

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-52583-2 - Performing Oaths in Classical Greek Drama

Judith Fletcher

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

According to the poet of the epic *Titanomachy* (fr. 13), it was Chiron who first taught mortals the practice of oath-swearing. With this lesson the wise centaur gave humanity an enduring gift. The oath was a ubiquitous social and religious practice in the ancient Greek world; it governed behavior in the law court, commercial, civic and international relations, and even in private lives. It would be difficult to overestimate the sanctity and influence of this pervasive ritual: “divinely ordained and magically protected,” as Anne Burnett put it, the oath “stood like the primeval pillar that supports the sky.”¹ Consonant with the ancient world’s respect for their cultural authority, oaths exercise a powerful narrative and dramatic force in Greek literature from Homer to the Hellenistic poets. Nearly half of extant Greek tragedy, the single surviving satyr play and several Aristophanic comedies feature a formal oath. Yet scholarship has not given this standard element of Greek drama the attention it deserves.² The purpose of this book is to respond to that lack. The following chapters investigate the oath as a literary device in the dramas produced in Athens during the fifth century BCE. I explore how the oath can mark or structure a dramatic plot, at times compelling characters to act in ways that are contrary to their best interests or even their own moral compunctions. Hippolytus, for example, is bound by oath not to tell the truth that might have saved his life. The reminder of an oath pushes the hesitant Orestes to kill his mother. Characters like Eteocles in Euripides’ *Phoenissae* or Strepsiades in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* discover the consequences of forsworn oaths. Oaths also highlight significant moments in a plot and often provide a ceremonial flourish to

¹ Burnett 1973: 13.

² Two monographs on the Greek oath (Hirzel 1902 and Plescia 1970) give no special consideration to the occurrence of the oath in literature, and in general are limited by dated approaches which do not account for recent evidence or methodologies. Also see Latte 1932: 345–6. Mikalson’s study of religion in Greek tragedy devotes a few pages to the topic (1991: 79–87), but does not extend beyond a descriptive catalog. For a variety of approaches to the Greek oath see the collection edited by Sommerstein and Fletcher (2007).

its resolution: Hyllus swears an oath to his father Heracles at the end of *Trachiniae*; Athena prescribes an oath to seal the alliance of the Argives and Athenians in the exodus of Euripides' *Supplikes*. As we are about to see, the Athenian dramatists inherited the oath as a plot device from epic poetry, and they adapted its narrative force in ways that reflected their own political institutions and civic ideology.

The ancient Greeks, Peter Karavites tells us, were the most promise-conscious society on record.³ Thousands of texts of oaths, including inscriptions, literary oaths and historical accounts, survive from the Hellenic world. For a contemporary audience whose lives were shaped to a great degree by the institution of *horkos*, a fictional oath would be more than just a useful literary device. Their own lives were demarcated and directed by oaths that they themselves had sworn or witnessed. They knew the power of this ritual just as they knew that shysters and crooks could warp and evade it. My project in this book is to reconstruct what the oaths of drama would mean to the members of an audience in the theater of Dionysus. The men, and possibly at times the women, of Athens who had sworn oaths themselves watched this familiar ritual performed within a mythical or fantastic world that could be distant and strange and yet was also managed and ordered in ways that resembled their own society. They would see that the crisis of the *Oresteia* is resolved by the dikastic oath sworn yearly by hundreds of Athenian citizens like themselves, their brothers, sons, fathers and neighbors. They might recognize that the oaths that initiate an Athenian homicide investigation are embedded in the proclamation of Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Or that the treaty oaths sworn by Athens and her allies (sometimes in the theater of Dionysus) are reprised by the oath of alliance between Argos and Athens prescribed by Athena at the end of Euripides' *Supplikes*. What did they think when Lysistrata makes her troupe of women swear an oath that blends treaty oaths and oaths of sexual abstinence sworn by priestesses during the Anthesteria? A substantial part of this book explores such abnormalities and distortions of dramatic oaths. When oaths are sworn in tragedy, satyr drama or comedy they are problem and power in equal parts, sometimes disturbing categories of gender, social status and civic identities in ways that redistribute and confound social authority, as well as supporting and validating the status quo.

WHAT IS AN OATH?

In order to understand what makes an oath effective or defective we need to be able to recognize its normative features. I begin with a definition: an

³ Karavites 1992: 2.

oath is a promise guaranteed by invoking the gods and offering an implicit or explicit conditional self-curse. The basic outlines of the oaths performed in Greek drama repeat those found in the historical inscriptions, oratory and other texts of fifth- and fourth-century Athens. They are a form of ritualistic language, and although the oaths of drama might have exceptionally colorful or spectacular features, they usually conform to a formula that was familiar to most members of the original audience. When there are deviations, and there sometimes are in drama, they generally signify a disruption or imperfection in the social order that the play portrays. Since the oath was a very traditional and widespread ritual in the ancient Mediterranean world, its formula was quite stable. The great oath that is sworn to secure the temporary truce between the Achaeans and Trojans in the *Iliad*, one of the most detailed examples of a literary oath, exemplifies the ritual. As Karavites has demonstrated, it suggests that the early Greeks borrowed the formal elements of the oath from ancient Near Eastern civilizations with which they had political exchanges.⁴

In epic poetry oath-swearing is a “type scene,” a formulaic sequence that functions as a narrative building-block; other examples include arming, arrivals, banquets, baths and sacrifices. For my purposes I have adapted and expanded the elements of the oath type scene in epic poetry, as delineated by Walter Arend and Cathy Callaway, in order to categorize the constituents of the oath in Greek drama. Every oath has at least one of the following features: 1) the invitation or offer; 2) the invocation; 3) the verb of swearing; 4) the body or actual promise; 5) the conditional curse.⁵ In addition I include a discussion of sacrifices, gestures and other sanctifying elements in this list; these are the non-linguistic accessories of the oath that accompany the speech act itself. The features listed below need not exist in all oaths, but there does have to be some indication that the speaker is swearing an oath. The most obvious signifier is some form of the verb of swearing or a statement like “I give an oath.” An invocation of the gods that calls them to “witness” is also a sign that an oath is being sworn. The offer of a self-curse with a promise will serve as a basic oath, as will the oath particles with the invocation of a god, a supernatural being or a special object. There is a gamut of performance conditions ranging from highly ceremonial public oaths such as treaties, to private exchanges between two individuals. I try to illustrate each element with historical examples and other literary representations (especially the oath of the Achaeans and Trojans), and to give examples of oaths from dramas that portray these elements.

⁴ Karavites 1992: 82–156. ⁵ Arend 1933: 122–23; Callaway 1993: 15 n. 2.

1) *The preface (an invitation or offer to swear an oath)*

A character might either offer or request an oath. No doubt this practice was a feature of many historical oaths, but we may not always have their context, especially if they are inscriptions. In the great treaty oath of the *Iliad*, Paris suggests the oath truce between the Achaeans and Trojans to Hector (3.73–5), who makes the offer to Menelaus (3.94). Heralds announce the oath by carrying the sacrificial lambs throughout the town. Obviously not all oaths are on this grand scale. In tragedy we often find characters simply requesting an oath as a personal favor. Medea asks Aegeus to bind himself with oaths that he will give her sanctuary (τούτοις δ' ὀρκίοισι μὲν ζυγείς, *Med.* 735). In Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (1181) Heracles demands an oath from his son without saying exactly what he wants, although in most instances the person asking for the oath will be more specific. The offer or request is not necessary and we often see spontaneous oaths of denial or affirmation that are less ceremonial but no less binding. Neoptolemus, for example, swears to Philoctetes that he is not tricking him a second time (*Phil.* 1289).

2) *The invocation*

By swearing an oath the individual calls upon the gods to witness a promise or assertion.⁶ Thus, according to Thucydides, the Plataeans remind the Spartans of oaths that the gods “witnessed” fifty years earlier (μάρτυρας δὲ θεοὺς τοὺς τε ὀρκίους, 2.71.4). Hippolytus calls on “the archer goddess Artemis” to “witness” him exculpating his father (τὴν τοξόδαμνον Ἄρτεμιν μαρτύρομαι, *Hip.* 1451). Another way of getting the gods' attention is a phrase like “Let the god(s) know.” Creusa swears by calling Athena to witness (ἴστω Γοργοφόνε, *Ion* 1478) that Ion is her son with Apollo.

The oath is thus like a prayer in which the oath-taker names one or more gods or supernatural beings to guarantee the oath. Its power rests on the understanding that the god invoked, Zeus *Horkios*, or some other supernatural being, will punish perjury. When the Achaeans and Trojans swear their oath, Agamemnon calls upon Zeus, Helios, the Rivers, Earth and the Erinyes (*Il.* 3. 280) to be witnesses of the oath. Neoptolemus swears by “the preeminent majesty of undefiled Zeus” (*Phil.* 1289), but all oaths

⁶ The range of possible gods is extensive, as the Nottingham Oath Project indicates, but see Graf (2006: 245) for a discussion of the most common *Eidgottheiten*.

are under the stewardship of Zeus *Horkios* whether he is invoked or not. The female chorus of *Hippolytus* swears its oath of secrecy to Phaedra by invoking Artemis in the accusative case: “I swear (by) sacred Artemis” (ὅμνυμι σεμνήν Ἀρτεμιν, Διὸς κόρην, *Hip.* 713). Artemis is a woman’s goddess (although she is sometimes invoked by men), and her invocation here is appropriate not only for the context, but also for the women’s oath.

Occasionally an oath might be guaranteed by an *Eideshort* or a significant object.⁷ Achilles swears by his scepter that the Achaeans will miss him (*Il.* 1.233–46), and his oath is guaranteed by Zeus’s nod after Thetis’ supplication. In the ephebic oath sworn by all Athenian male citizens, eleven gods or heroes are invoked in addition to “the boundaries of my fatherland, Wheat, Barley, Vines, Olives and Figs” (Rhodes and Osborne 2003, *GHI* 88.5–16). Antigone swears “by iron” that if she is forced to marry she will become a Danaid (E., *Phoen.* 1677); in other words she will murder her husband. This unique *Eideshort* lends a special minatory relevance to her vow. Several of the dramas that we investigate suggest that oaths sworn by objects rather than gods have a subversive potential. Parthenopaeus, one of the seven attackers of Thebes, swore by his spear (ὅμνυσι δ’ αἰχμὴν ἦν ἔχει) “which, in his confidence, he honors more than the god and esteems more than his own eyes, that he would take Thebes against the will of Zeus” (A., *Sept.* 529–32). Aristophanes’ Socrates flouts the Olympian gods in *Clouds* by invoking “Breath, Chaos and Air” (627–9).

Not surprisingly, the invocation of certain gods or spirits is gender specific, or peculiar to a certain status or locale. Praxagora chides one of her co-conspirators who invokes the two goddesses μὰ τῷ θεῷ, *Eccl.* 153–9 (Demeter and Persephone), when swearing a woman’s oath while impersonating a man. Aristotle records an oath “by the darkness of the oak” used by the women of Priene (*Politeia* 129 [Samos] fr. 593.1 Gigon). Gods, we are told, swore by the River Styx (e.g. Hera to Sleep *Il.* 14.271). Alan Sommerstein has argued that oaths by Hera (sworn by Socrates according to Plato and Xenophon) are specific to the deme of Alopecce.⁸ The comic poets evidently got a laugh by having characters swear by unusual deities or objects. Someone in Eupolis’ *Baptai* swears by an almond tree (fr. 79 K–A), someone else by cabbages (fr. 84.2 K–A).

⁷ As Thür suggests (1997: 908), the object would have some prestige or special meaning to the oath-swearer. He gives the racehorses of Antiochus as an example (*Il.* 23.581–5). Benveniste (1969: 168) argues that *horkos* is always to be conceived of as an object (this includes substances such as wine).

⁸ Sommerstein 2008a: 326–31.

3) A verb or expression of swearing

In many cases an oath invokes a deity or an *Eideshort* by using special oath particles. When Lysistrata's women take their oath of chastity, they give their assent as νῆ Δία ("Yes, by Zeus," *Lys.* 237). This is one of the most common invocations in comedy (e.g. *Frogs* 612–14) and oratory (e.g. Dem. 19.215), but the oath particle νή is never used in tragedy. Perhaps it is too colloquial. Clytemnestra swears by *Dikê* and other spirits using the particle μὰ (*Ag.* 1432). In Sophocles' *Electra* the heroine emphasizes to Orestes that she is not afraid of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra with an oath by Artemis (μὰ τὸν Ἄρτεμιν τὸν αἰὲν ἀδμήταν, *El.* 1239).⁹

The particles and the name of a god in the accusative are enough to signify that an oath is being sworn. When Menoeceus swears to the Chorus of *Phoenissae* that he will sacrifice himself, he does so with only an invocation and a particle: "By Zeus among the stars and bloody Ares," μὰ τὸν μετ' ἄστρων Ζῆν' Ἄρη τε φοίνιον (*Phoen.* 1006). But the clearest indication is a verb of swearing either in the preface to the oath (for example as an imperative, ὄμνυ, *IT* 743) or as a performative present. When Orestes offers his alliance with Athens, he introduces it with the statement "I will go home, having sworn an oath" (ὀρκωμοτήσας, *Eum.* 764). The most common oath verb in tragedy is ὄμνυμι, which is also the verb we see most often in Herodotus and on the inscriptions of oaths in the fifth century (ὄμνυω is more common in the fourth century). When Hyllus swears an oath to his father Heracles he says ὄμνυμι' ἔγωγε, Ζῆν' ἔχων ἐπώμοτον ("I swear, with Zeus as my oath witness," *Trach.* 1188).

4) The body of the oath

The terms of the promise must be specified in the oath, or at least by the person who is asking for the oath. These can cover an infinite range of possibilities. An individual can swear that he or she is telling or will tell the truth, as Hippolytus does to Theseus: "By Zeus, the god of oaths, and the wide expanse of earth, I swear (ὄμνυμι) to you that I never touched your wife" (*Hip.* 1025–6). More frequently in drama we encounter characters who commit themselves to some future action by a promissory oath. Hyllus swears to marry his father's concubine at the end of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*; Pylades swears to deliver a letter in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*; at some

⁹ The Nottingham Oath Project allows searches by the different oath particles according to genre and authors. Particles that do not occur in tragedy also include οἱ μὰ Δία, e.g. Plat., *Euthyd.* 279c5–6 and Aristoph. *Peace* 930.

What is an oath?

7

point before the *Clouds* begins Strepsiades had sworn oaths to his creditors to pay his debts. One or two characters agree to a “blind oath,” when they simply agree, like Hyllus, to swear an oath without knowing what they will swear to. Promissory oaths that mark significant events in the dramatic plot are the main subject of this book, but it is also worth noting that oaths can simply emphasize a point. At the beginning of Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*, Dicaeopolis swears by Apollo (μὰ τὸν Ἀπόλλω, 59–60) that he will not sit down until there is a motion for peace in the assembly. In *Birds* (263), Euelpides uses the same invocation just to emphasize that he doesn’t see any birds. A full discussion of these colloquial oaths is beyond the scope of this study, but it bears mentioning that they are much more frequent in comedy, which seems to capture the idioms of everyday conversation more closely than tragedy.

5) The curse

Every oath is a conditional self-curse whether or not the curse is specified. “May I be damned if I am not telling the truth” is really a type of oath. Oath-takers commonly end their promise with a provisional curse that will presumably be executed either by the deity invoked, or by Zeus the god of oaths, the Erinyes, or some other supernatural curse enforcers. The oath prescribed for the Achaeans and Trojans should they violate their truce begins with a bit of sympathetic magic. Agamemnon prays that the oath-breakers’ brains and those of their offspring pour to the ground like the treaty wine (*Il.* 3.299–301). And he completes the curse with the wish that any oath-breaker’s wife “be subdued by others,” a forecast of the fate of the Trojan women and a variation on the theme of the extirpation of a perjurer’s family line. Treaty oaths sworn in the fifth century demonstrate how extensive curses could be. For example Aeschines (3.110–11) cites the Amphictyonic oath which includes a curse effected by Apollo, Artemis, Leto and Athena Pronaea:

May their land bear no fruit; may their wives not bear children who resemble their fathers but rather monsters; may their flocks not yield their natural offspring; may they be defeated in war, court and market, may they perish utterly (ἐξώλεις εἶναι) themselves, and their household and family.

Tragedy features several versions of the self-curse. To emphasize that he did not rape Phaedra, Hippolytus guarantees his exculpatory oath with a detailed imprecation that begins “may I perish” (ὀλοίμην, *Hip.* 1028–31).

In an ironic variant Oedipus, after cursing the unknown murderer of Laius, includes himself in curse (παθεῖν ἄπερ τοῖσδ' ἄρτίως ἡρασάμην, *OT* 249–51) if the killer is living in his household without his knowledge. Sometimes the curse fits the circumstances: when Iphigenia asks Pylades to guarantee his oath to carry her letter to Greece, he simply responds, “May I not return home” (ἄνοστος εἶην, *IT* 751). And of course Aristophanes has numerous imaginative ways to make the self-curse funny. When Dionysus offers to pay a corpse nine obols to carry his luggage to Hades, the corpse emphasizes his refusal with an inversion of the self-destructive curse “May I come back to life again” (*Frogs* 177).

Not every oath features a blessing, but historical inscriptions and other texts indicate that sometimes an oath promised rewards for those who kept their word. Blessings are usually concomitant to curses, and seem to function as a balance. They do not occur independently of curses and are seldom as elaborate. The participants of the Delphic Amphictyony end their treaty oath by invoking Apollo, Leto and Artemis to “grant me many good things if I keep my oath, but evils if I forswear my oath” (SIG 3.145.13–15).¹⁰

6) Gestures, sacrifices and sanctifying features

Oaths, whether they are private statements of commitment between individuals or full-scale public ceremonies, are always a form of drama. As a ritual performance they are inherently a combination of language and action. During the choregic oath taken before the dramatic festivals (IG I³ 254.10–24), officers would touch the statue of Dionysus, giving an extra measure of sanctity to their promise. This non-linguistic aspect of the oath is the most ephemeral, since although texts may be preserved, the gestures, actions and ceremonies that accompanied the spoken words are not. It is rather like having the libretto of an opera without the music and stage action, or the text of a play, to use a more familiar example, without the stage directions. Happily some texts provide evidence of the ritual actions that contributed to the oath ceremony. When Heracles asks his son for an oath at the end of *Trachiniae*, he requests his son's right hand (ἐμβαλλε χεῖρα δεξιάν πρώτιστά μοι, *Trach.* 1181), just as Strepsiades does to his son in the prologue of *Clouds* (81). Thus Sophocles' Philoctetes is able to claim that Neoptolemus swore an oath even though all the youth did was guarantee a promise with his right hand.¹¹

¹⁰ See Faraone 2006: 140–58.

¹¹ Cf. the suitors' oath ὀρκους συνάψαι δεξιάς, *IA* 58.

Other gestures could add authority to the spoken words. When Helios gets Lachesis to swear to give him Rhodes, he bids her to lift up her hands (χεῖρας ἀντεῖναι, Pind., *Ol.* 7.65). At the beginning of the ceremony to mark the Achaean and Trojan agreement, Agamemnon lifts his arms into the air (χεῖρας ἀνασχών, *Il.* 3.275) as he calls upon the gods to witness the agreement. This gesture makes the oath like a prayer (as the verb εὔχετο indicates), and we see it represented on a black-figure vase (from sixth-century Athens, now in St. Petersburg) that depicts a group of young men or ephebes with their hands extended over an altar as if swearing an oath. While the handclasp might have marked the private oath, the uplifted arms could be a more public or formal gesture.

The most significant ritual action of an oath is of course the sacrifice, often referred to simply as the *horkos* or *horkia*.¹² As a preface to the great ceremonial oath of the Trojans and Achaeans the heralds carry the *horkia pista* throughout the city (*Il.* 3.245). Before the sacrifice Agamemnon cuts hairs from the victims and distributes them among the assembly, so that every man present has some contact with the sacrificial victim. Touching the sacrifice seems to be a gesture that draws the oath-taker more closely to the victim. A visceral example occurs in the Herodotean account of the Spartan Demaratus, whose mother swears an oath about his paternity while holding the innards (τῶν σπλάγχνων, 6.68.1–2) of a bull that her son had previously sacrificed to Zeus.

Contact with the sacrifice or the sacrificial altar is a feature of the oath sworn by the nine Athenian archons who stood on the sacrificial stone and vowed to “rule justly and according to the laws” (*Ath. Pol.* 55.5.5). The gesture is exploited by the Athenian politician Callias who, when confronted by an ex-lover demanding that he acknowledge her son, took the dramatic measure of holding onto the altar of Zeus *Phratrios* and offering a conditional execration on his household to guarantee his oath that his child by his wife was his one and only son (*Andoc.* 1.126).¹³

Sacrifice and ritual contact with the victims might be part of public oath ceremonies, but they were certainly not required. Immolation is a symbolic enactment of the curses, whether spoken or implied, that guarantee every oath. Inscriptions and historiography indicate that “full-grown sacrificial

¹² There are other terms for the victim. Athenian inscriptions (e.g. SEG 33.147) can refer to the oath sacrifice as the ὀρκωμόσιον. On the oath sacrifice see R. Parker 1983:186–7; Thür 1996; von Staden 1991: 230; Plescia 1970: 12; Burkert 1983: 35, 1985: 250–4; Faraone 1993.

¹³ As Faraone (2006: 149) notes this action strongly resembled the ritual of standing on or touching the *tomia* (“cut pieces”) of the oath sacrifice while uttering a conditional curse on oneself and one’s household. References to the practice of holding parts of the victim in one’s hand include Aeschin. 1.114–15.

victims” would be slaughtered at public oaths such as treaties (e.g. IG I³ 83.26–8; Thuc. 5.47.1–48.2 [the Argive alliance]). The orators relate that the complex series of oaths taken at homicide trials were sworn over the “cut pieces” of victims. Obviously there would be less formal or spontaneous situations when it would not be possible or necessary to perform an oath sacrifice.

In drama the actual performance of a sacrifice would be a complicated and possibly sacrilegious procedure, hence audiences only witness blood-free oaths. Although Orestes swears an oath of alliance with the Athenians at the end of *Eumenides* – the type of treaty that would in real life be sanctified with oath sacrifices – there is no mention of sacrifice. Of course he is swearing to Athena herself, a situation that adds great weight to the oath. The only real oath sacrifice that is performed before the audience is that of Lysistrata and her army of women who enact a parody of a treaty oath with a wine-skin. As we shall see, this ritual action has some provocative implications in terms of gender and embodiment, but most obviously it is good for a laugh.

Although oath sacrifices are not performed in the theater they are sometimes described. Many of the oaths discussed in this volume are narrated or in one instance prescribed. They are usually signified by the word *horkos* or a form of *omnumi* in the past. While it is common enough for the audience to hear that a character swore an oath, the narrated oath offers possibilities for describing sacrifice and other ritual actions. The earliest reference to an oath in Athenian drama, which occurs in the prologue to Aeschylus’ *Septem*, is also one of the few accounts of an oath sacrifice in tragedy. The scout relates the oath sworn by Polynices and his six allies to Eteocles:

ἄνδρες γὰρ ἑπτὰ, θούριοι λοχαγέται,
ταυροσφαγοῦντες ἐς μελάνδετον σάκος,
καὶ θιγγάνοντες χερσὶ ταυρείου φόνου,
Ἄρην ἔνυώ καὶ φιλαίματον Φόβον
ὥρκωμότησαν, ἥ πόλει κατασκαφὰς
θέντες λαπάξιν ἄστυ Καδμείων βίᾱ,
ἢ γῆν θανόντες τήνδε φυράσειν φόνῳ

Seven men, fierce captains, slaughtered a bull in a black shield, and touching the gore of the bull with their hands, they swore an oath by Ares, Eno and bloodthirsty Fear, that they would either take the city of the Cadmeans by force and raze it, or die and stain the earth with their own gore. (*Sept.* 42–8)

The narrative allows the poet to describe a bloody sacrifice that could never be depicted in the theater. Similarly Athena, at the exodus of