. *Aj.* 59; Most, 2013). The consistent description of Ajax's state as an illness is revealing of contemporary society's empathy for the victim's vulnerability to succumb to the pressures of mental health difficulties (Soph. *Aj.* 66; Padel, 1995). When Tecmessa describes Ajax's attack on the herds, she also describes that her husband had been struck by 'madness' (*μανίᾳ* – Soph. *Aj.* 216). Once again, a tragedy employs the term *mania* to classify the mental state of the afflicted hero despite his different symptoms when compared to the heroes that *mania* is also applied to. Furthermore, Ajax's refusal to listen to Tecmessa and sympathise with her or her son's fate reflects the negative symptoms of psychosis which the hero is suffering from. Further 'schizophrenic' behaviour is exhibited in the middle of the play when, after his earlier speech in which he speaks of his shame and desire to die, Ajax announces a change of heart (Williams, 1981; Williams, 1993). Here, Ajax describes that he will purify himself and revere the gods as well as Agamemnon and Menelaus, reassuring his wife and friends that all will be well. In the wake of his ultimate suicide, it is left to the performers and viewers to decide whether this speech's change of opinion is sincere, and thus a further exhibition of Ajax's mental instability, or deceptive, which would highlight a concerningly morbid clarity of mind (Gill, 1996; Goldhill, 1986). The overwhelming scholarly opinion is that Ajax's speech announcing his change of heart is deceptive which, in turn, highlights his determination to act upon his suicidal thoughts (Simpson, 1969; Thumiger et al., 2013; Williams, 1993). The discovery of his body reveals the method in which he kills himself and the preparation required to complete it, these factors themselves acting as indicators of the severity of his depression (Kaplan, 2021).

Sophocles' *Ajax* has had serious contemporary uptake due to its reader relations with 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder'. Shay's sensitive analysis of the damaged, dedicated hero whose combat experience leads to destructive *mania* changed the way Ajax and his martial narratives could be re-empathised and employed (Shay, 2002 & 2003). Utilising the poems of the Greek and Trojan heroes, he appropriated this wealth of literature as a therapeutic pathway for the experiences of the 20th Century's most traumatic conflicts – particularly the Vietnam War. This relevance to modern experience which Ajax, his commanders, his victims and his family members were recognised to wield saw further representation through the re-interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy (Baker, 2011, 'After Shock'). Bryan Doerries' *Theater of War* (2015) and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* are recent projects which have sought to highlight the role that 'PTSD' has in Ajax's tragic demise (Roberts, 2020). Doerries' project (2015) had a therapeutic goal: he performed his *Ajax* to groups of veterans and active-service military personnel (Cole, 2019). Through his updated, relatable translation, his cast of award-winning actors delivered their performances in a scaled-back, sparse staging (McGuire, 2015 describes Doerries' translations as 'clipped, precision-tuned versions of Greek tragedy', delivering 'intense, hard-driving performances'). Doerries intended for the language and dialogues of his script to have a stark impact on his audiences, offering a fully worded exhibition of a condition often exacerbated through the silence of an unaddressable stigma: 'All the translations of Greek tragedies within these pages are mine. However, they are not literal word-for-word renderings of Greek into English, but rather adaptive attempts to convey the drive and action of Greek drama, clearly and directly, for contemporary readers' (Doerries, 2015). His translation expands upon Sophocles' Greek – where Lloyd-Jones translates lines 205-207 as 'for now the dread, the mighty Ajax, harsh in his might, lies low, stricken by a turbid storm of sickness', Doerries' version engages his audience with modern relevance: 'he sits shell shocked inside the tent, glazed over, gazing into oblivion. He has the thousand-yard stare' (Fiely, 2009, 'Ancient Empathy for Warriors'; Soph. *Aj.* 205-207; Lloyd-Jones, 1994a). Likewise, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Ajax* marks another effort for the performance of a relevant Sophoclean message and places its focus upon the hero and his fellow soldiers' struggles with 'PTSD-like' mental distress (Roberts, 2020; Cole, 2019). Modern performances and their ambitions to use the Sophoclean text as a living dialogue, delivered with the dynamism of live performance, have been exceptionally successful in reviving Ajax's 'timeless tale' for therapeutic purposes and in provoking discussion around this taboo topic. Lodewyck (2015) argues that 'performances engage participants productively on a social level by leveraging familiar Western theatrical tropes such as "catharsis,"

which helps provide manageable, socially acceptable ways to publicly discuss emotionally intense and stigmatized topics' (cf. Manfredi & Massardi, 2019).

This theme of a male warrior turning his violence towards his own people is also famously exhibited in Euripides' *Herakles*. Euripides' text reveals the cause of Herakles' familicide as the wishes and actions of the goddesses Hera, Iris and Lyssa (Holmes, 2010) yet Herakles' descent into madness has also been read through a 'PTSD' framework (cf. Riley, 2008; Cole, 2019). Furthermore, Herakles' episodes of violence against his family due to 'PTSD' have been adapted and performed in modern theatre: Archibald Macleish's *Herakles*, Simon Armitage's *Mister Heracles*, Daniel Algie's *Home Front* (cf. Riley 2008). Yet, as evinced above, the Sophoclean text does not delineate between different classifications of mental distress and their particular symptoms and causes. Likewise, the diagnostic term of 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder' is another classification which is under contemporary scrutiny for its efficacy and suitability for patients and therapeutic pathways (Spring, 2017; Litz et al., 2009; Nazarov et al., 2015; Shay, 2014; Thompson, 2015). Although problems inherent in diagnostic terms such as 'PTSD' are a concern for patient care, nevertheless the exposure of Ajax and Greek warrior narratives to wider, non-scholarly audiences – particularly those suffering relatable experiences – has been the subject of meaningful, helpful and therapeutic reception (Fiely, 2009, 'Ancient Empathy for Warriors' recalls how, at a discussion panel after a certain performance of Doerries' *Ajax*, US Army Major Joseph Gerarci defended the value of performance therapy against Jonathan Shay's criticisms of theatre's therapeutic efficacy; Roberts, 2020; Cole, 2019; Spring, 2016).

The gods and mental health (Stage 3)

The gods play a significant role in Greek tragedy, particularly in the plays of Euripides and Sophocles. Deities are employed in tragedy to explain away the unjustifiable or enact the impossible. This may have positive or negative consequences: in several Euripidean tragedies, divine influence and characters favourably resolve issues which have no obvious solution (*Medea*, *Helen*, *Orestes*, *Alcestis*, *Andromeda*, *Ion*, *Iphigenia in Aulis* are all tragedies by Euripides in which the gods are key agents in the resolution of the plot; Holmes, 2010; cf. Appleton, 1920; Abel, 1954; Michelini, 1987; de Jong, 2016, for the use of *Deus ex Machina*). Likewise, in tragedies which explore mental health on stage, the gods again feature strongly (Ouwehand et al., 2014, record a modern-day study on the perception of divine experience in patients suffering from 'bipolar disorder'). The overbearing power of the divine acts as a reflection of what contemporary society and authors felt were the external influences that can affect mental state (sometimes seemingly unavoidable and often experienced as uncontrollable – Padel, 1992). In

Euripides' *Bacchae*, Dionysus and his chaotic mood drive the plot – abnormally, the god is this tragedy's protagonist. Whether this is a tragedy that warns people of the power of the gods or rather educates its audience about divine fickleness, nevertheless Dionysus has the power to reduce anyone to a state of *mania* (Kaufman, 1966; Segal, 1986). In Sophocles' Oedipus plays, Zeus and Apollo are seen as the agents behind the plague afflicting Thebes as well as the wider, destructive fate placed upon Oedipus and his family (Soph. *OT* 95-98; 151-203; 252-254; 376-377; 469-472; 738; 1184-1185; 1329-1335; *OC* 365-386; Williams, 1981). Ultimately, they are the agents responsible for Oedipus' mental demise (Williams, 1993). Athena plays a direct role, like Euripides' Dionysus, in the psychological illness and collapse which Ajax suffers from (Goldhill, 1986). Ajax himself blames Athena for casting a 'plague of madness' (*λυσσώδη νόσον* – Soph. *Aj.* 452) on him and the chorus describes the hero's condition as a 'godsent madness' (Soph. *Aj.* 611: *θεία μανία* – literally, 'a divine madness'). Herakles is a mythological hero who is another tragic figure cursed to insanity by the gods (cf. Euripides *Herakles* and later adaptations such as Seneca's *Hercules Furens*; Holmes, 2010). Euripides' tragedy tells the story of Herakles' descent into madness at the hands of the gods and his consequent manic, shameful acts of killing of his own family whilst out of his mind (Eur. *Heracl.* 922-1015; Williams, 1993; Thumiger et al., 2013; Padel, 1992). Like many of the heroes of the discussed tragedies, Herakles has been the subject of modern re-analyses. These re-analyses include terminologies such as 'hysteria' (Riley, 2008), 'manic depression' (Riley, 2008; Dodds, 1929) and 'PTSD' (Riley, 2008; cf. Holmes, 2010). Much work has been done in the Classics to analyse the role of the gods upon the sanity of tragic heroes and their agency in the mental demise of these characters (Gill, 1996; Papadopoulou, 2004). Whether the power of the gods to instil madness upon mortals was an accepted belief for the contemporary audiences of antiquity or rather a socially introspective critique of their behaviour is a subject of conjecture (Gill, 1996, p. 250: 'human psychological agency is subject to the power of forces from inside and outside the self: more precisely, that 'the self' is the meeting-place of inner and outer forces, agency and passivity, and that madness represents both a striking exemplification of this interplay and a crisis within it'; Ustinova, 2020; Dodds, 1951). Yet the involvement of fickle, divine, all-powerful beings in the mental health of tragedy's heroes reflects the fear of powerlessness in the face of madness present within many societies. Such consciousness of divine influence in madness is evident throughout literature, for example the Rev. William Anderson Scott's heathen proverb: 'Those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad' (cf. Scott, 1854, p. 248; various paraphrases are visible in ancient literature: Hom. *Od.* 9.492-493; Soph. *Ant.* 620-623; an ancient scholiast on Soph. *Ant.* 620 'ὅταν δ' ὁ δαίμων ἀνδρὶ πορσύνῃ κακά, τὸν νοῦν ἔβλαψε πρῶτον ᾧ βουλεύεται' [Nauck, 1856, p. 710, no.

379 of *Adespota*]; *Athenagoras, Legatio pro Christianis, Cap. 26, para … 129*; Tolstoy's *War and Peace* book 9 chapter 2 'Quos vult perdere dementat'). Indeed, where the term *mania* encompasses a plethora of expressions without the need to define illnesses and their symptoms, thus showing an understanding by tragic authors and audiences of the holistic impacts of mental ill-health, the blaming of the gods presents a tricky understanding of personal responsibility in the face of the terrible acts committed by human characters in all of the four tragedies discussed here (Holmes, 2010). The uncomfortable overlap of illness and personal responsibility may have been dealt with in Greek tragedy through the blaming of ruthless gods, yet this aspect of Greek tragedy does not solve modern concerns over agency and ill-health, particularly mental health (Evans et al., 2003; Williams, 1981, p. 31: 'Regret necessarily involves a wish that things had been otherwise, for instance that one had not had to act as one did. But it does not necessarily involve the wish, all things taken together, that one had acted otherwise'; Dodds, 1951; Snell, 1953).

Closing Thoughts (Stage 4)

The exhibition of mental deterioration appears to be at the heart of these tragedies, a viewpoint bolstered by the knowledge that these storylines would have been familiar with their audiences – it was important to the playwrights and the viewers that the process of mental collapse be centre-stage (Bourlot, 2019). This demand for and appreciation of an open display of mental and emotional turmoil and its consequences is indicated by their successful contemporary reception as they won awards (Williams, 1993). Greek tragedy is famous for its dramatisation of taboo subjects and alongside the incest, familicide and suicide, explorations of mental state likewise staged the fears and fantasies of the audience (Kaplan, 2021; Scull, 2021b; Manfredi & Massardi, 2019; Segal, 1986; Most, 2013; Padel, 1995; Snell, 1953). In no way are the dramatic effects of these ancient Greek tragedians definitively superior to modern psychology's studies of mental health, but this alternative to classification and specificity within an artform fascinated by mental instability may highlight the interrelations which complications within mental (ill-)health share (Trembinski & Pickren 2011; Padel 1995,; Harris 2013, p. 1: 'No one suggests here that the ancients devised more accurate or more serviceable diagnostic categories than the ones that are used now. It may be salutary, however, for all who are concerned with the history or the practice of psychiatry to consider how some of the best ancient minds perceived mental illness and madness [and the ancients' avoidance of what has been called 'nosologorrhea', the tendency to multiply to excess the number of recognized syndromes, has something to recommend it]'). Greek tragedy's absence of classifications for mental disturbances sidesteps the subjective, arbitrary and divisive diagnoses and their origins which have interminably

troubled the fields of psychiatry and psychology, such distractions and economic and academic allegiances perhaps presenting an obstacle to the improvements of treatment (Scull 2021b; Szasz 1961; Spring 2016).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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