

The Poetics of Euripides' Trojan Women: unity, rhetoric and pathos

No good work whatever can be perfect, and the demand for perfection
is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art.

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In Euripides' *Troades*, the Greek herald Talthybios weeps for Andromache as she leaves Troy in mourning, farewelling Hector's tomb and begging her new husband to bury her young son (Tr. 1130-35). In translating the play, this scene drew tears from me as well.² Such is the emotional force of *Troades* wrought by its timeless themes of war, death, loss, human will and the capacity for suffering – an emotional force widely recognised by scholars (see Conacher 1970, p 138 and Heath 1987, p 111) and felt by modern audiences alike (Lee 1976, p xxv). Indeed, one can only imagine that the ancient audience - for whom the threat of war, destruction and enslavement was more real - would have also been moved by *Troades*.

On this account, if one accepts that the primary purpose (or pleasure) of Greek tragedy is to effect emotion, as Aristotle seems to consider³ (*Poetics* 1149b 27-28) and Heath concurs (1987, p 35), then we would expect *Troades* to be thought a great tragedy and art-work. In fact, despite wide recognition of the emotional power of the play, *Troades* has oft been considered poorly (see Dunn 1996, p101). Historically, criticism of *Troades* has been directed at its unusual structure and form (Barlow 1986, p 30), which has led to views that the play is episodic and disconnected i.e. a mess (Haigh 1896, p 300), and thus dramatically flawed. More recently, the play has been criticised for its rhetorical scenes which are argued to lessen its pathos (see Scodel 1980, p11). This essay examines the basis and weight of these two criticisms. I argue that the first is too entrenched in a belief that the best tragedy must conform to the structure set down by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, and that the second fails to take full account of the emotional effect of reason. I conclude

¹ *The Stones of Venice*, Volume II.

² Aristotle says that tragic plots should be constructed so that even without seeing the play one shudders and feels pity hearing (reading) of the happenings (*Poetics* 53b5-6).

³ Specifically, Aristotle refers to tragedy evoking the emotions of pity and fear.

in accord with *Troades*' many apologists as typified by Barlow who contends that the play is 'neither a soggy emotional mess nor an art-form weighed down by too much rhetoric' (1986, p36).

The great testament of Aristotle has been his ability to influence the thoughts of men through the ages, even some 2,400 years after his death. His *Poetics* has been particularly influential in the Western approach to poetry and drama, and it would appear that many long-standing criticisms of *Troades* are in deference to this text. (Heath 1996, p viii)

The *Poetics* set out Aristotle's views on both the proper effect of tragedy (*Poetics* 1149b27-28) and the construction of the best tragedies (*Poetics* 1452b27-1454a15). The introduction to this essay noted that the emotional force of *Troades* is widely recognised, even by its critics (Scodel 1980, p11). Who indeed would not pity Hecuba having to bury her grandson (Tr 1156-1250), or fear the same fate themselves? In this then, *Troades* accords with Aristotle's views on the proper effect of tragedy.

However, the construction of *Troades* does not appear to match the qualities set down by Aristotle as marking the best tragedies. In the first instance, because *Troades* is composed of a series of scenes between Hecuba and her daughters (natural and in-law) which are not causally connected, the play is often seen to have what Aristotle called an episodic plot⁴, which he considers the worst kind (*Poetics* 1451b 33-35). That is to say, the plot is considered not to represent a single unified action as it is felt that the various scenes of *Troades* could be transposed or removed without any discernible effect (*Poetics* 1451a30-35). Second, because of the static nature of *Troades* – the Trojan women begin and end the play as wretched captives – it is often considered not to have reversals of fortune and scenes of recognition which Aristotle sees as key elements in the best tragic plots (*Poetics* 1452a 22 – 1452b8). Third, the pain upon pain inflicted on the Trojan

⁴ Aristotle considers an episodic plot to be one in which the sequence of episodes is neither necessary nor probable (*Poetics* 1451b 33-35).

women, without any obvious error (*hamartia*),⁵ would appear, according to Aristotle, to be an imitation of events that are more sickening than piteous and fearful (*Poetics* 1452b28 – 1453a6).

This discord between *Troades* and the *Poetics* is emphasised by other extant tragedies such as *Oedipus*, which seem to neatly fit the mould set by Aristotle (a ‘model’ tragedy for Aristotle himself – *Poetics* 1452a 22 – 1452b8). Thus the authority of Aristotle has provided a sure foundation for criticism of *Troades* as dramatically flawed because of its comparatively episodic, static yet harrowing plot. The tacit implication of such criticism is that, despite the emotional power of *Troades* as written, it could have been bettered were it to conform to the rules laid out by Aristotle.

There are however two weaknesses to this dependence on Aristotle to criticise *Troades*. First, it can equally be argued that despite superficial differences *Troades* and the *Poetics* are in fact consistent (see Heath 1987, pp 109-111). Second, one can question the absolute authority of Aristotle and argue for the unity of the play on its own terms (Conacher 1970 p138).

Arguing that *Troades* is in fact consistent with the *Poetics* is not difficult – particularly if one accepts that *Troades* need not look the same as ‘model’ plays such as *Oedipus*. Heath has shown that the sequences of scenes in *Troades* are ordered according to probability (why should Hecuba not chance upon her daughters as they all wait to be allotted and led way?) and thus represent a unified action (1987, p 109-111). Moreover, any number of scenes in which the feint hopes of Hecuba are dashed (as when Hecuba hopes for Astyanax’s sons to resettle Troy again, Tr 701-05, only for Talthybios to enter and announce the boy’s death, Tr 709-19) could be taken as reversals, and recognition where Hecuba comes to understand that Polyxena is dead (Tr. 624-25) or that Helen will

⁵ Although in the context of the trilogy which *Troades* completes, the error or misjudgement leading to this suffering may be traced to the first play, the *Alexandros*, in which the Trojans ignore the warning of the oracle of Apollo not to raise Paris as he would be the destruction of Troy (Barlow 1986, p 28).

not be punished (Tr. 1051⁶). And finally, Aristotle himself permits tragedies of suffering that focus on actions of pain and destruction (*Poetics* 1452b9-13).

While the *Poetics* cannot be ignored in any serious study of tragedy, Aristotle's views of tragedy are by no means 'faultless or uncontroversial' (Heath 1996, p viii), and after all, they are only Aristotle's opinions of how the best tragedy is to be composed. It is thus reasonable for scholars to ask themselves why they feel *Troades* is a great tragedy, rather than being constrained to ask if Aristotle would consider it to be a great tragedy.

The common conclusion of those who are prepared to approach *Troades* on its own terms (see Dunn 1996, p101) is that its 'beauty and appeal' is derived not from details of plot and character but skilfully worked pathos (Grube 1961, p 282). The pathos of *Troades* is founded upon its 'parade of misery' (Anderson 1997, p168). However, Euripides has presented a parade that is neither a disconnected and incoherent assault on the emotions, nor a horrifying spectacle that becomes disgusting.

Euripides has given the play structural unity by the constant presence of Hecuba, who becomes the epitome of Trojan suffering, the Queen bearing the sorrows of her country (Barlow 1986, p 32), and also by the pervasion of metres (antiphony and bipartite progression), images (voyages and marriage), themes (contrast between past and present, vengeance, praise for the dead) and stylistic devices (cries, questions, repetition) which would have recalled ritual laments to the ancient audience (Suter 2003, p 3). The scenes themselves form a logical and probable progression of farewells (Anderson 1997, p 159), and are given the 'impression of continuity and movement' through the use of allusions to foreshadow the 'unfolding pattern of events'⁷ (Heath 1987, pp109-11), and also by the 'rhythm of hope and despair' (Conacher 1970, p 139). This rhythm also breaks up the litany of sorrows (Lee 1976, p xviii), and along with the threat of retribution hanging over the head of the Greeks (Tr 77- 97), and the emotional relief provided by the Chorus

⁶ I interpret Hecuba's words 'οὐκ ἔστ' ἔραστής ὅστις οὐκ ἀεὶ φιλεῖ' as her recognition that Menelaus will not punish Helen. Indeed the chorus appear to reflect this recognition in their next ode, when they lament Zeus betraying them in this way (Tr. 1060-70).

⁷ Poseidon's view in the prologue of the death of Polyxena, the marriage of Cassandra, and Helen amongst the prisoners is a good example of this foreshadowing,

(Kitto 1961, p 216) and the agon (Lee 1976, p xxii), allows Euripides to build emotional force without the play becoming a sickening spectacle. In the end, we are left with an ‘impression of completeness which no mere series of episodes could evoke’ (Conacher 1970, p 138).

So much for the unity of *Troades*. Now to the criticism that rhetorical aspects of *Troades* undermine its emotional force.

Troades includes many passages of a rhetorical nature – the agon between Helen and Hecuba (obviously) (Tr 914-965 and 969-1032), and the rhesis of Cassandra (Tr 353-405) and Andromache (Tr 634-683) are the most commonly cited examples (see Scodel 1980, pp 119-21, Conacher 1970, p 142 and Lloyd 1992, p 94). Helen’s defence, for instance, is made up of sign-posting of argument (Tr 916-18, 931), logical analysis (Tr 919-922), rhetorical questions (Tr 946-47) and anticipation of counter-arguments (Tr 949-954) – indeed her whole defence follows the traditional four part division of rhetorical speeches: proem, narrative, proof and epilogue (McDonald 2007, p 481). Hecuba’s accusation is similarly rational and argumentative, while Cassandra and Andromache logically analyse ‘abstract ideas’ about the effect of war and the lot of women (Lloyd 1992, p 94).

In principle, rhetoric is not out of place in tragedy, nor is it inconsistent with the production of emotion. Aristotle lists reasoning (διάνοια) as one of the six component parts of tragedy (*Poetics* 1450a), by which he basically means rhetoric as he explicitly defers discussion of reasoning in the *Poetics* to his *Rhetoric* (*Poetics* 1456a). Indeed rhetoric is a common feature in all the 5th century tragedians, and would appear to have become even more prevalent in the 4th century (McDonald 2007, p 485). Moreover, it is clear that rhetoric was recognised and widely used as a means of arousing emotions by the Greeks and Romans alike. Many ancient manuals, such as Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*,⁸

⁸ Aristotle lists pathos as one of the three artistic (*techai*) modes of persuasion (*Rhetoric*, 1355b 35 – 65a 4).

devote considerable attention to examining the nature of emotions and providing instruction on how to excite them by reasoned argument (see Konstan, 2007).

However, the impact of rhetoric in *Troades* is disputed. Barlow maintains that it contributes to the total force of the play by balancing 'purely emotional and reasoned utterance' (1986, p 31). And Scodel (whom Barlow is mainly responding to) argues that the 'dry and analytic rhetoric' in *Troades* is 'inappropriate to both character and situations' and is 'destructive to a fully pathetic effect' (1980, p 11).

Scodel's view is somewhat surprising given that Greek tragedy is recognised to be of a highly rhetorical nature in general, and Euripides in particular (Conacher 1981, pp 3-4, and Heath 1987, p 135). For, if rhetoric is thought to undermine *Troades*, it would similarly undermine the whole tragic genre - unless one can systematically demonstrate that rhetoric is more prevalent or destructive in *Troades*, which Scodel has not done⁹ (nor anyone else that I am aware of).

Leaving aside this structural concern¹⁰, let me examine Scodel's argument on its own merits. Certainly Aristotle says that consistency is one of the four things poets should aim at in portraying characters (*Poetics*, 1454a). And for modern audiences it is indeed incongruous for a grief-stricken character such as Hecuba to launch into a long rhetorical speech and show a rationalism and self-possession not previously evident (Lee 1976, pxxii). Yet for ancient audiences this would not have been so. In the oral world of the ancient Greeks, rhetoric had independent literary and aesthetic value to the audience (Heath 1987, p 133) quite apart from character development.¹¹ From an artistic point of

⁹ Scodel merely states that rhetoric *may* be carried further in *Troades* than any other of Euripides extant plays (1980, p11, my italics). This would appear to be a key assumption supporting Scodel's broader thesis of *Troades* being part of a tightly-knit trilogy with *Alexandros* and *Palamedes* which is concerned more with a range of intellectual problems rather than emotion (1980, p138).

¹⁰ This weakness points to a more general concern about how modern scholars and critics should approach Greek tragedy. Heath would argue that both Scodel and Barlow are applying modern viewpoints in assuming that rhetoric must contribute to the plot, character, theme, and emotion. He warns that such a viewpoint carries the risk of 'interpolating alien meaning or losing the meaning intended by the author and apt to the genre' (1987, p 133).

¹¹ Moreover, as litigants were expected to speak for themselves in Greek law courts, it is entirely probable for the distressed Queen to set aside her personal grief and cogently seek justice from Menelaus. Granted

view, it should be remembered that tragic poets combined a number of techniques to create a powerful tragedy – Aristotle says that tragedy has six component parts which determine its quality: plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle and lyric poetry (*Poetics*, 1450a). In combining components to produce the greatest overall tragic effect, it is not necessary that each part be extended to its fullest limit, nor that all parts are in perfect harmony. Thus characters may be given rhetorical skills, which, while inconsistent with portrayal of character, are necessary to coherently express important themes in the play (1992, p94).

Themes expressed in *Troades* through rhetoric relate to war, life and death, the lot of women and allotment of blame. The raving prophetess, Cassandra, sees beyond the current scene and relate her vision (which no-one else could have) of destruction for the house of Atreus and the ambiguity of war (Tr 353-405). Andromache (Tr 634-683) speaks of the merits of death over life (in order to comfort Hecuba, who has just learned of Polyxena's death), and this argument is supported by analysis of her role as women and wife, which Barlow sees as germane since it is because she is a good wife that Andromache's dilemma between old and new husband is intensified (1986, p 190).¹² And the *agon* (Tr 914-965 and 969-1032) - the most rhetorical part of *Troades* - explores the crucial question of who is responsible for all this suffering. All these themes are relevant to the pathos of the play, and through rhetorical reasoning they can be examined more closely than is possible by plot and character alone.

The relationship between rhetoric and pathos can also be observed through the lens of lament. Suter has found that the imagery, action and emotion, indeed the entire structure of *Troades* is based on ritual lament (2003, pp 11-18) - she finds that even in the rhetorical passages of *Troades* there are elements of lament.¹³ Paradoxically, rhetoric supports the overall focus on lament in *Troades*, since lament is about the 'mediation or reconciliation of opposites' i.e. coming to terms with a new situation (Suter 2003, p 12),

women could not speak for themselves in the courts, but they made appearances via clever use of reported speech – as in Lysias' speech, *Against Diogeiton*.

¹² The tragic problem of women as chattel to Havelock (1968, p 122)

¹³ Suter sees the combination of lament and rhetoric as the basis for Barlow's view that *Troades* balances reason and emotion (2003, p 6).

and rhetoric allows one to clearly set out and explore these opposites. For example, Cassandra explores the differences between victors and vanquished; Andromache, the old and new life; Helen and Hecuba, the allotment of blame (humans or the gods – free-will or determinism). All these explorations are apposite to the situation of the Trojans – in their intense grief the women would naturally ask themselves: what position do I find myself in, what have I lost, what is my fate, who is responsible? By clearly and logically describing and exploring the details of these miserable questions, the rhetorical passages in *Troades* help sharpen our empathy for the Trojan women, and in this it supports rather than undermines the pathos of the play.

Aristotle calls Euripides the most tragic of poets, while simultaneously criticising him as having a faulty technique in many respects (*Poetics* 1452b). This duality is reflected in modern criticisms of *Troades*, which, while acknowledging the emotional force of the play, consider it to be dramatically flawed due to its episodic structure, or weighed down with rhetoric. These criticisms appear to be premised on a belief that the play would be improved by either conforming to Aristotelian notions of plot or removing its rhetoric. I have argued in this essay, that despite its unusual structure *Troades* is in fact a connected and unified play, and its rhetorical passages serve to increase the play's pathos.

Notwithstanding these arguments, I can't help but think they will never convince one who *feels* otherwise. Feeling is, after all, the telos of tragedy, and as Kitto says 'we either feel it or we don't' (1961, p 211). I feel the tragic power of *Troades* - it is the loss of others if they desire more of Euripides.

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