The Agamemnon Problem: The Fluidity of History-Making and Myth-Making in the *Dune* Universe

by Sara Mohr and Sam Butler

> "The Sisterhood has no need for archaeologists. As Reverend Mothers, we embody history." — Bene Gesserit Teaching (*Dune*: *House Corrino*, 183)[1]

1. Introduction

Frank Herbert's *Dune* series is regarded as a masterpiece of science fiction world-building and epic narrative structure. Set thousands of years in the future, the story revolves around House Atreides, the noble house controlling the planetary fief of Caladan as part of an interstellar, multi-planet society. However, the Atreides trace their ancestry back thousands of years to the times of the ancient Greeks of old Terra (Earth), specifically to Agamemnon. Outside of the books, Agamemnon is a prominent figure in ancient Greek mythology, most famous for leading the Greeks in the war against the city of Troy.

The use of such a genealogy in the *Dune* universe would be interesting enough in its own right, as it anchors this saga of the distant future in our own distant past. Yet what makes this genealogy a problem worthy of particular note is the introduction of the Titan Agamemnon in the *Legends of Dune* prequel trilogy written by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson.

The Titan Agamemnon, a human brain controlling a mechanical body, is a "real" character in the world, as opposed to the mythical ancient Greek Agamemnon, and can plausibly serve as an anchor for the heritage of House Atreides. However, references throughout the original six *Dune* books and throughout the *Legends of Dune* and *Prelude to Dune* trilogies[2] suggest that the Titan Agamemnon may not be the only Agamemnon to exist in the *Dune* universe. Further, it is not always clear to whom explicit mentions of "Agamemnon" are referring. The result is a muddled ancestral history for House Atreides in a way that may well be entirely accidental, but which mimics the way historical connections are made to a glorious past in the ancient world.

Our goal is not to critique the authors for their use or misuse of the "source material," or to point out inconsistencies between books. Rather, as ancient historians, we are interested in

[1] In this article, we will be citing all books in the *Dune* series by their title only for the sake of simplicity.
[2] The *Legends of Dune* trilogy includes *The Butlerian Jihad, The Machine Crusade,* and *The Battle of Corrin.* The *Prelude to Dune* trilogy refers to *Dune: House Atreides*, *Dune: House Harkonnen*, and *Dune: House Corrino*.

exploring the ways that, intentionally or not, the ambiguity within the Atreides' lineage mimics a phenomenon that we can see throughout history. As detailed by Busse, the role of the author in the interpretation of a work has been debated even before Roland Barthes' seminal work "The Death of the Author" in 1968. And it has continued to be debated ever since (Busse 2017, 21-26). However, one lasting effect of Barthes' and other Postmodernists' writings is the idea that authorial intent is not the only metric for analyzing a work. The reader's experience and interpretations are also valid avenues of investigation. In this piece, therefore, our goal is not to critique inconsistencies between texts written by multiple authors with potentially different intentions. Instead, our focus will be on exploring the experience of the reader.

As ancient historians and science fiction enthusiasts, we are guided by four main questions: Is House Atreides' connection with the Agamemnon of ancient Greek myth "real" in the conceit of the books, or is it fabricated? In what way(s) does Agamemnon exist or not exist in the *Dune* universe? Can we recognize distinctions between the two Agamemnons as readers? The answers to these questions, or lack thereof, highlight the discrepancies among authors and among different series of the *Dune* universe that brings the story more in line with history than may have been intended.

2. *Dune* and the Ancient Greek Influence

Much has been written about the relation between science fiction writing and myth-making. Indeed, in their 1969 article on the topic titled "Science Fiction as Mythology," Sutton and Sutton even referenced F. Herbert's *Dune*, writing: "It is not infrequent to find themes from earlier mythologies serving as subplots for science fiction stories. Examples are readily afforded by F. Herbert, who weaves a knowledge of ecology with allusions to Old Testament myths in his novel *Dune* (236)." F. Herbert is perhaps one of the most well-referenced authors to do so (Christensen 2015; Rogers 2017). Our topic therefore is not a new one. But when it comes to the *Dune* universe, few works have gone beyond pointing out such "allusions" to discussing how the authors use mythological or historical motifs to explore the themes of this series (Kennedy 2016, 101). Our goal in this article is to take a deep dive into one such allusion in the *Dune* series in order to show how its inclusion enriches the series' exploration of history and myth-making across vast time scales, whether the authors intended so or not.

As has been noted, references to names, places and languages from our own past are abound in F. Herbert's series, as well as those of B. Herbert and K. J. Anderson. The universe of *Dune* is wide and complex and the authors build its history from traces of a varied past. The languages

represented in *Dune* are diverse. Atreides is based in Greek and Bene Gesserit is based in Latin[3], reflecting the strong influence of Classical history. But there is also representation from Navajo, Chakobsa, Turkish, Persian, and Nahuatl (*Dreamer of Dune*, 189). Additionally, the planet Arrakis and its notorious fearsome sandworm draw inspiration from the folklore of dragons. Particularly, the descriptions of Shai Hulud mimic those of the dragon who guarded the great treasure in the epic tale *Beowulf* (Interview with Frank Herbert 1969; Afterword to *Dune*, 876). B. Herbert would go on to name one of the subordinate Titans, under the thumb of the Titan Agamemnon, Beowulf in the *Legends of Dune* prequel trilogy.

But what is the effect of all these names and allusions on the reader? Kara Kennedy argues that "[Frank] Herbert deliberately chooses names that already exist or are slightly altered and so evoke recognizable time periods, environments, religions, and cultures, and construct the illusion of a universe that exists beyond the borders of the story itself" (Kennedy 2016, 100). On the one hand, this usage of names is a useful shortcut for the authors in their worldbuilding, especially since the Dune universe is meant to take place in our own distant future. For example, the fact that Shaddam IV is called "the Padishah Emperor" evokes Orientalizing tropes of the Eastern Despot for the reader ("Pad(i)shah," 1996; Kennedey 2016, 100). However, it is also possible that within the *Dune* universe, the term itself is a hold-over from ancient Terra. On the other hand, the fact that the authors rely on real-world examples creates room for confusion precisely because the reader cannot always be sure whether the referent of an ancient allusion is something specific from our own past or just a certain atmosphere.

Rogers and Stevens discuss the ambivalence of classical allusions in Science Fiction in the introduction to their volume *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*. They argue that the inclusion of classical references in Science Fiction represents "an advanced post-modern moment marked by a recomposition of past cultural products that is omnivorous and, from a scholarly perspective, generally uncritical" (Rogers and Stevens 2015, 10). Within the *Dune* series, the use of allusions to past cultures and names is clearly "omnivorous" as noted above. What we are arguing here is that it is also "uncritical" (from the specialist's perspective) because the purpose is often, as Kennedy writes, to "evoke" a time or culture the reader may be familiar with, without engaging further with the cultural context of that allusion. And it is this generally "uncritical" handling of ancient "source material" that leads to ambiguity when it comes to one of the most developed allusions in the series: House Atreides.

[3] Gesserit was also stylized to sound like Jesuit (*Dreamer of Dune*, 21).

There are many indications that when F. Herbert penned the first *Dune* books, he had story-lines and themes from ancient Greek mythology in his head. In an interview later published by his editor Tim O'Reilly, F. Herbert states that he viewed Paul Atreides as "the hero of a Greek tragedy, in a sense," and said "heroism was his Achilles' heel. That was his flaw" (O'Reilly 1987, 110). B. Herbert later laid out more explicitly the influence of the ancient world, specifically the ancient Greek world, on his father's conceptualization of *Dune*. In the afterword he penned to his father's *Dune*, B. Herbert explains perhaps the most well-known of these ancient Greek references:

> For the names of heroes, Frank Herbert selected from Greek mythology and other mythological bases. The Greek House Atreus, upon which House Atreides in *Dune* was based, was the ill-fated family of kings Menelaus and Agamemnon. A heroic family, it was beset by tragic flaws and burdened with a curse pronounced against it by Thyestes. This foreshadows the troubles Frank Herbert had in mind for the Atreides family. The evil Harkonnens of *Dune* are related to the Atreides by blood, so when they assassinate Paul's father Duke Leto, it is kinsmen against kinsmen, similar to what occurred in the household of Agamemnon when he was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra. (Afterword to *Dune* 2005, 875)

In his 2003 biography of his father, *Dreamer of Dune,* B. Herbert writes that his father had long been intrigued by the study of the past, even making several attempts at learning Latin in high school (40). Greek tragedy appeared to have a unique hold on F. Herbert, particularly based in the theme of hubris on the level of the individual and of society as a whole. B. Herbert writes,

> Very few readers realized that the story of Paul Atreides was not only a Greek tragedy on an individual and familial scale. There was another layer, larger than Paul, and in that layer Frank Herbert was warning that entire societies could be led to ruination by a hero. In Dune and Dune Messiah he was cautioning against pride and excessive confidence, the hubris of Greek tragedies that led to the great fall. But it was societal-scale hubris he was warning against... the potential demise of an entire society. (*Dreamer of Dune*, 191)

It seems clear, therefore, that F. Herbert's idea of his own Atreides was influenced by his understanding of ancient Greek mythology and the stories surrounding the House of Atreus. By choosing the name "Atreides" for the main protagonists of *Dune*, F. Herbert was aiming to

inject an air of tragedy into the story of this family that would further highlight the theme of hubris inherent in the work.

Whatever F. Herbert's original intentions, however, the inclusion of the Atreides within the *Dune* universe does more than just evoke a certain tragic sensibility. For while the allusions to Greek mythology are some of the most developed across all the *Dune* series, they are still the products of the "omnivorous" and "uncritical" approach that Rogers and Stevens argue characterizes Science Fiction's attitude towards the ancient world. This, and the fact that the *Dune* universe is the creation of multiple authors, leads to the interpretative quandary that we call the "Agamemnon Problem."

3. The Agamemnon Problem

It is clear for us as readers that there exist two Agamemnons of mythical (or semi-mythical) fame in the Dune universe: Agamemnon of ancient Greek myth and the Titan Agamemnon. However, two things remain unclear. Firstly, are we the readers supposed to treat their connection as real? Secondly, are the characters in the books aware of both Agamemnons? In this section, we will explore these questions which constitute what we have termed the Agamemnon Problem.

3.1 *The Agamemnons*

House Atreides in the *Dune* universe traces its lineage back to a larger-than-life figure named Agamemnon. In ancient Greek mythology, Agamemnon was king of the city of Mycenae. He is most famous for leading the Greeks against the city of Troy in order to recover his brother Menelaus' wife, Helen, who had been abducted by Paris, a prince of Troy. Agamemnon and Menelaus were known as "the Atreides," which simply means "Sons of Atreus." Atreus could trace his lineage back to the figure Tantalus, who attempted to serve his own son as a feast for the Gods. Because of this impious act, the Gods cursed the line of Tantalus to misfortune, a curse that only ended with Agamemnon's son Orestes. Orestes killed his mother, Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, after she herself had killed Agamemnon. However, in a trial between Orestes and the avenging Furies, Orestes is acquitted and his line left at peace (Aeschylus, *Eumenides*).

Until the publication of the *Legends of Dune* prequel series, readers of F. Herbert's *Dune* were left to believe either that House Atreides had made up this connection to a family from the mythological past of Old Earth, or that in the *Dune* universe, the House of Atreus and Agamemnon should be considered as historical. However, B. Herbert and Anderson introduce the Titan Agamemnon, a human brain contained in a robot body known as a cymek. It is clear

that Agamemnon is a self-assigned name, as the human turned cymek sought to take on an air of grandeur as his power grew.

> As a boy, Agamemnon had been raised on pampered Earth, with the name of Andrew Skouros. His parents had led a hedonistic but passionless lifestyle, as had so many other citizens. They existed, they dabbled ... but none of them really *lived*. Across the depths of time, he barely remembered the faces of his parents. All weak and feeble humans looked the same to him now. Andrew Skouros had always been restless. He asked uncomfortable questions that no one could answer." (*The Butlerian Jihad*, 300)

This passage is one of only a handful in the series that gives the reader a glimpse of the Titans before their transformation into cymeks, and Agamemnon is one of only a few Titans whose human names the reader learns. He is joined by other Titan cymeks who give themselves monikers after similarly powerful figures, like Juno, the Roman goddess, and Xerxes, the ancient Persian king.

At the same time, we are introduced to the Titan Agamemnon, we meet Vorian Atreides, a fully human son of Agamemnon. He is one of at least a dozen human men spawned from the Titan Agamemnon's sperm and a female human slave. Vorian is the only one who has been deemed worthy of living this long, both for his general skill and for his loyalty to machines over humans. We are later treated to how he started the famous House Atreides and even the Bene Gesserit. As the direct descendant of the Titan Agamemnon, it would be expected that Vorian would be referring to his father when waxing poetic about his strong heritage and connections to Agamemnon. However, we quickly learn that this is not the case for his descendants.

The name "Atreides" is first used for Vorian, not the Titan Agamemnon. Vorian is first mentioned by his father, who simply calls him "my son Vorian" (*The Butlerian Jihad*, 55). But a few pages later he is introduced by the narrator with his full name, "Vorian Atreides" (57). There is no indication as to how he took on this last name. When he meets Serena Butler, presumably the first free human he has ever met, she seems to already know his full name as she greets him as "Vorian Atreides" (*The Butlerian Jihad*, 378). She could only have learned this name after being captured by the machines and being sent to the robot Erasmus' villa where she meets Vorian. Hence, it seems Vorian already used Atreides as a last name before his defection to the humans.

Are we the readers supposed to imagine that the Titan Agamemnon gave him this name? As previously mentioned, the Titan Agamemnon's human name was Andrew Skouros, so it is not as if Atreides was a "family" name passed on from father to son. Is it possible then that the name

Atreides, just like the name Agamemnon, was assumed by the Titan just for its mythic connotations? This possibility seems to be precluded by the fact that we are told by the narrator that Vorian "could trace his lineage back past the Time of Titans, thousands of years to the House of Atreus in ancient Greece and another famous Agamemnon" (*The Butlerian Jihad* 2002, 57). This seems to be an explicit statement not only that Vorian was descended from the Agamemnon of Greek myth, but that *that* Agamemnon should also be considered as real in the *Dune* universe. It is potentially significant, in this case, that the name "Andrew Skouros" has a certain Greek ring to it. Andrew is the anglicized version of the Greek name Andreas (Ανδρέας), used in both ancient and modern Greece (Hanks et. al., 2006). *Skouros* (σκούρος) is a Greek adjective meaning "dark," or "shadowy," although it is not used in names ("Σκούρος," 2022). This choice of name thus seems to leave open the possibility that the Titan Agamemnon came from a human family with Greek roots that traced its lineage back to king Agamemnon of Mycenae. In this case, the decision on the part of Andrew to take on the name Agamemnon and then (much later) give his son the family name Atreides would not have been arbitrary, but rather a deliberate call back to his family's roots.

But the books won't let us off that easy. The problem with this picture is that it puts the burden of proof on the Titan Agamemnon. Whatever Vorian thinks he knows about his lineage would have come from his father. But the Titan's trustworthiness as a historian is explicitly called into question. Indeed, it is partly by learning about discrepancies between his father's and Omnius' accounts of the wars between the machines and humans that leads Vorian to defecting (*The Butlerian Jihad* 2002, 488-489). It is therefore reasonable to question whatever Vorian thinks he knows about his lineage from his father.

Our purpose here is not to argue which of these two scenarios is more likely or is what the authors intended. Rather it is to demonstrate that from the very origins of House Atreides in *The Butlerian Jihad*, there is reason for the reader to be uncertain what they are supposed to believe about the connection between the two Agamemnons. The possibility is raised that the Titan Agamemnon, and thus all of House Atreides, are descendants of a real king Agamemnon of Mycenae. But at the same time, we as readers are given reason enough to doubt this.

3.2 *The Question of in-text Awareness*

This first issue concerns what we as readers are supposed to think about the two Agamemnons. The second issue we will discuss is what the characters think. The basic question is, are the characters in the *Dune* universe aware of this doubling of Agamemnons? Given that the Titan Agamemnon is present for the action of the chronologically first three books, the

question may seem obtuse. However, in many places, the books leave plenty of room for ambiguity as to which Agamemnon is being referred to.

In fact, there is only one instance where the existence of two Agamemnon's is explicitly acknowledged. This is in the passage that introduces Vorian quoted above:

> Born from a female slave impregnated with Agamemnon's preserved sperm, dark-haired Vorian could trace his lineage back past the Time of Titans, thousands of years to the House of Atreus in ancient Greece and another famous Agamemnon. (*The Butlerian Jihad*, 57)

In the above passage, the Agamemnon of ancient Greek myth is specifically referred to as "another" Agamemnon, in contrast to the Titan of the same name.

In most cases, when a character refers to Agamemnon, it is clear that they believe they are referring to the mythical Agamemnon. The characters in the *Dune* universe are certainly aware of Earth's ancient past. Repeated references are made to ancient peoples and individuals such as the Egyptians (*The Butlerian Jihad*) and the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurnaṣirpal (*God Emperor of Dune* 131), as well as ideas such as Feng Shui (*House Atreides* 434), and the Indian concept of Maya or "illusion" (*Children of Dune* 107), to name a few. Despite this depth of knowledge, there appears to be continued confusion over the existence of an ancient Greek Agamemnon as more than a character in a story.

Nowhere is this more clear than the opening scene of *House Atreides*, in which a performance of the play *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus is staged.[4] Aeschylus (c. 525-455 BCE) was an ancient Greek tragedian and his *Agamemnon*, first put on in 458 BCE, depicted the return of Agamemnon from Troy and his murder at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra. At the beginning of *House Atreides*, the reader is told that the performance of the play is an annual tradition for the Atreides. We are then given a snapshot of the performance:

[4] For a discussion of the reception of Aeschylus in *Dune*, see Rogers 2017

> 'Suffering is the great teacher of Men,' the chorus of old actors said as they stood on the stage, their voices in perfect unison. Though the performers were simple villagers from the town below Castle Caladan, they had rehearsed well for the annual performance of the official House Play. Their costumes were colorful, if not entirely authentic. The props – the facade of Agamemnon's palace, the flagstoned courtyard – showed a realism based only on enthusiasm and a few filmbook snap-shots of ancient Greece. The long play by Aeschylus had already gone on for some time... (Dune: House Atreides, 23-24)

The quoted phrase appears to be the rendering of a famous line (180) of the play: *πάθει μάθος* (pathei mathos*)*: "learning (comes from) suffering," which became proverbial.[5] In addition to the performance of the play by itself, the story of *Agamemnon* appears to be a large part of how the Atreides family thinks of themselves and their own history. In ruminating to himself, Duke Leto Atreides is said to have "shuddered as he thought of the play *Agamemnon*, and the curse of Atreus that had dogged his family since the dawn of history" (*House Atreides* 2001, 470). The introduction of this real ancient Greek play into the mythos of House Atreides, therefore, highlights the tension between myth and history that we are examining here. For it seems that the play is treated as an historical drama about the Atreides' ancestors. The added detail that the set design was based on images from ancient Greece may support this view.

And there are many indications throughout the *Prelude to Dune* series that the Atreides view this story portrayed by Aeschylus as family history. In *House Harkonnen* (2000), Duke Leto laments that House Atreides is undoubtedly cursed, and has been "since the days of Agamemnon" (680). A deepening of the family connection to Agamemnon is also evident in the name Leto gives to his young son, Paul:

> Taking his son in his strong hands, Duke Leto lifted the baby high. "Citizens of Caladan, meet your next ruler–*Paul Orestes Atreides*!" The name had been chosen to honor Leto's father Paulus, while the middle name, Orestes, commemorated the son of Agamemnon in the House of Atreus, thought to be the forerunner of House Atreides (*House Corrino*, 655).

As previously discussed, Orestes is the son of Agamemnon in the ancient Greek story. However, the passage suggests that he and his father were the forerunners of House Atreides, and therefore were real people, who started the Atreides line. In the *Dune* universe, there is indeed an

[5] Translation is our own.

Agamemnon who had a son who then began what would be known as House Atreides. But they are distinctly different from the ancient Agamemnon and his son Orestes.

In F. Herbert's original series, there are several references to an Agamemnon, and two of these are clearly to the one from ancient Greek mythology. These both come from the mouth of Leto II in *God Emperor of Dune* (1987). The first is in a passage in the *Stolen Journals* where Leto is speaking to the audience, he knows will eventually read them. Here he declares: "My paternal grandfather was *The Atreides*, descendant of the House of Atreus and tracing his ancestry directly back to the Greek original" (13). The second comes from an imagined dialogue Leto has with himself, where he states: "Through my father's line and the others, I have gone right back to the House of Atreus" (183). From these references, the reader learns that Leto II traces his ancestry back to a House of Atreus and Agamemnon specifically, which he considers to be "Greek."

In these cases, a character is obviously referring to the ancient Greek Agamemnon. In fact, in the *Prelude to Dune* series and F. Herbert's series, there are no clear references to the Titan Agamemnon. One obvious explanation for this may be that the series about the machine war was the last to be written. Without knowing how much of the prequel series is inspired by topics included in F. Herbert's notes, we could assume that the Titan Agamemnon did not exist before *The Bulerian Jihad* was published in 2002. However, regardless of authorial intent, once the reader becomes aware of the potential existence of two Agamemnon's in the Atreides line, many of the references to Agamemnon become ambiguous.

For example, when Leto I sees the body of his first son Victor lying in a morgue, he remarks: "There can be no doubt now [...] House Atreides is cursed... and has been since the days of Agamemnon" (*House Harkonnen,* 680). While this can be read as a reference to the tradition of the curse of the House of Atreus in Greek myth, the idea also applies to the Titan Agamemnon and his son Vorian, both of whom could be considered cursed; the former for become a cymek and enemy of humanity and the latter for being in responsible for the deaths of billions of humans in his extermination campaign against the Synchronized Worlds.

The two other references to Agamemnon from F. Herbert's original series can also be read as ambiguous. In *Children of Dune* (1987), when Alia suffers the assault of her Other Memories that leads her to cede control to the memory of Baron Harkonnen, the only voice that is explicitly named is Agamemnon: "I, Agamemnon, your ancestor, demand audience!" (60). Chronologically later comes the passage where Ghanima is scolding Irulan for not knowing her history:

> We Atreides go back to Agamemnon and we know what's in our blood. Never forget that, childless wife of my father. We Atreides have a bloody history and we're not through with the blood (*Children of Dune* 1987, 287).

Again, in both cases there is room to question which Agamemnon the characters are referring to. The other memory in Alia's head could be either given that they are both her ancestors. And both the figure of myth and the Titan could be said to have started "a bloody history."

This then is the Agamemnon Problem. The doubling of Agamemnons in the lineage of the Atreides creates a situation that leads readers to question the validity of the Atreides' claims and moreover to question what the Atreides' themselves think about their lineage. Our goal in tracing this problem is to highlight another way in which the books deal with the theme of myth-making and its consequences. The existence of two Agamemnons in the Dune universe, especially with one who outside of the books could be considered 'mythical,' sheds light on the ways in which humans view the past and incorporate it into their present, and how myths can come to be viewed as reality, and real events and people as mythical.

4. Problematizing the Problem

In the preceding section, we presented the Agamemnon Problem as insoluble from the characters' perspective; while we the readers know about the two Agamemnons, there is hardly any proof that the characters do as well. This is the ambiguity that we find so fascinating; over the course of history, the boundary between myth and history can be easily elided.

Our discussion thus far has mostly been focused on the Atreides themselves and what they knew of their own "lineage." However, the Butlerian Jihad was common knowledge, and a further layer of complexity is added to our argument when we address the question of what in general was known about the Butlerian Jihad by the time we get to the action of the *House* series and Frank Herbert's original series. There are numerous references to the war with the Machines by characters in the original series and the reader is obviously meant to understand that most people knew about it, especially through the command: "Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a human mind!" preserved in the O.C. Bible. Yet given that it occurred 10,000 years before the action of the original *Dune* series, how detailed was their knowledge?

One potential answer is that at least some people should have been aware of the Titan Agamemnon. The *Butlerian Jihad* begins thus: "Princess Irulan writes: 'Any true student must realize that History has no beginning. Regardless of where a story starts, there are always earlier heroes and earlier tragedies'" (*The Butlerian Jihad* 2002, 1). The conceit is that the opening

chapter of this book, which gives a general overview of the rise of the Titans and then the machines, is taken from one of the writings of Irulan. But in our much-discussed passage from *Children of Dune*, Irulan is shown to be ignorant of the name Agamemnon when Ghanima mentions him. How can this be if she wrote about the Butlerian Jihad?

One obvious answer is that she only learned of the Titan Agamemnon and wrote her work on the Jihad after the events described in *Children of Dune*. Having (miraculously) survived all the events of first Paul's, then Leto II's rise to power, Irulan apparently lived out her life peacefully. It is easy to imagine that, after Leto II secured his place as emperor, Irulan retired to a life of research and writing. In various chapter epigrams, she is mentioned as the author of no less than 22 separate works, and so there is no reason she could not have authored one on the Butlerian Jihad.[6] [7] One imaginable scenario therefore is that someone like Irulan, with access to Imperial and Bene Gesserit archives, could have uncovered accurate information about both Agamemnons. The general public and even House Atreides could have relegated both to "the distant past," only preserving the name of one figure. This is of course an unanswerable question, but our point is that the fact that Irulan seems to have written a history of the Jihad mentioning the Cymek Agamemnon does not mean that everyone, including the Atreides themselves, would have been aware of the Cymek Agamemnon.

The other source for information about the past that we must address here is the Other Memory of the Bene Gesserit sisters and of Alia, Paul Atreides, and his children. In the *Dune* universe, the Bene Gesserit sisters gain the ability to access the memories of all their female ancestors through the initiation ritual by which they become Reverend Mothers. Paul Atreides, as the Kwisatz Haderach, has the ability to access all the memories of both male and female ancestors, a power shared by his sister Alia, and his children Ghanima and Leto II.[8] It is this

[6] Assuming Collected Sayings of Muad'dib and Sayings of Muad'dib are the same work, and likewise for Conversations with Muad'dib and Muad'dib: Conversations

[7] Though interestingly, it is to Harq al-Ada that an epigram in Children of Dune (395) from a work titled The Butlerian Jihad is attributed. This is the name given by Leto II to Farad'n, the grandson of Shaddam IV and eventual husband to Ghanima. At the end of Children of Dune, when Farad'n is forced to become Ghanima's consort and rechristened, he is also tasked by Leto II to become the official scribe of the Atreides and no less than 17 works are attributed to him in epigrams.

[8] As we learn from Reverend Mother Mohiam:

> 'We look down so many avenues of the past...but only feminine avenues.' Her voice took on a note of sadness. 'Yet, there's a place where no Truthsayer can see. We are repelled by it, terrorized. It is said a man will come one day and find in the gift of the drug his inward eye. He will look where we cannot—into both feminine and masculine pasts.'
> 'Your Kwisatz Haderach?' (*Dune*, 15)

ability that leads to the attitude captured in the epigram we use at the start of this article, that the Bene Gesserit have no need for archaeologists (or, we might add, historians) because they have access to the actual experiences of their ancestors since the beginning of humanity. It is therefore reasonable to ask how any sort of historical confusion could arise for people with this ability; to put it another way, did they not have ancestors who lived at the time of the Butlerian Jihad and potentially in ancient Greece?

In fact, we are given a demonstration of a Bene Gesserit sister using her Other Memory to fact check something from ancient history, specifically something about ancient Greece. In *Chapterhouse: Dune* (1987), Odrade, now Mother Superior, meets the disgraced sister Dortjula and learns she has a hobby:

> Odrade thought most interests boring but found it significant that Dortjula called hers a hobby. She collected old coins, did she?
> "What kind?"
> "I have two early Greek in silver and a perfect gold obol."
> "Authentic?"
> "They're real." Meaning she had done a self-scan of Other Memory to authenticate them (Chapterhouse Dune, 145).

We learn several important things from this exchange. Firstly, actual physical objects, here coins, from Old Earth have survived until the present of the books. Secondly, we see Other Memory in action: Dortjula has evidently looked back through her Other Memories to find someone who lived in ancient Greece who can confirm that indeed the coins that Dortjula possesses are genuine. A corollary to this that has important implications for our question is that we are given a mechanism whereby someone like Dortjula could "remember" either stories about the mythical king Agamemnon if he is supposed to be mythical, or memories of the actual king if he is supposed to be real. Furthermore, people with Other Memory should be able to remember the Titan Agamemnon and be able to distinguish him from the Agamemnon of ancient Greece. Whether this is the case or not is in the end immaterial; we as readers do not see Other Memory being used for this purpose, so the ambiguity remains.

5. Real World Examples

As we have said, what makes the doubling of Agamemnons in the *Dune* universe particularly interesting is that it mirrors, intentionally or not, the ways in which people throughout history have reused names, and the ways in which people pass between myth and history. The following examples are by no means meant to be exhaustive, rather we merely wish to point out two key

instances of this phenomenon from our areas of expertise in ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern history.

Perhaps no Near Eastern king is as widely known as Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. His fame, or rather infamy, is largely due to his role in Jewish history, where he is known as the destroyer of the Kingdom of Judah leading to the Babylonian exile. Under his rule, Babylon was the seat of an empire that rivaled that of the Assyrians, becoming the commercial and political center of the ancient Near East. In fact, our image of a grand Babylonian capital city is largely due to his extensive building projects (Beaulieu 2017). From the framework of his success, it is no wonder that he takes on a larger-than-life persona in our modern world. However, he is actually one of three Mesopotamian rulers to have had the name Nebuchadnezzar. As each new Nebuchadnezzar appeared on the scene, the mythologized version of their stories took on more weight, even in the ancient world.

It is not clear after whom Nebuchadnezzar II was named, if anyone. Nebuchadnezzar I ruled as the fourth king of the Second Dynasty of Isin in the 12th century BCE. He is known primarily for his victory over Elam and the return of the statue of the god Marduk to its rightful place. Nebuchadnezzar II and Nebuchadnezzar I are unrelated. It is another Nebuchadnezzar, who was ruler of Uruk under the reign of Ashurbanipal in the seventh century BCE who was likely the grandfather of Nebuchadnezzar II. This familial character was not the subject of renewed interest during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II. Rather, it was Nebuchadnezzar I. Ultimately, in the narrative the Babylonians were trying to write, it did not matter which Nebuchadnezzar was the hero of the story.

The mythologizing of "King Nebuchadnezzar" began in earnest during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II. To mythologize a real person is to make them abstract, to eventually ignore the name of the individual altogether in favor of an image that can be conjured in connection with multiple real people (Sack 2004). In the case of Nebuchadnezzars I and II, it is clear to see where that would be possible. The biggest threat to the Neo-Babylonian Empire were the Persians, an outside non-native foe with the potential to compromise important Babylonian traditions and customs. In crafting the narrative of the rightful heirs to Babylon fighting against outsiders, the Babylonians turned to the exploits of Nebuchadnezzar I, easily equating Elam and Persia (Nielsen 2015). While the achievements of Nebuchadnezzar I were aligned with those of Nebuchadnezzar II, beginning the abstraction of the great king, the process became more involved in Greek sources.

The historian Megasthenes of the third and fourth centuries BCE writes of a king Nebuchadnezzar, without stating which one. He attributes superhuman attributes to this king, including building the walls of Babylon in just 15 days (Sack 2004). Megasthenes also claims that his version of Nebuchadnezzar lived during the time of Belus, who was considered by some Hellenistic sources to be the first king in the Mesopotamian region after the creation (Sack 2004). For authors like Megasthenes it didn't matter that there were no specifics around which Nebuchadnezzar was being referred to, or that his feats were impossible to have achieved. What mattered was the ability to pick some historical fact and relate it well enough to established tradition to create the myth of the great king Nebuchadnezzar. There were three Nebuchadnezzars who lived and ruled in Mesopotamia. As time marched on, it mattered less which achievements belonged to whom. What became important was the narrative and the sense of connection to the past the narrative forged.

The previous example mirrors what we argue is happening in the *Dune* universe: someone taking on or calling back to a prestigious name for their own gain. But the case of Marcus Junius Brutus, one of the assassins of Julius Caesar, illustrates that identification with a real or fictitious predecessor is not always beneficial for an individual. Marcus Junius Brutus (c. 85–42 BCE), or just Brutus as he is more commonly known thanks to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, was a Roman politician, military commander, and erstwhile ally of Julius Caesar. He is perhaps most well-known now for his "betrayal" when he joined the conspiracy against Caesar and was one of the men who assassinated him in 44 BCE. What interests us here is one of the tactics that, according to our sources, was used to persuade him to turn against Caesar. For Brutus was not the first Junius Brutus in the annals of Roman history. Roman tradition held that a Lucius Junius Brutus was one of the main actors in the abolition of the monarchy in Rome and its re-foundation, in 509 BCE, as a Republic (Livy 1.56.7-60.4). As one of the founders of the Republic, the name Junius Brutus therefore had a large amount of cultural cache by the time Caesar's rise to power seemed to presage the Republic's end.

It is for this reason that those who were unhappy with Caesar's rule capitalized on the similarity of their names and possible connection to urge Marcus Junius Brutus to stand against Caesar. According to the biography of Brutus written by Plutarch (c. 46– 119 CE), some denied that Marcus was the actual descendent of Lucius (Plutarch, *Brutus* 1.4). Regardless, our sources agree that many accepted the relation, and began urging Brutus to emulate his famous namesake. In particular, graffiti began appearing on a statue of Lucius Junius Brutus calling Marcus unworthy of his supposed ancestor (Plutarch, *Brutus* 9.3; Appian *Civil Wars* 2.112; Cassius Dio 44.11.4-12.3).

We can never know how much this tactic actually affected Brutus' decision to join the conspiracy against Caesar. What is important to us is that it provides a real-world example of another way in which people use names to make connections through time. Whether or not Lucius Junius Brutus actually existed or did all that was attributed to him, or whether Marcus was actually descended from him is immaterial. The fact remains that, to the best of our knowledge, people did actually draw a meaningful connection between the two and tried to use that for their political advantage. Moreover, even now when we look back at Roman history, it is almost impossible to bring up one Lucius Brutus without mentioning the other. The significance of their connection, whether fictitious or not, still remains.

6. Conclusions

As a giant of the science fiction and fantasy world, *Dune* has been the subject of many inquiries into its role as a modern myth-making tool. However, many of these studies focus on the existence of references to known historical figures and concepts rather than their implications for how these works reflect actual history-making processes. *Dune* and its accompanying stories can be understood as modern classics, central to the canon of science fiction in the twentieth century. Science fiction as a genre speculates on the possibilities of the future and how humanity finds its place in that future, much like how ancient myths serve to explain humanity's experience in the world (James 1994). In a sense, science fiction and historical writing are two sides of the same coin in that those who write history and the authors of our modern science fiction novels are storytellers and world-builders, defining spaces, people, and cultures for those who do not have the privilege of being present. In this article, we have taken a deep dive into the use of the figure Agamemnon in the *Dune* universe to highlight the complexity of myth and history creation that is a hallmark of these books and of science fiction in general.

The Agamemnon Problem leads us to wonder as readers and as ancient historians whether the abstraction of Agamemnon for the characters in the *Dune* universe can be taken as evidence of a uniquely human approach to history-making, noting the similarities between science fiction and history in how they reveal our understanding of human knowledge (Rogers and Stevens 2015). It is often ambiguous for the reader which Agamemnon is being referred to in a given moment, either the cymek or the mythical Greek figure. This mirrors reality in that when it comes to people's relation to the past, we tend to find connection based on identity, difference, continuity, and change rather than any kind of inert factuality (Freedman 2000). History can be researched and written as a method of understanding our present moment. So, too, is the case with science fiction. It appears that in each instance of his reference, Agamemnon is serving a

purpose for the characters in their present moment, much like Nebuchadnezzar and Brutus did at various points throughout history.

As we continue to study the relationship between ancient history and science fiction, we can perhaps find a new avenue forward as historians through incorporating the ways in which authors of modern myth-like stories are inspired by and, in fact, replicate mechanisms of storytelling and history-making. Beyond acknowledging the connection between the two genres, we as historians can more deeply embrace it in our research and teaching by recognizing science fiction as a form of history-writing, but for a past that has yet to occur. Accidental or not, the existence of the Agamemnon Problem brings this epistemological connection into focus and serves as a concrete example of the ways in which humans construct both realistic and imagined pasts.

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