

3 Oaths in traditional myth

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The malleability of Greek myth has often, and quite rightly, been stressed by scholars.¹ It is important to remember, however, that there were certain limits to the possibilities of adaptation. Stesichorus in his *Palinode* and Euripides in his *Helen* may have proposed that it was a phantom created by the gods and not the real Helen who caused the Trojan War, but they could not suggest, for example, that the Trojan War had not taken place. As Fritz Graf has argued, a myth “transcends the text: it is the subject matter, a plot fixed in broad outline and with characters no less fixed, which the individual poet is free to alter only within limits.” Moreover, myths “are transmitted from one generation to another, without anyone knowing who created them: that is what is meant by *traditional*”.² Graf makes an important distinction between traditional myth and text, but as Françoise Létoublon has observed in her discussion of Homer’s use of myth, we are faced with “rather an uncomfortable and paradoxical challenge” in studying early Greek myth where we have no direct evidence which predates Homer,³ a point often valid for later sources also. In identifying traditional myth we are very much limited by the surviving sources, which are invariably textual, especially poetic, or artistic. Nevertheless, in studying the corpus of oaths in Greek literature, there emerges a category of oaths intricately connected with the fabric of traditional myth, insofar as this category of myth is identifiable. For our purposes such oaths, which we can call mythological oaths or aetiological oaths, can be defined as having a clear and unalterable impact on the course of Greek mythology and an explanatory function therein. We can expect that oaths of this sort might be referred to in more than one work and across different genres and media. I will discuss three examples of sworn oaths, and one example of a broken oath, which definitively fix crucial events in Greek mythology. In each case a female figure is central to the circumstances of tendering or breaking the relevant oath, a point to which we shall return at the end.

¹ See e.g. the collection of essays in Woodard 2007, who states in his introduction (1) that “[w]hat we call “Greek myth” is no featureless monolith, but multifaceted, multifarious and multi-valent, a fluid phenomenon”. Other recent discussions of variability and innovation in Greek myth include Rutherford 2011 on Pindar, Alaux 2011 on Athenian drama, and Torrance 2013 on Euripides.

² Graf 1993, 2.

³ Létoublon 2011, 28.

A particularly important example of an aetiological oath is the oath of Helen's suitors, which precipitates the Trojan War, and interestingly is not explicitly mentioned in Homer (as discussed below). In an attempt to safeguard the outcome of the contest for Helen's hand, Tyndareos prevents the assembled Greek heroes from competing for her until they have sworn an oath to the effect that they will support whoever becomes Helen's husband should someone abduct her from the marital home, and will all march against this hypothetical man and sack his city with force of arms, be he Greek or Asiatic. The oath is sanctified by the claspings of hands, the making of sacrifices, and the pouring of libations.⁴ This particular version is found in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* (58–65), but the oath appears in the literary tradition as early as the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (fr. 204.78–84), where each of the suitors swears not to attempt to make Helen his wife without Tyndareos' consent, and to attack anyone who takes her unilaterally by force, which has essentially the same impact as the more detailed oath statement of the *IA*. Paris is the one who takes Helen and is attacked as a result.

That the oath of Helen's suitors is mentioned three times in the first 400 lines of the *IA*, twice in the prologue (58–65, 78) and once in the first episode (391–5), is noteworthy.⁵ This play contains more references to this oath than any other surviving text. The suitors' oath is described in the prologue in order to contextualize the situation in Aulis, and to explain why the Greeks have gathered there. The oath is, of course, crucial for explaining why all the Greek heroes felt compelled to go to war against Troy, though most had no particular reason to want to help Menelaus retrieve his wife.⁶ The simple fact was that each hero who had sworn the oath *was* compelled to go, bound by it, in spite of the length of time that had passed since it was sworn (cf. *IA* 78–9).⁷ The issue of necessity is clearly

⁴ See ch. 6, pp. 145, for further discussion of the sanctifying features of this oath.

⁵ We deal with the text as a whole and will not enter here into debate over issues of Euripidean authenticity. Kovacs (2003) reviews the evidence and argues (81) that lines 49–105 were part of the play's first performance, and most editors retain 391–5 (Jouan 1983, Gunther 1988, Stockert 1992, Kovacs 2002). Diggle 1994 suggests that 391–5 are probably by Euripides.

⁶ Cf. Cingano 2005, 124: "the oath provides the seminal motif which accounts for [the] presence [of the suitors at Troy]".

⁷ Cingano 2005, 124–7, argues that the suitors' oath actually represents "a prolongation of their status as former suitors" (126), a status which brings almost inevitable death to those who compete for, and fail to win, the hand of a princess. Cingano compares the contests for Hippodameia, Atalanta, Marpessa, and Penelope, but his statement (n. 30) that Odysseus and Menelaus are the only suitors to survive the war is incorrect. The Cretan suitor Idomeneus (fr. 204.56ff.), for example, certainly survived the war, though plagued by storms on his return journey; Diomedes, Philoctetes and Teucer (listed among the suitors in [Apoll.] *Bibl.* 3.11.8) survived too, and there are other minor suitors whose fates are unclear.

crucial to the central dilemma that faces Agamemnon in the *IA*, the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. In a play characterized by abrupt changes of mind, first in Agamemnon, then in Menelaus, and finally in Iphigeneia,⁸ references to the suitors' oath come exclusively during Agamemnon's changes of mind represented in the opening scenes. Having previously sent a letter home luring his daughter to Aulis on the pretence of marriage to Achilles in order to offer her as a sacrificial victim to Artemis and thus gain fair winds enabling the fleet to sail for Troy, he has now regretted it, and attempts to send a second letter warning his wife and daughter not to come. When this is intercepted by an angry Menelaus, Agamemnon makes some interesting remarks about the suitors' oath when he addresses his brother. He calls those who swore Tyndareos' oath "ill-witted marriage-loving suitors" (*IA* 391–2), telling Menelaus to take these men to war who "are ready with the folly of their minds" (394). Agamemnon then suggests that "divine power is not senseless, but can consider when oaths have been fixed wrongfully and taken under compulsion" (394a–395).

Agamemnon's language emphasizes his dilemma. He simultaneously tries to distance himself from the suitors who swore Tyndareos' oath, as if he was not one of them, but then tries to create an escape clause for himself by suggesting that the gods will not expect someone to keep an oath in certain circumstances, thus implicitly acknowledging that he had sworn the oath. It seems to be true that Agamemnon was not a suitor *per se* but our earliest source for the oath lists him as swearing it as a proxy for his brother, while he was already married to Clytaemestra (Hes. fr. 197.4–5),⁹ and Agamemnon's own suggestion that the oath could be invalid demonstrates that he is, in fact, bound by it. In some very rare cases, it seems that the Greeks believed that oaths could be broken without divine consequences (see §11.1), but Agamemnon's argument is weak. He implies that he took the oath under compulsion but does not state this as fact, and the oblique claim is not supported by any evidence. If sacrificing Iphigeneia is the only way for the fleet to set sail for Troy – and this is how it has been presented to Agamemnon – then failing to sacrifice her means not only abandoning the expedition, but also breaking his oath. The oath by which Agamemnon is bound thus helps to

⁸ On change of mind in this play, see esp. Gibert 1995, 202–54.

⁹ Agamemnon acting on behalf of his brother is not as strange as it may first appear. Cingano 2005, 135–6, notes that it has a parallel in Melampus courting the daughter of Neleus for his brother Bias, and that Helen's mythic tradition is often associated with pairs of males, the Dioscuri, Theseus and Peirithous, and here the Atreidae. In the *IA* Agamemnon and Menelaus function as an interdependent unit, on which see Torrance 2013, 85.

explain his terrible indecisiveness, a characteristic he bears already in the *Iliad* but which is further exaggerated in the *IA*.¹⁰

The ultimate sacrifice of Iphigeneia thus reflects, on some level, Agamemnon enabling the fulfillment of his oath, an oath that none of the suitors considers breaking. In Sophocles' *Ajax* (1111–14), Teucer reminds Menelaus that Ajax has not joined the expedition for the sake of Helen nor for Menelaus' own sake but because of the oath he had sworn. Even Odysseus, who tries to wriggle out of his oath, does not break it, and this is one occasion on which Odysseus' tricks fail him, and he proves decidedly less gifted in the skill of “sidestepping” (ch. 10) than his grandfather reputedly was.¹¹ In the *Cypria* he feigns madness in order to escape his duty to take part in the Trojan War, but his deceit is discovered by Palamedes who puts Telemachus in danger and finds that Odysseus' wits return with great rapidity in order to save his son (*Cypria* Arg. §5 West). So Odysseus is forced to keep his oath and take part in the expedition against Troy, but Odysseus' relationship with the suitors' oath is more complicated than that of the other suitors. Although listed as a suitor in the Hesiodic *Catalogue*, he sent no gifts, anticipating that his wealth would be no match for that of Menelaus (fr. 198.2–9), though apparently failing to foresee that Tyndareos would demand the oath. In the later mythic tradition, Odysseus, having abandoned the idea of courting Helen, is himself presented as suggesting the oath to Tyndareos, to help him manage the suitors, in exchange for Tyndareos' help in wooing Penelope ([Apoll.] *Bibl.* 3.10.9). It is unlikely that Odysseus' role in suggesting the oath was reported in a lacuna of the *Catalogue*,¹² since it is at odds with the early tradition of Odysseus trying to evade his oath in order to be made exempt from the Trojan expedition. If the oath was Odysseus' idea at a time when he was no longer interested in courting Helen, there would be no reason for him to swear the oath at all.

There are two important heroes of the Trojan War, however, who are certainly not bound by the suitors' oath. One is Achilles, who had been too young to be counted among the suitors,¹³ and an attempt to thwart his participation in the expedition is made by his father Peleus who concealed him on the island of

¹⁰ In his discussion of characterization in the *IA*, Griffin 1990, 140 notes how Agamemnon in the *Iliad* is “at one moment bullying and overconfident but at others passive and despairing”, and gives a persuasive analysis of the “change of mind” motif in the play, suggesting that “strict psychological plausibility” is secondary to “pathos, sentiment, and patriotism” (149). See also Gibert 1995, 206–22 and Michelakis 2006, 33–5.

¹¹ Autolycus was well known as a thief and manipulator of oaths (cf. *Odyssey* 19.395–6 and Pl. *Rep.* 334b3).

¹² Cingano 2005, 127 suggests this possibility.

¹³ Hes. fr. 204.87–93, esp. line 89 where he is described as “being still a boy” (παῖδ' ἔτ' ἐόν[τ]).

Scyros (*Cypria* fr. 19 West). The other is Achilles' son Neoptolemus, who joins the Trojan expedition at a later stage. The fact that Achilles and Neoptolemus are *not* bound by the suitors' oath gives them particular powers during the course of the war. The oath does not appear explicitly in Homer, but it is possible that Nestor's reference to oaths previously sworn (*Iliad* 2.339–41) is an allusion to the suitors' oath.¹⁴ Certainly, as we have seen, it features in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* and was clearly part of the epic tradition.¹⁵ If there is a latent understanding that Achilles' presence at Troy is not dependent on compulsion, any threat that he will withdraw his forces from the war must be taken extremely seriously by the other leaders since he is essentially at liberty to decide whether or not to leave. When Achilles withdraws from fighting in the *Iliad* after his quarrel with Agamemnon, his absence is sorely felt on the battlefield, but he is still at Troy. When he says that he will leave with his men (*Il.* 9.356–61), both the audience and the three envoys are going to take his threat that much more seriously if he is not bound by oath. Indeed, Agamemnon's insult to Achilles would be a strong incentive for Achilles to depart, if we consider that his presence there can be explained as a favour to the Atreidae (Paus. 3.24.11). Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric* (1396b17), finds it worthy of particular praise that Achilles took part in the Trojan War although he was very young and was not bound by oath. This is listed next to Achilles' achievements in slaying Hector, the bravest of the Trojans, and Cynus, who prevented all the Greeks from disembarking, as well as Achilles' invulnerability.¹⁶ The fact that Achilles fought at Troy though he was not bound by oath was clearly an important element in defining his persona.

That Achilles' son Neoptolemus is not bound by the oath of Helen's suitors is a significant issue in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, a play in which we are constantly being reminded that Neoptolemus is the son of Achilles.¹⁷ After the Greeks have been fighting at Troy for ten years and have suffered many losses, including the death of Achilles, they are told by the Trojan seer Helenus, whom Odysseus captures

¹⁴ M.L. West 2011, 109, and see §5.2 and ch. 6 for further discussion.

¹⁵ Cf. Gomme 1945 on Thuc. 1.9.1 and West 2011, 42, 87, 109.

¹⁶ This comes in a discussion of praise where it is argued that figures should be praised in respect of their specific achievements or actions, and not in respect of issues which could be deemed generic or apply to more than one person. For details of the Cynus episode, see Ovid, *Met.* 12.64–168, cf. Pindar *Ol.* 2.81–3.

¹⁷ Neoptolemus is referred to as his father's son at 4, 50, 57, 241, 260, 364, 582, 940, 1066, 1220–1, 1237, 1298, 1312, 1433. He is so like his father that the Greeks are said to have sworn on oath that they are seeing the ghost of his dead father Achilles (357–8), and although this is part of a narrative by Neoptolemus which includes many falsehoods, there is no (other) reason not to take *this* statement as true. For further discussion of oaths in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* see §5.2.

by a ruse, that they will only take Troy with the help of Philoctetes and his bow, a sacred gift from Heracles. Originally a member of the Greek fleet, Philoctetes had been abandoned on the island of Lemnos en route after he had been bitten by a snake. The bite had become infected giving off a putrid odour and causing him to utter great cries of pain, which the army decided they could not endure. In *Philoctetes* Odysseus convinces a reluctant Neoptolemus to persuade Philoctetes that he has abandoned Troy, having fallen out with the Achaeans over the arms of Achilles, and is on his way home (*Phil.* 54–64). In this way, Philoctetes will be persuaded to board the ship, thinking it bound for home, and will thus be trapped on board with his bow to be brought to Troy. The fact that Neoptolemus was not part of the original expedition which had abandoned Philoctetes means that he will not be the subject of Philoctetes' anger and resentment, but it is also crucial that Neoptolemus is not bound by the suitors' oath because it means that he can plausibly maintain that he really is homeward bound, something which Odysseus and the other suitors cannot do. Odysseus uses this very argument (*Phil.* 72) to explain that only Neoptolemus can credibly persuade Philoctetes that he has abandoned the Trojan expedition. Thucydides (1.9.1) doubts the importance of the oath of Helen's suitors in assembling the expedition against Troy, attributing the reason instead to Agamemnon's superior power over the other princes at the time, but Thucydides tends to downplay the importance of religious factors throughout his work,¹⁸ and our other sources show overwhelmingly that the suitors' oath had an important place in traditional Greek myth.

Another mythological hero forced by an oath, a blind oath this time, to embark on a military campaign is the Argive seer Amphiaraus. Married to the Argive king's sister, Eriphyle, Amphiaraus swears an oath to the king, Adrastus, to the effect that any future differences between them will be arbitrated by Eriphyle. When Adrastus backs the military assault of his new son-in-law, the exiled Theban prince Polyneices, against Thebes, Amphiaraus refuses to take part in the expedition, having the divine foresight which tells him it is doomed to failure. Desperate for the campaign to go ahead, Polyneices is said to have bribed Eriphyle with a Theban heirloom of divine provenance, the necklace of Harmonia, wife of Thebes' founder Cadmus, and daughter of Aphrodite and Ares. In return for the necklace Eriphyle calls on Amphiaraus to keep his oath and acquiesce to her wish that he should join the expedition generally known as that of the Seven against Thebes. He fights and dies as do all the attacking chiefs apart from Adrastus, although in some versions Amphiaraus is swallowed alive into a chasm

¹⁸ See Hornblower 2011, 25–53.

in the earth.¹⁹ The oath itself is only explicitly referred to in one fourth-century source, by the mythographer Asclepiades (*FGrH* 12 F 29), but Amphiaraus' strong reluctance to join the campaign is well attested in the earlier tradition. He is an unwilling participant in an expedition that he considers evil in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* (573, 575), and the story of Polyneices bribing Eriphyle – which makes little sense without the oath, since it implies that she has the power to compel her husband somehow to join the expedition – features in the *Odyssey* (15.247) and was popular in fifth-century vase paintings.²⁰ Moreover Pindar's *Nemean* 9 describes Adrastus giving Eriphyle as a wife to Amphiaraus “as an oath pledge” (9.16: ὄρκιον ὥς ὅτε πιστόν), and since we know that the Greek marriage ceremony did *not* include an oath it is reasonable to see an allusion here to the oath sworn by Amphiaraus to Adrastus which Eriphyle had the power to enforce. Louis Gernet questioned how Amphiaraus came to be compelled to join the expedition of the Seven, stating that “[o]n this point the legend's tradition is unclear and complicated” and that “[t]he obligation remains unexplained”.²¹ The oath recorded in Asclepiades, however, of whose existence Gernet seems unaware, resolves the question entirely.

A third oath of significance for traditional myth is the oath through which Hera tricks Zeus into ensuring Eurystheus' power over Heracles, thus causing the labours of Heracles. As it is related in the *Iliad* (19.107–13) Hera requests that Zeus should confirm on oath his statement that whatever child of his blood was born on that day would be lord over his neighbours. Zeus duly swears the oath in anticipation of the birth of Heracles, but Hera delays Heracles' birth until after that of Eurystheus, leading to Eurystheus' dominance over Heracles against Zeus' will.²²

¹⁹ Amphiaraus' death is mentioned in Homer (*Od.* 15.247) and is implicit in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* (792–9, cf. 615–19). The alternative tradition of Amphiaraus' disappearance into the earth features in Pindar (*Olymp.* 6.13–14, *Nem.* 9.24–7) and in Euripides' *Suppliant Women* (925–7).

²⁰ See *LIMC* III.2 s.v. Eriphyle I, plates 2–6, 8, 9, 11, 16, with *LIMC* III.1, 844–5.

²¹ Gernet 1981, 84.

²² Later tradition presents Zeus (Jove) fulfilling a blind oath by Styx to Dionysus' mother Semele, after the interference of Juno, when Semele requests that he show himself to her (Ovid, *Met.* 3.251–313). This results in Semele's death and Zeus' rescue of the unborn Dionysus whom he places in his thigh until the time is right for his birth. Earlier sources neither report this oath nor exclude it but on balance there is too little support for this as a mythological oath, particularly since in Ovid the oath is not requested by either Juno or Semele but is volunteered by Jove (*Met.* 3.286–9). This is not a case of Zeus being tricked by an oath, as we saw with the oath sworn by Zeus to Hera, and it may well have been a straightforward request with which Zeus readily complied in the majority of versions, unaware of the impact it would have. Even in Ovid, Juno does not anticipate that the tendering of an oath will be necessary for Jove to comply.

Aristotle discusses this passage and suggests that it is reasonable for Hera to ask for an oath because she is afraid that things will not go as she wishes (Arist. fr. 387 Gigon). Zeus is enraged by the deception. He hurls the goddess Delusion (*Atē*) out of Olympus, swearing a second strong oath that Delusion should never again return (*Il.* 19.125–31). Interestingly, this is the only place in the entire corpus of our archaic and classical sources in which Zeus is presented as swearing oaths (see §7.3 for further discussion of oaths sworn by gods). It is fitting then that the main oath sworn by Zeus²³ has a significant impact on the course of traditional myth since it orchestrates the context for, and explains the necessity of, the labours of Heracles, a mythological sequence which helped to create a panhellenic hero and which could be mined for mythical exempla or used for didactic purposes.²⁴

We find then, that, essentially, there are only three oaths of the mythological or aetiological type which appear in our sources from the archaic and classical periods, as having been sworn and fulfilled: the oath of Helen's suitors, the oath of Amphiaraus, and the oath of Zeus to Hera. But there is another oath which may be classed as aetiological, and is sworn but *broken*, and it is the breaking of the oath, this time, which can be seen as having an important impact on the course of Greek mythical history. This is the treaty between the Greeks and Trojans described in detail in *Iliad* 3.245–301. The truce is proposed to the Greeks by Hector, at Paris' suggestion (cf. 3.73–5), and both armies swear, in an elaborate oath ceremony, that they will stop fighting, and that Menelaus and Paris will engage in single combat over Helen and her possessions in order to resolve the war. However, the treaty is subsequently broken by the Trojan ally Pandarus under the influence of Athene. The *Iliad* is our earliest surviving source which refers to this treaty and the impact of it being broken, and all later references can be assumed to take the *Iliad* as their source, but there are hints in the structure of the *Iliad* that the treaty described in Book 3 and broken in Book 4 belongs to an older tradition within the Trojan War saga. The *Iliad* is set at a time when the Greeks have been at war with Troy for nine years, yet the proposal of single combat to resolve the war is believed by many scholars to belong more logically to a time at the beginning of the war. This, combined with the *teichoskopia* in Book 3 where Priam strangely requests (after nine years of war) that Helen identify the champion Greek warriors in the battlefield, suggests that events in Book 3 properly belong to an earlier period of the Trojan cycle and have been imported into

²³ The second oath expressed in a rage is made as a result of the first.

²⁴ See Graf 1993, 64 on the myths of Heracles as exempla, and see I.C. Rutherford 2011, 110, 121–2 on Pindar's use of the labours of Heracles.

the *Iliad*'s narrative from earlier epic sources.²⁵ A further point in support of this is the lack of continuity between books 2 and 3. In Book 2, Agamemnon had been promised (falsely) an immediate victory and might have been expected to reject the proposal for a truce which he accepts in Book 3.

The breaking of this oath troubled the philosophers in particular, especially the way in which divine intervention is responsible for the breach of contract. The *Iliad* presents a whole divine conspiracy to contrive the breaking of the truce by the Trojans. At the opening of Book 4, Hera petitions Zeus who eventually sends Athene to effect Hera's wishes and cause a breach of the truce. In Plato's *Republic* (379e), the fact that the violation is presented as being brought about by the gods makes the story an unacceptable subject for the citizens of the ideal state. Aristotle discusses two different issues concerning the breach of the truce at Troy in his *Homeric Problems*, both to do with the problem of perjury. At fr. 372 (Gigon) Aristotle splits hairs over whether the Trojans perjured themselves or simply cursed themselves. He argues for the latter, based on *Il.* 3.298–301, where the curse for perjury is expressed on "whichever group first does harm to the oaths" (3.299: ὁππότεροι πρότεροι ὑπὲρ ὅρκια πημύνειαν). So, Aristotle argues, the Trojans did not commit perjury but committed the crime of *doing harm* to their oaths, thus bringing a curse upon themselves. Hence, he argues, Hera tries to ensure that harm comes to them from their own curse, for it is after they have prayed that Hera suggests the violation of the truce (*Iliad* 4.64–72). Aristotle's assertion that doing harm to one's oath is not the same thing as perjuring oneself is a distinction that does not really hold water. If the Trojans have acted contrary to their oaths, then they have committed perjury, and there is no way around this. Agamemnon certainly treats the breach as perjury, stating that the Trojans have "trampled on their oaths" (*Il.* 4.157).²⁶ He rouses the Argives back into battle by reminding them that the Trojans have broken their oaths, and listing again the consequences for the oath-breakers: vultures will feed on Trojan flesh, and their wives and children (at least daughters, cf. *Il.* 6.57–60) will be shipped to Greece (*Il.* 4.237–9). Idomeneus also comments on the fact that the Trojans have broken their oaths (*Il.* 4.269–70). Even the Trojan Antenor urges the Trojans to give Helen back to the Greeks and end the war because the Trojans are fighting in contempt of their oath (*Il.* 7.351–2). In fact, Aristotle himself, later in the same work (fr. 375 Gigon), reveals

²⁵ See e.g. Mueller (1984) 66, Edmunds (1987) 188, Silk (1987) 41–2, M.L. West (2011) 59, 61, 127–8, 137–8.

²⁶ Similar expressions describing the trampling of oaths occur in Hipponax fr.115.15, Alcaeus fr. 129.22–3, and *trag. adesp.* 188b. For a detailed discussion of the Alcaeus fragment see Bachvarova 2007.

the problem with his own distinction when he returns to this sworn truce and *does* treat its breach as perjury this time, though importantly, he confines his use of the term to Pandarus. Here the question is: why does Athene influence Pandarus to break the truce rather than speak directly to one of the Trojans (Pandarus is technically one of the Trojan allies)? The answer given is that Pandarus was born a perjurer because he belongs to a people who are still perjurers (Dardanians). In this way, Aristotle attempts to clear the Trojans of the charge of being oath-breakers, since the oath was technically broken by a non-Trojan.

Philosophical concerns about the breach of this truce are significant for strengthening our understanding of the solemnity of an oath. The breaking of an oath is still regarded by the philosophers as a serious crime, which is why Aristotle is at such pains to clear the Trojans of the taint of perjury. But there is also a much deeper philosophical issue behind the unease over this truce and its breach. This is the disturbing fact that the breach of a truce sworn in good faith by mortals invoking the protection of Zeus and other gods can be caused by the very same divine forces who should be protecting the truce. This is clearly such an abhorrent notion of divinity to philosophers that Plato can dismiss it with little discussion, while Aristotle attempts to rationalize and sanitize this extraordinary event, which leads to such serious devastation.²⁷

There are quite a number of cases (some discussed elsewhere in this volume)²⁸ in which an oath appears in *some* versions of a myth, but the scarcity of cases in which an oath is fundamental to a mythological tradition confirms the intrinsic malleability of that tradition, while at the same time highlighting several fixed aspects of its mythological framework. Moreover, the oaths discussed here share some significant features. All function aetiologically as devices of narrative logic which explain how and why mythological characters engage in actions which are not in their best interests. The majority of the Greek leaders are compelled to remain fighting in Troy in spite of their heavy losses over ten years because they are bound by the oath of Helen's suitors. The possible resolution of the war through a sworn truce and the single combat between Paris and Menelaus is ruined, not only by Aphrodite saving Paris from death, but more importantly by the minor ally who is influenced to break the truce. The enforcement of an oath compels Amphiaraus to go on a military expedition which he knows is doomed, and causes Zeus to be bound to accept his son's enslavement to Eurystheus. Each of these mythological oaths serves a didactic function. In spite of being placed in difficult positions, not one of Helen's suitors, not Amphiaraus,

²⁷ On divine and human responses to perjury, see further ch. 12.

²⁸ Notably in chapters 2, 4, 8, 11 and 12.

not even Zeus, dares to break his oath, while the whole of Troy suffers the punishment for one man's breach of a collective oath – one person's actions devastating the entire community, a model which explains the sentiment expressed at the end of Euripides' *Electra* (1355) where Castor warns against sailing with perjurers. There is very rarely any consideration for extenuating circumstances in committing perjury (see §11.1), and as we shall see (§10.2) even contemplation of perjury could be treated as perjury itself. Oaths in traditional myth thus illustrate the correct code of behaviour in relation to oaths and the consequences for perjury.

Finally, we can observe that female figures are central to each of the mythological oaths we have discussed. The danger of Helen's beauty and desirability is confirmed by the number of suitors who swear the oath and are subsequently compelled by it to take part in the expedition against Troy where the eventual victory of the Greeks comes only at an extreme human cost.²⁹ Eriphyle too can be viewed as one of the many female destroyers of men in Greek myth through her part in forcing the expedition against Thebes.³⁰ Moreover, her acceptance of the necklace of Harmonia links her role to the category of mythical women associated with a fatal gift.³¹ Hera's actions in exacting an oath from Zeus conform to the paradigm of the troublesome jealous or vengeful wife causing problems for her unfaithful husband,³² while her ability to influence Zeus to send Athene in order to cause the Trojans to break the sworn truce represents the typical female gift of persuasion.³³ Although all the oaths in question are sworn by males, each aetiological oath includes a vital element of female influence which explains how

29 Helen is blamed for the numerous deaths at Troy in Semonides fr. 7.115–17 and in Aesch. Ag. 687–90. On the dangers of female beauty, seductiveness, and sexuality articulated in Greek myth through the paradigm of Pandora see Vernant 1980, 183–201 (with Csapo 2005, 254–63) and Zeitlin 1996, 53–86.

30 A list of women who feature in myth as destroyers of men is given by Gould 2001, 149–50. Gernet 1981, 83 notes that the necklace of Harmonia “brings about men's deaths”.

31 Gernet 1981, 83 describes the necklace as “the most representative example of the precious object's destructive force.”

32 Such wives often feature in Greek tragedy. Clytaemestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Medea in Euripides' *Medea* are prominent examples. Even Deianeira's misguided actions in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, when she attempts to rekindle Heracles' desire for her with a love potion which turns out to be deadly, are directly linked to Heracles' affair with a younger woman. See Hall (1997) 103–10 for an overview of women in tragedy, and Foley (2001) for a more detailed treatment. On Hera's characteristics as a female goddess, see also S. Blundell 1995, 32–5, Lefkowitz 2007, 14–15, and Doherty 2001, 156, who notes that the role of the “wicked stepmother” among the goddesses is usually played by Hera; cf. also n.21 above.

33 On the association of women with persuasive powers in Greek literature, see e.g. Zeitlin 1996, 136–43, and Foley 2001, 272–99.

the oath came to be sworn or to be broken. In the context of mythological oaths, as elsewhere in Greek myth, female figures are imagined as being both dangerous to men and indispensable to their world.³⁴

34 Cf. e.g. Vernant 1980, 201 “no Man without Pandora”, Zeitlin 1996, 85 on the “double problem of the origin of woman and woman as the origin”, and Gould 2001, 149 on the representation of women in mythology as signifying men’s “obsessive fear and revulsion, on the one hand, and on the other, an implication of total dependence.”