

Cheiron's Way: Youthful Education in Homer and Tragedy

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Cheiron's Way
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[Preface](#)

when homer's agamemnon sends a delegation bearing an offer of reconciliation to Achilles, one of the three emissaries is Phoenix, who served as Achilles' tutor when the hero was a child in Thessaly and subsequently accompanied him to Troy. As Phoenix pleads with Achilles to let go of his anger he reminds him, "I made you the man you are" (καὶ σὲ τοσοῦτον ἔθηκα, *Il.* 9.485). That claim forms the point of departure for this study, which investigates the social and ethical instruction and formation—processes that would ultimately be subsumed under the term *paideia*¹—that helped make certain protagonists of epic and tragedy the men they are. Following an introduction that sketches the conceptual background for literary representations of teaching and learning, [Chapter 1](#) considers the pedagogic persona of Cheiron the centaur, the first teacher in the Greek tradition. [Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) focus on the Iliadic Achilles, who achieves maturity by way of successive crises of disillusionment and empathy and who becomes an influential prototype for the tragedies studied here. Subsequent chapters discuss Telemachus and Odysseus in the *Odyssey* ([Chapter 4](#)); Ajax in his name play ([Chapter 5](#)); Neoptolemus in *Philoctetes* ([Chapter 6](#)); Hippolytus in his name play, with

an excursus on *Ion* ([Chapter 7](#)); and Achilles and Iphigenia in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, with a preliminary discussion of Nausicaa in the *Odyssey* ([Chapter 8](#)).² A coda summarizes results and takes note of the perennial lure (despite its uncertain results) of the educational enterprise for communities, students, and teachers.

Every fictional character comes with a past attached, a presumed personal history that is both explicit and implicit.³ The text can evoke this past directly through reminiscences, flashbacks, or allusions, and the audience can also reconstruct it⁴ with the help of information gleaned from the words spoken and actions performed in the narrative present. Far from succumbing to the documentary fallacy and forgetting that “literature operates on a thinnish crust, and there is nothing underneath this crust,”⁵ readers and spectators who deliberately take up a text’s beguiling invitation to animate its fictional characters with a history antedating the narrative present turn out to be “wiser” (in Gorgias the sophist’s paradoxical formulation)⁶ than those who remain disengaged.⁷ If carried out with due regard for historical and literary context, the process of fictional reconstruction can enhance understanding both of the epic and tragic texts themselves and of the relationship between the two genres. Furthermore, the historical record for pedagogical theory and practice in archaic and fifth-century Greece is sparse by comparison to later eras.⁸ The depiction of education in epic and tragedy accordingly provides suggestive evidence, despite being refracted through the prism of the Greek literary imagination.

Archaic and classical Greek literature is profoundly engaged with education—its assumptions, contexts, agents, methods, and limits—and the richest and most illuminating depictions of this process can be found in the epic and dramatic texts. That is one reason to study the two genres together; another is that tragedy was profoundly influenced by epic.⁹ As Gould observes, the tragedians were “in Homer’s debt for the imaginative projection of a world in which human action is given a scale, a moral complexity and a seriousness that matched the[ir] needs.”¹⁰ Although the Homeric legacy supplies a template for tragic depictions of education, the tragedians assert their independence by purposefully diverging from epic precedent and by incorporating fifth-century elements that create a hybrid intertextual domain.

Epic and tragedy are not, of course, the only genres that can be enlisted as witnesses for archaic and classical concepts of education. If I refer to others only in passing, it is from a consciousness of their limitations as well as to keep my project within manageable bounds. Hesiod’s hexameters and Theognis’ elegiacs are avowedly didactic, setting forth authoritative prescriptions for ethical conduct, but these texts are composed from a single perspective, the instructor’s, whose message is moreover fixed at the moment of delivery.¹¹ By contrast, representations of education in epic and drama feature multiple voices and action that unfolds over time. The audience gains access to students as well as teachers and witnesses the maturation—intellectual, ethical, social, and emotional—that is intrinsic to the educational process.

The lyric genre provides invaluable evidence for female enculturation,¹² but the circumstances of its production and performance remain dauntingly opaque. While Pindar’s epinicians constitute the most important source for Cheiron’s role as the archetypal educator,¹³ their unswerving aristocratic viewpoint limits their usefulness. Although the pre-Socratics’ statements on pedagogy are suggestive, the fragments often lack a contextualizing framework. Aristophanic comedy refers frequently to the educational process and even puts scenes of instruction on stage,¹⁴ but scholars who undertake the painstaking and necessary task of adjusting for comic irony, hyperbole, and caricature risk wandering far afield from the topic of education.¹⁵

To be sure, epic and tragedy have their own shortcomings, and their portrayals of the educational process entail significant absences and elisions. This study will highlight the educational roles of four female characters: Penelope, her son Telemachus’ instructor; Hippo, pupil of her father, Cheiron, and teacher of her daughter Melanippe; Nausicaa, who internalizes her society’s

expectations for young women; and Iphigenia, who initially accepts but ultimately transcends them. For the most part, however, both genres focus on the formation of youthful male aristocrats, paying little heed to women and even less to non-elites.¹⁶ Epic and tragedy intermingle public and private, categories that moderns tend to keep apart;¹⁷ they gloss over the relationship between pedagogy and pederasty,¹⁸ and downplay the homoerotic when depicting same-sex pairs of friends.¹⁹ Although they make passing mention of the homosocial groups that were decisive in the historical formation of the young, they accord them no prominence.²⁰ They minimize the pedagogical role of athletic training (*gumnastikē*) and of music, song, and dance (*mousikē*), even though both were fundamental to what Aristophanes (*Nub.* 961) calls τὴν ἀρχαίαν παιδείαν (old-time education).²¹ They pay scant attention to literacy, an important component of real-life education from the fifth century on.²² This study, which is literary rather than historical, takes its cue from the texts in selecting what aspects of archaic and classical education to emphasize; as a result, its scope is necessarily affected by theirs. Nevertheless, that epic and tragedy share a common worldview, participate in an intertextual relationship, and even evince the same limitations gives promise that studying them in tandem will prove mutually illuminating.

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Some of the material in this book has been previously published. Portions of [Chapter 5](#) appear in “Sophocles’ Ajax and His Homeric Prototypes,” in *Theatre World: Critical Perspectives in Greek Tragedy and Comedy; Studies in Honour of Georgia Xanthakou-Karamanos*, edited by A. Fountoulakis, A. Markantonatos, and G. Vasilaros, de Gruyter 2017, 137–55. Material from the Introduction and [Chapter 6](#) appears in “Sophocles and Education” in *Brill’s Companion to Sophocles*, edited by A. Markantonatos, Brill 2012, 513–25. Portions of [Chapter 7](#) appear in “The Education of Hippolytus” in *Wisdom and Folly in Euripides*, edited by P. Kyriakou and A. Rengakos, de Gruyter 2016, 121–36. Portions of [Chapter 8](#) appear in “Iphigenia in Aulis: A Dual Education,” in *Brill’s Companion to Euripides*, edited by A. Markantonatos, forthcoming from Brill. I thank the publishers for permission to reprint.

[1.](#) *Paideia* signifies “both the culture or civilization of its time . . . and the process of education by which a command of the culture and its tradition were acquired” ([Elsner 2013](#), 137). Convenient though the term is, I avoid it for two reasons. First, it is attested with the signification “education” only from the last third of the fifth century (see [Perdicoyianni 1994](#), 260 and [Ward 2011](#), 12–14). Second, the term acquired disquieting associations in the wake of [Jaeger’s Paideia](#) (1939–44). See [Näf 2002](#); [White 2002](#); and [Losemann 2007](#), 312 for the affinities of Jaeger’s thought with Nazi ideology.

[2.](#) Although I discuss the Aeschylean motif of “learning through suffering” in the introduction and refer to other passages when relevant, I do not devote a separate chapter to Aeschylus, because the pattern that concerns me in this study—the social and ethical formation of youthful characters as modeled on the Iliadic Achilles’—does not loom large in his extant plays. [Rogers 2005](#), 126–93 and 194–252, discusses the didactic theme in the *Oresteia* and in [Aesch.] *PV* respectively; for the

latter see also [Castrucci 2012](#), 15–134.

3. Even newborns, such as the infant protagonist of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* or the infant Perseus set adrift in a chest with his mother (Simon. F 271 Poltera), possess a familial history that supplies the audience with crucial information.

4. For “the way [a] text invites us to be actively involved in making reconstructions” see [Easterling 1990](#), 94. She concludes (1990, 99), “The desire to construct is perfectly compatible with the knowledge that strictly speaking there is nothing there at all.” For an illuminating discussion of this process from the perspective of theory of mind see [Budermann and Easterling 2010](#).

5. [Waldock 1951](#), 15. Narratology’s attention to *analepsis* (i.e., flashback, subdivided into internal and external, narratorial and actorial) goes far to establish a foundation beneath the crust. For these subsidiary categories see [de Jong 2007](#).

6. ὁ ἀπατηθεὶς σοφώτερος τοῦ μὴ ἀπατηθέντος, DK 82 B 23. For analysis of this fragment see [S. Halliwell 2005](#), 396 and [Munteanu 2011](#), 47–51.

7. Such readers and spectators are not naive, but neither are they excessively subtle or “super-competent” ([Revermann 2006](#), 100), because they can follow up on indications embedded in the text rather than rely on prior familiarity with the mythical material.

8. [T. Morgan 1998](#), 9–10 observes, “While most of the elements of later educational practice were developed in the classical period . . . what little evidence we have gives no indication that they were assembled as a regular group or in a regular order until the early Hellenistic period.” Primary sources bearing on ancient education are selected and translated in [Joyal, McDougall, and Yardley 2009](#). For Greco-Roman schooltexts see [Crihiore 2001](#), 127–59; for education in classical Athens, [Rihill 2003](#). Three handbooks—[Too 2001a](#); [Grubbs and Parkin 2013](#); and [Bloomer 2015](#)—cover selected topics in Greco-Roman education and offer suggestions for further reading. Older works include [Freeman 1922](#); Jaeger 1939–44; [Marrou 1948](#) (English translation 1956); and Beck [1964](#) and [1975](#). Of these, Marrou’s study is still regularly consulted; for its strengths and weaknesses see [Too 2001b](#), 1–4.

9. For the relationship between epic and tragedy see [Rutherford 1982](#); [Gould 2001](#); [Easterling 1984](#); [Davidson 1999–2000](#), 2006, and 2012; and [de Jong 2016](#).

10. [Gould 2001](#), 33.

11. For attempts to recover the addressee of Greco-Roman didactic poetry see [Schiesaro, Mitsis, and Clay 1993](#).

12. For choral training as formative for young women see [Calame 1997](#), 25–34 and passim; [Ingalls 2000](#); and [Swift 2010](#), 186–88.

13. For the parallel between Cheiron’s teachings and the poet’s own “paraenetic relationship with his patrons” see [J. M. Halliwell 2008](#), 87 and passim.

14. For the motif of education in *Clouds* see [Dover 1968](#), lviii–lxvi and passim; in *Wasps*, [Slater 1997](#); in *Knights*, [Morgan 1999](#), 49; in *Lysistrata*, [Golden 2015](#), 40–41.

15. For the challenges of determining comic tone see [Wright 2012](#), 5–30. Exemplifying the complexity of the task is [Woodbury 1976](#), a meticulous parsing of two brief references to literacy in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*.

[16.](#) For (rare) references in tragedy to lower-class enculturation as a trickling down of aristocratic standards see Eur. *Hipp.* 407–12 and Eur. *Hec.* 313–16. For Helen’s death as a deterrent for women who might be tempted to commit adultery see Eur. *Tro.* 1031–32. For the education of Aristophanes’ sausage seller as a travesty of elite training see Ar. *Eq.* 1235–39. For the dramatic function of tragedy’s anonymous household slaves see [Yoon 2012](#), 9–21.

[17.](#) For the blurring of boundaries between public and private see [Griffith 2001](#), 24–25 and *passim*.

[18.](#) For pederastic pedagogy see [Percy 1996](#). On Euripides’ lost *Chrysippus*, which represented Laius as teaching Pelops’ son Chrysippus how to drive a chariot and then abducting him, see [Hubbard 2006](#), 223–31.

[19.](#) For a careful assessment of the bond between Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad* see [Fantuzzi 2012](#), 187–215. He concludes that their relationship is depicted by Homer as emotional rather than sexual, but reinterpreted as homoerotic in the later tradition—for example, in Aeschylus’ lost tragedy *Myrmidons*, for which see [Michelakis 2002](#), 41–46. Orestes and Pylades are portrayed as a devoted pair by all three tragedians, but with no suggestion that their relationship is homoerotic.

[20.](#) For acculturation via age groups see [M. Griffith 2001](#), 36–56 and [M. Griffith 2015b](#), 34. For Hippodameia’s eminence among her age mates see *Il.* 13. 431–32. At *Od.* 1.383–85 Athena disguises herself as Telemachus to assemble a crew of young Ithacans, who, however, remain with the ship and take no part in Telemachus’ adventures at Pylos and Sparta. At Eur. *Hipp.* 1179–80 the messenger reports that a “vast crowd of friends and contemporaries” (μυρία . . . / φίλων . . . ἡλικῶν ἄθ’ ὀμήγουρις) clustered around Hippolytus as he departed from Trozen, but elsewhere in the play the young man is characterized as detached and solitary. At Eur. *Tro.* 1182–84 Hecuba recalls that her grandson Astyanax promised to bring “bands of age mates” (ὀμηλικῶν / κώμους) to her tomb, and at 1209–11 she laments that she is not crowning him for besting his contemporaries (νικήσαντα . . . / . . . ἡλικίας) in riding or archery, but instead adorning his corpse. Within the play, however, Astyanax (as Hector’s son and heir) is the only child singled out for death by the Greeks.

[21.](#) For the distribution of athletic activities across classes in democratic Athens see [Fisher 1998](#). For the link between *gymnastikē* and *mousikē* see [Bundrick 2005](#), 74–79. The value of these pursuits was at issue in Euripides’ lost tragedy *Antiope*, in which twin brothers, the warrior/athlete Zethus and Amphion the musician, represented and advocated contrasting ways of life. For different hypotheses on how their conflict developed see Wilson 1999–2000, 440–49, and [Natanblut 2009](#).

[22.](#) For references to literacy in Euripides see [Wright 2010](#), 176–79.

[Abbreviations](#) Ancient Authors and Texts

Abbreviations of ancient authors’ names and the titles of their works generally follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, fourth edition. A list of authors and works mentioned in the text and notes is provided below for convenient reference.

Aesch., Aeschylus

Ag., Agamemnon

Cho., *Choephoroe* (= *Libation Bearers*)

Eum., Eumenides

Pers., Persae (= Persians)

Supp., Supplices (= Suppliant Women)

[Aesch.], pseudo-Aeschylus

PV, Prometheus Vincetus (= Prometheus Bound)

Apollod., Apollodorus

Bibl., Bibliotheca (= Library)

Epit., Epitome

Ap. Rhod., Apollonius of Rhodes

Argon., Argonautica

Ar., Aristophanes

Ach., Acharnenses (= Acharnians)

Eq., Equites (= Knights)

Nub., Nubes (= Clouds)

Ran., Ranae (= Frogs)

Arist., Aristotle

Eth. Nic.,

Ethica Nicomachea (= Nichomachean Ethics)

Poet., Poetica (= Poetics)

Pol., Politica (= Politics)

Rh., Rhetorica (= Rhetoric)

Ath., Athenaeus

Deipn., Deipnosophistae (= The Learned Banqueters)

Bacchyl., Bacchylides

Dith., Dithyrambos

Ep., Epinicians

Callim., Callimachus

Democr., Democritus

Dio Chrys., Dio Chrysostom

Or., Orationes

Diog. Laert., Diogenes Laertius

Eur., Euripides

Alc., Alcestis

Andr., Andromache

Ba., Bacchae

Cycl., Cyclops

El., Electra

Hec., Hecuba

Hel., Helena (= Helen)

Heracl., Heraclidae (= Children of Heracles)

HF, Hercules Furens

Hipp., Hippolytus

IA, Iphigenia Aulidensis (= Iphigenia in Aulis)

Ion

IT, Iphigenia Taurica (= Iphigenia among the Taurians)

Med., Medea

Or., Orestes

Phoe., Phoenissae (= Phoenician Women)

Supp., Supplices (= Suppliant Women)

Tro., Troades (= Trojan Women)

Gorg., Gorgias

Hdt., Herodotus

Hes., Hesiod

Op., Opera et Dies (= Works and Days)

Theog., Theogonia (= Theogony)

Hom., Homer

Il., Iliad

Od., Odyssey

Hor., Horace

Epod., Epodi (= Epodes)

Hymn. Hom. Ven., *Hymnus Homericus ad Venerem (= Homeric Hymn to Venus)*

Juv., Juvenal

Lib., Libanius

Progymn., Progymnasmata (= Preliminary Exercises)

Nic., Nicander

Ther., Theriaca

Ov., Ovid

Ars am., Ars amatoria

Fast., Fasti

Paus., Pausanias

Philostr., Philostratus

Imag., Imagines

Pind., Pindar

Isthm., Isthmian Odes

Nem., Nemean Odes

Ol., Olympian Odes

Pyth., Pythian Odes

Pl., Plato

Ap., Apologia (= Apology)

[Ax.]

Axiochus

Chrm., Charmides

Hp. mai., Hippias maior

Lach., Laches

Leg., Leges (= Laws)

Men., Meno

Prt., Protagoras

Resp., Respublica (= Republic)

Symp., Symposium

Plut., Plutarch

Mor., Moralia

Vit. Lyc., Vitae Parallelae, Lycurgus (= Life of Lycurgus)

Vit. Thes., Vitae Parallelae, Theseus (= Life of Theseus)

Prot., Protagoras

Quint., Quintilian

Inst., Institutio oratoria

Semon., Semonides

Simon., Simonides

Soph., Sophocles

Aj., Ajax

Ant., Antigone

El., Electra

OC, Oedipus Coloneus (= Oedipus at Colonus)

OT, Oedipus Tyrannus (= Oedipus Rex, Oedipus the King)

Phil., Philoctetes

Trach., Trachiniae (= Trachinian Women)

Stat., Staius

Achil., Achilleis (= Achilleid)

Theophr., Theophrastus

Hist. pl., Historia plantarum

Thgn., Theognis

Thuc., Thucydides

Tyrt., Tyrtaeus

Verg., Vergil (Virgil)

Aen., Aeneid

Ecl., Eclogues

G., Georgics

Xen., Xenophon

Cyn., Cynegeticus

Mem., Memorabilia Editions of Fragments and Testimonia

Bernabé A. Bernabé, ed. 1987–2007. *Poetarum epicorum Graecorum: Testimonia et fragmenta*. 2 vols. Leipzig: Teubner.

Davies M. Davies, ed. 1988. *Epicorum Graecorum fragmenta*. Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.

Davies-Finglass M. Davies and P. J. Finglass, eds. 2014. *Stesichorus: The Poems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DK H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds. 1956. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 6th ed. 3 vols. Berlin: Weidmann.

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Merkelbach-West R. Merkelbach and M. L. West, eds. 1967. *Fragmenta Hesiodica*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Neri C. Neri, ed. 2003. *Erinna; Testimonianze e Frammenti*. Bologna: Pàtron Editore.

P Oxy. *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, edited by B. P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt. 1898–. London: Egypt Exploration Society.

Poltera O. Poltera, ed. 2008. *Simonides Lyricus, Testimonia und Fragmente*. Basel, Switzerland: Schwabe.

Snell-Maehler B. Snell and H. Maehler, eds. 1987–89. *Pindari Carmina cum fragmentis*. 2 vols. Leipzig: Teubner.

TrGF *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, edited by B. Snell, R. Kannicht, and S. Radt. 1971–2004. 5 vols. in 6. Berlin: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. Note: “Kannicht” and “Radt” refer to the relevant volumes of *TrGF*.

Voigt E.-M. Voigt, ed. 1971. *Sappho et Alcaeus: Fragmenta*. Amsterdam: Polak and van Gennep.

West M. L. West, ed. 1989–92. *Iambi et elegi Graeci ante Alexandrum cantati*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cypr., Il. Parv. West M. L. West, ed. and trans. 2003. *Greek Epic Fragments*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Note: *Cypr.* = *Cypria*; *Il. Parv.* = *Ilias Parva* (Little

Iliad). Reference Works

LIMC *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae*. 1981–2009. Zurich, Switzerland: Artemis Verlag

RE A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, W. Kroll, et al., eds. 1894–1980. *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler. Texts, Translations, and Proper Names

My principal Greek texts are West's Teubner edition of the *Iliad*, Stanford's Macmillan edition of the *Odyssey*, Lloyd-Jones and Wilson's Oxford Classical Text of Sophocles, and Diggle's Oxford Classical Text of Euripides. Translations not otherwise attributed are my own. I generally use Latinized names for familiar mythological figures and Greek names for less well-known ones. Citations of Scholarly Journals

Abbreviations of journal titles generally follow *L'Année philologique*.

Cheiron's Way
[Introduction](#)

representations of education in epic and tragedy unfold against a backdrop of cultural concepts that can go stated or unstated, challenged or assumed. As a prelude to my readings of specific texts I consider the following questions: what physical and mental qualities are taken to differentiate youth from age? In scenes of instruction who is regarded as the instructor, who the student? How relevant to archaic and classical concepts of education is the initiatory model of adolescent maturation? Who are the typical purveyors of instruction, and what are the typical occasions and methods? What balance is assumed between natural endowment and educational acquisition? What relationship is postulated between experience and learning? [Age Classes and Education](#)

The literature of archaic and classical Greece assumes a sharp demarcation between the different life stages—a premise that proves highly relevant to education.¹ As archaic and classical poets describe the abilities and pursuits characteristic of each period, they draw a contrast between time's effects on the body and on the mind. Even as the physical flourishing of youth yields to debility, mental impulsiveness gives way to judgment and understanding. Young men are feckless; their arguments are incomplete, their judgment fragile.² The sobriety and good sense that stereotypically characterize the old³ serve as partial compensation for the physical decline that is recognized as an inevitable corollary of aging.⁴

In the *Iliad* older men take little part in the fighting; when King Priam and his counselors look down at the battlefield from the walls of Troy, their spatial distance from the realm of action underscores their chronological and psychological detachment.⁵ Exceptionally, the aged Nestor still participates in the fighting on the Greek side, but even he suffers from diminished powers. When Agamemnon wishes aloud that the old king's strength were commensurate to his fighting spirit, Nestor concurs, adding (*Il.* 4.322–25)

[b]ut nevertheless I shall mingle with the chariot-fighters

and guide them with counsel and directives, for that

is the old men's privilege. The younger men will wield their spears,

since they are my juniors and trust in their own strength.

The belief that counseling the young is the "old men's privilege" (γέρας γερόντων, *Il.* 4.323) reflects a widespread assumption that it is for the old to teach and for the young to listen and learn.⁶ When a young person offers advice to his elders, it is with deference and hesitation. At a later point

in the poem, when the Trojans have broken through the Greeks' defensive wall to threaten the ships, Agamemnon advocates abandoning the siege and sailing home. Odysseus attacks his suggestion, at which point Agamemnon invites anyone "whether young or old" who has a better idea to express his opinion. Diomedes takes up the challenge, but begins by expressing the hope that his listeners will not be surprised or annoyed at his temerity, given that he is the most youthful among them (*Il.* 14.111–12). Though in the event his advice is favorably received, it is telling that he prefaces his speech with a *captatio benevolentiae* that acknowledges his auditors' prejudice against advice emanating from the young.

Conventional wisdom ascribes rashness to the young and sagacity to the old,⁷ but a more fine-grained analysis of the life stages can yield a different result. An innovator in many spheres, Solon adopts an idiosyncratic perspective on aging.⁸ His poem on the ages of man (F 27 West) divides the life span into ten periods of seven years each. Solon focuses on the physical changes that accompany the first four hebdomads: the loss of baby teeth, onset of puberty, growth of a beard, and attainment of adult strength. The fifth hebdomad is marked by a change in social status: it is "seasonable" (ῥπιον, 27.9) for a man in his thirties, Solon observes, to contemplate marriage. Only in the sixth, seventh, and eighth hebdomads do mental qualities come into play: Solon comments that a man in his forties is no longer inclined to "acts of thoughtlessness,"⁹ and that someone of this age is "the best by far in judgment and speaking ability." He notes that intellectual debility sets in around the ninth hebdomad, ensuring that a man will die "not unseasonably" (οὐκ . . . ἄωρος, 27.18) at the end of the tenth. Not only does Solon not dwell on youth's vigor and old age's physical decline as other archaic poets are wont to do, but he also views mental qualities idiosyncratically: not as improving over time, but as reaching a peak in midlife and then gradually diminishing.

Solon's willingness to challenge conventional wisdom is evident in another statement about aging. His avowal that "I am constantly learning many things as I grow older" (γηράσκω δ' ἀεὶ πολλὰ διδασκόμενος, F 18 West) is cited by a number of Plato's speakers¹⁰ and also holds appeal for moderns, for its affirmation of lifelong learning harmonizes with contemporary theories of human development. In the Greek tradition, however, an old man who continues to learn is as anomalous¹¹ as a young man who offers advice; the Athenian statesman goes against the grain of tradition when he associates advanced years with receiving rather than giving instruction. To be sure, a fragment of Democritus (DK 68 B 183) denies any necessary connection between age and wisdom: "There is, I take it, comprehension (ξύνεσις) in the young and lack of comprehension in the old. For time does not teach sense, but seasonable nurturing (ῥραϊή τροφή) does, and nature." Solon's viewpoint also finds some adherents in tragedy: the unknown speaker of an Aeschylean fragment asserts, "It is fine even for an old man to learn what is wise" (Aesch. F 396 Radt), and the Argive elders who make up the chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* declare, "For the old, constructive learning (εὔ μαθεῖν) remains forever fresh."¹² Yet the defensive tone of these statements suggests that they represent a minority view. More often the traditional linkage between youth and foolishness on the one hand and age and wisdom on the other goes unchallenged. In tragedy, geriatric learning generally takes place under compulsion and is associated with misfortune, hardship, humiliation, or defeat. [Rites of Passage](#)

Rites of passage, with their initiatory associations and three discrete stages of withdrawal, liminality, and reintegration, would seem intuitively related to education, but in the ancient Greek context the points of contact prove elusive.¹³ While rite-of-passage motifs appear in scattered form throughout archaic and classical literature, representations of the complete process are not easy to identify. The most unassailable instance occurs in the *Odyssey*. In a compressed but vivid flashback the Homeric narrator recounts how the youthful Odysseus, during a visit to his maternal grandparents, passed an initiatory test by killing a wild boar and returned home laden with gifts, having acquired a commemorative battle scar bearing testimony to his enhanced status (*Od.* 19.392–466). Each of these details can be related to rite-of-passage scenarios exemplified in other

cultures.¹⁴ Some scholars have argued that the portion of the *Odyssey* known as the *Telemachy* exemplifies a similar pattern of withdrawal, liminality, and reintegration, although Telemachus' initiatory experience is more drawn out and his trials are more internal in nature.¹⁵ I regard initiatory experiences as secondary to the poem's portrayal of Telemachus' education; what is fundamental is the relationship that develops between father and son.

The *Odyssey* is probably not, however, the classical text that first comes to mind in connection with rites of passage. In an influential series of articles dating from the 1960s to the 1980s, Vidal-Naquet asserted the initiatory character of the Athenian *ephēbeia* (military service for adolescents) and then applied his conclusions to Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.¹⁶ For Vidal-Naquet, Neoptolemus is a paradigmatic ephebe who undergoes an initiatory transformation on the island of Lemnos. The end of the play finds him preparing to return to Troy, having acquired enhanced hoplite status. This account depends, however, on a highly selective reading of the text. In the interpretation I present in this study the primary influences on *Philoctetes* are intertextual; such traces of the rite-of-passage motif as can be identified have been filtered through the *Odyssey*, and Neoptolemus' educational trajectory owes most to the pattern of the *Hairesis Biou*, or Choice of Life.

[Hupothēkai, Gnōmai, and Paradeigmata](#)

Didactic figures in the Greek literary tradition rely on verbal directives and take a dim view, as we shall see, of the learning that comes from direct experience. We can single out three formal markers of the pedagogical moment: *hupothēkai*, injunctions; *gnōmai*, general reflections; and *paradeigmata*, exemplary tales.¹⁷ Each of these modes conveys (or at least purports to convey)¹⁸ to the listener an experienced speaker's distilled wisdom. The dispenser of instruction may or may not be a blood relative: in the *Iliad*, for example, Achilles receives advice from his father, Peleus, in the form of injunctions, and counsel from his tutor Phoenix in the form of exemplary tales.¹⁹ Regardless of biological connection, in the literary tradition the didactic relationship is often conflated with the parental one. Good counsel emanating from other sources is typically described as fatherly.²⁰ Paternal advice is assumed to be reliable as well as benevolent: thus a fragment of Solon (22a West) notes that an attractive youth should "heed his father, for he will not be obeying a guide who is prone to mistakes," and in a fragment of Euripides (362.1–4 Kannicht) Erechtheus, the king of Athens, tells an unnamed son that "since you are now at an age to understand—and if I die, you can cherish the paternal counsels (πατρὸς/γνώμας) that I am about to expound—I want to leave you a legacy of advice that is fine and useful for a young person."

Whether the counsel dispensed by didactic figures consists of traditional, generalized *hupothēkai* ("Pay honor to Zeus and your parents"; "Remember that Zeus alone knows how our lives will end"²¹) or warnings tailored to a specific situation, all that is required of the addressee is to keep the proffered advice in mind. That task is not, however, as simple as it sounds. A cautionary example of filial distraction is Euripides' Phaethon (Eur. F 779 Kannicht): before and even after his son takes the reins of his chariot, Helios the sun god issues instructions that the youth fatally ignores. The forgetfulness of the young is repeatedly deplored in archaic and classical texts.²² [Sunousia](#)

Communal influence is one aim of the aristocratic, homosocial association that the Greeks termed *sunousia*, or "being-with."²³ For a young man, the mingling that took place at an elite banquet or symposium²⁴ was regarded as indubitably educational, though not necessarily in a positive way. Addressing his youthful beloved Cynus, Theognis (31–36 West) explains the risks and rewards of absorbing lessons from such an environment:

Do not associate with wicked men, but always adhere

to the good ones: drink and eat with them, and sit among them,

and try to please those who have great power. From worthy men

you will learn what is worthwhile; if you mingle with the wicked,

you will destroy even the sense you possess.

Sunousia is linked to the traditional oral transmission of cultural values.²⁵ Drinking and eating in company offers training in virtue or, as it may be, vice.²⁶ Presumably, a young man will observe the example and listen to the advice of good men and bad and shape his own conduct accordingly. The process can be envisaged as passive and ineluctable; thus Antiphon declares (DK 87 B 62), “One must necessarily become, with respect to character, of the same sort as the individual with whom one spends the greatest part of each day,” and Democritus (DK 68 B 184) remarks that “regular association with wicked men increases the habit of evil.” On the other hand, it can be envisaged as a conscious, intentional process of “imitating” (μιμῆσθαι, DK 68 B 39 and DK 68 B 79) good or bad exemplars. Either way, *sunousia* provides a venue and opportunity for youthful learning.

Tragedy takes the educational consequences of *sunousia* for granted, although speakers disagree on whether bad associations are harmful or salutary or simply reinforce a preexisting tendency.²⁷ In Aeschylus’ *Persians* the queen mother Atossa attributes her son Xerxes’ strategic missteps to his intercourse with wicked men.²⁸ Euripides’ Hecuba seems to envisage an education that keeps bad influences at a safe remove when she describes a fine upbringing as an “instruction in good. And if someone learns this well, he surely knows what is shameful, having learned it by the measure of what is fine” (*Hec.* 601–2). Euripides’ Agamemnon takes the same line when he tells his wife, Clytemnestra, that Achilles’ father entrusted his son to Cheiron the Centaur “so that he would not learn the habits of wicked men” (*IA* 709). On the other hand, Euripides’ Electra maintains that “what is bad holds an example for the good, and attracts attention.”²⁹ Despite their divergent views of the relationship between positive and negative exemplars, all these speakers recognize that *sunousia* entails risks as well as opportunities for the impressionable young.

The prestige of *sunousia* appears to dwindle over time as literate instruction replaces oral enculturation.³⁰ Writing in the fourth century, Plato offers a *reductio ad absurdum* of education by association.³¹ At the opening of Plato’s *Symposium* Agathon, who has invited Socrates to dinner, insists that his guest recline beside him, “so that by touching you, wise as you are, I may get the benefit of [your thoughts].” “It would be well,” Socrates replies, “if wisdom (ἡ σοφία) could flow from the fuller of us to the emptier if we just touch one another, in the same way that water flows through a woolen thread from a fuller vessel to an emptier one! If wisdom works like that, I value highly my position beside you” (*Symp.* 175c8–e1). Socrates here turns a graceful compliment by paradoxically identifying his younger companion, rather than himself, as the source of wisdom. Simultaneously, he frames his conceit as an improbable condition, for he is well aware that *sophia* cannot be siphoned from one individual to another.³² For Socrates the transmission of wisdom is not a matter of simple proximity, nor does he have any use for passive reception on the part of his interlocutor. While Socratic learning relies on imitating the instructor’s ethical example, it requires the student’s voluntary, active participation at every stage.³³

Sunousia makes its own demands on young aristocrats, requiring them to be responsive and adaptable. Changeability is one aspect of the multivalent term *mētis* (“resourcefulness”³⁴), which appears frequently in educational contexts. Whereas moderns associate this quality with the chameleon, to the Greeks it called to mind the octopus. Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 317a) quotes a fragment of Theognis (= 215–16 West) praising the octopus’s gift of protective coloration: “Cultivate the disposition of the wily octopus, which resembles the rock to which it clings!” The lines have the ring of paraenetic advice; indeed, elsewhere Athenaeus adduces a fragment of Pindar³⁵ that employs the same image and overtly reflects the conventions of mythological advice poetry. According to Athenaeus, the speaker (presumably Amphiaraus, the Theban seer) is exhorting (παραινώων³⁶) the youthful Amphilochus to calibrate his responses to his company: “My child, bring to your

associations in every city a mind that most resembles the skin of the creature of the rocky sea [i.e., the octopus]. Spontaneously praise the man who is present, but adopt other attitudes on other occasions.”³⁷

Even as aristocratic *sunousia* demanded adaptability, it also required an enactment of dignity and integrity. The balance was a delicate one, and a youth’s comportment in social situations tested both his character and his training. When Cleisthenes, the tyrant of Sicyon, decided to choose a son-in-law, he invited the suitors to stay with him for a year, while “he made trial of their manliness, temper, education, and manners by consorting with them both individually and all together.”³⁸ Hippocleides the Athenian emerged as the favorite until at the culminating event of the probationary period, the banquet at which Cleisthenes was to announce his choice of bridegroom, the young man got drunk and performed headstands on a table, making a spectacle of himself that might appeal to carousing youths, but not a prospective father-in-law. Because he forgot what was appropriate to company and context, Hippocleides forfeited an advantageous marriage. [Mentoring and Peer Role Models](#)

A more manageable form of education involved tutelage by a single instructor. In the second and third books of the *Odyssey* the goddess Athena emerges as the Western tradition’s first Mentor when she disguises herself as Odysseus’ Ithacan friend of the same name. Although her attitude is in many respects paternal, she makes a temporary rather than lifelong commitment to her charge. She rouses Telemachus to action by combining generous praise with stern exhortation, develops a full itinerary for him—he is to travel to Pylos and Sparta to inquire after his missing father—and then helps him set it in motion. Athena in the guise of Mentor remains at Telemachus’ side after he lands in Pylos, encouraging the young man to act with confidence, guiding his conversation with his host, and modeling appropriate behavior. The goddess takes her leave, as befits a mentor, once she has deemed Telemachus capable of functioning without her. Before transforming herself into a vulture and flying away, however, she ensures that Telemachus will have a new guide on the next stage of his journey. It is at her behest that Nestor’s son Pisistratus accompanies Telemachus to Sparta (*Od.* 3.369). Pisistratus, who is the same age as Telemachus but possesses more social experience and self-confidence, serves as a peer role model for Odysseus’ son. By the time Telemachus’ journey draws to a close, not only have the two young men forged a personal bond (*Od.* 15.195–97), but Pisistratus has also taught Telemachus by example how to conduct himself in the social situations that are a recurrent test of Homeric adulthood. Although the interventions of a mentor and a peer role model help the youth make up lost educational ground, they cannot compensate for the absence of his father. [Curricula](#)

While *hupothēkai*, *gnōmai*, and *paradeigmata* are deployed to convey instruction on the spot, prearranged courses of study are not unattested. Phoenix gives an abbreviated description of the warrior’s curriculum when he reports that Achilles’ father, Peleus, charged him with shaping the youth into “a speaker of words and a doer of deeds” (*Il.* 9.443, cf. *Od.* 4.818). Missing from this précis but omnipresent in the poem is another crucial aspect of the warrior’s upbringing, enculturation in the value system that constituted the heroic code.³⁹ Some fifth-century assumptions about the influence of curriculum on character can be gleaned from Herodotus, who in the first book of his *Histories* has occasion to describe two contrasting courses of study, one designed for the Persians and the other for the Lydians. *

This book studies the social and ethical formation of youthful figures in Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides. Every fictional character comes with a past attached, a presumed personal history that is both implicit and explicit; for the youthful heroes and heroines of epic and tragedy, early education figures significantly in that past.

Cheiron's Way takes as its point of departure the words of Homer's Phoenix to Achilles, who claims, "I made you the man you are"; as he pleads with his former pupil to let go of his anger.

The book begins by exploring topics relevant to heroic and tragic education: age classes, rites of passage, verbal modes of instruction, social conditioning, mentoring, peer role models, and the controversial balance between nature and nurture. It introduces the first teacher in the Greek tradition, Cheiron the centaur, who founded a school for young heroes in his Thessalian cave and instructed Achilles, Jason, and others with mixed success. Next it turns to the Iliadic Achilles, who achieves maturity by way of successive crises—a crisis of disillusionment with the assumptions that shaped his heroic education, followed by a crisis of empathy for his adversary—and who becomes an influential prototype for tragedy. Examination of the *Odyssey* suggests that while Odysseus received a normative heroic upbringing and Nausicaa internalizes social expectations for young women, Telemachus is more of an outlier. In tragic representations of education Sophocles' *Ajax* and Neoptolemus replicate the Achillean pattern only partially and unsuccessfully, as does Euripides' *Hippolytus*; only Achilles and Iphigenia in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* achieve an emotional maturity commensurate with the Iliadic Achilles'. Yet all these texts confirm, as elegantly argued in this book, the perennial lure, despite uncertain results, of the educational enterprise for communities, students, and teachers.

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