

Fear, Self-Pity, and War in Fifth-Century Athenian Tragedy: Ethos and Education in a Warrior Society

By Maria Arpaia

Abstract: In Greek culture, the natural connection between war and fear was acknowledged since Homer. However, during the Hellenic era (507-323 BC), war began to be represented on the stage in tragedies, in which the connection between war and fear included the emotion of desperation. During the Persian War, in which Athens began the symbol of Greece's freedom, the citizens experienced for the first time war-fear and the anguish over the threat of slavery. The educational task of tragedians, therefore, was twofold: on the one hand, they highlighted the heroic values in order to keep alive in the Athenians the civic duty of defending their homeland; on the other hand, they voiced the war-fear of the people, which had to endure the worst effect of the conflict. This paper will offer insight into the Greek conceptualization of war-related fear in two different historical contexts: in the aftermath of the Persian War, by analysing Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes* (467 b. C.); and during the disastrous Peloponnesian War, by analysing Euripides's *The Trojan Women* (415 b. C.).

Keywords: Greek tragedy, emotions and theatre, Aeschylus, Euripides, educational function of theatre

The emotions in Greek tragedy

The Greek civilization was a warrior society and military conflicts were doubtlessly a relevant aspect of its history. Warfare was such vivid a thing that almost every generation was either forged in war or witnessed it. To the Greeks, war was a periodic event, an institution of social life, and an ineluctable and almost annual necessity to keep some socio-economic balance among the interests of the local communities. War was, therefore, also one of the most popular literary topics used to educate the audience about the warrior ethos, which included heroic values and respect for defeated enemies. The *Iliad* can serve as a good example to illustrate the ethical conception of war among the Greeks.¹ Achilles and his superhuman warrior virtues hold a prominent place in epic storytelling as much as the sacrifice that Hector, the last champion of the enemy, performs for his homeland. Even if the killing of Hector brings a great victory to the Greeks, the focus of the *Iliad* eventually shifts on the desperate reactions of Hector's mother, father, and wife, who cry over his death (Homer, *Iliad*: XXIV, ll. 708-775). Similarly, the funeral of Hector announces the conquest and destruction of Troy but is not described in a triumphalist and celebratory tone: rather, the Trojan women voice the despair and fear for the future of their people through their lamentations.

The Athenians showed particular appreciation, inherited from the epic poem, for the universality of wartime suffering. Also by experiencing the grief and fear of their foes, they could explore their own emotions in wartime, which they mostly did through tragedy staged at Dionysus's theatre.² Beyond any doubt, theatrical performance intensified the empathic reaction of the audience towards the defeated enemy more than listening to the storyteller, also because the visual component of the tragic performance involved the spectators in a synesthetic experience. Greek tragedies often represented the emotive consequences of warfare, including the suffering of the characters and the fear of an uncertain future that the vanquished felt as they were confronted with the perspective of being deported from their homeland, either as slaves or as exiled.

To catch the educative scope of the above-mentioned tragic themes, it is necessary to take into account the pedagogic role of theatre in ancient Greek culture. The *mise-en-scène* of tragedies as a social event represented a way of bringing the community together and investigating topical and controversial matters that concerned society as a whole.

The theatrical performance was an occasion to permit the citizens to experience fear, pity and compassion in a safe way to develop self-awareness. These feelings were stimulated in the spectators by means of a sophisticated mechanism of identification based on displaying emotions on stage. In a crucial passage of the *Poetics* XIV, Aristotle reflects on the importance of involving the audience emotionally:

Pity and fear can derive from the visual (*opsis*), but also from the arrangement of the incidents itself, which is preferable and the mark of a better poet. For the plot ought to be so composed that, even without seeing a performance, one who merely hears what happens will shudder and feel pity as a result of the events – as indeed one would on hearing the plot of the *Oedipus* (14, 1453b 1-7).

Both seeing and hearing involve the formation of mental images and thus poetic speech alone without *opsis* – as Aristotle argues – is capable of arousing in the hearers the kind of emotion that will permit them to identify with the events on stage (Munteanu, *Grief*: 47 and 95-100). Aristotle's approach to emotion in drama and poetry focuses on the importance of *phantasia*, which means imagination, that the philosopher calls "enargheia" or "vividness" (*Poetics*: 1462a, 14-18). The quasi-pictorial representation of a stage, person, or event permits the hearer to form mental images out of a verbal narrative. In Greek narrative, there is no effective distinction between the effects of visual and verbal representation: both aspects possess great power of persuasiveness,

Close Encounters in War Journal – Issue n. 4 (2021): "Close Encounters in War and the Emotions"

engage *phantasia*, and emotional response.³ Longinus, the author of *On the Sublime* (15, 1) underlines that *phantasia* is typically emotional: one feels something that a participant or an eyewitness would feel. The audience feel as though they were seeing the events through the eyes of the characters, but the characters' experience itself comes from the dramatist's imagination. We are in presence of a three-level identification with a very sophisticated process of "emotive reflection". By watching the drama, the audience identify themselves emotionally with the characters and, in turn, recreate sympathetically their first-person perspective in their mind. The elicited audience's experience is not the same as the emotions of the characters imagined by the dramatist, though, because the spectators feel a derivative emotion, some sort of second-degree emotion. The audience's reaction mirrors the emotions embodied by the actors on stage but such perception must necessarily be different in nature because it is filtered through the audience's subjective emotional system. The audience are aware of being safe as to the events performed on stage and empathize with the suffering of the tragic characters. Thus, the spectators feel pity for the disaster that overwhelms the protagonist, and feel terrified before the heinous killings *as if* they were involved in the narrative contest, although they are not. This inevitable cognitive distance from the emotional context on stage marks an important effect on the educative aim of ancient drama. The tragic performance would solicit both the emotional and cognitive spheres. The emotional play of Greek tragedy focused on the audience's two-level reaction to the emotions performed on stage.⁴ Only this kind of "reflective feeling" could catch the similarities and the differences between self-perception and the other-perception and broaden the spectators' standpoint.

In the light of these considerations, one could therefore claim that the external audience of the ancient Greek dramas did not directly empathize with the first-person perspective of the characters: they are suffering on stage, while the spectator does not feel what they are feeling, but rather, as Gorgias states, "a certain experience of their own" (*Encomium of Helen*, 9).⁵ The characters may feel anguish or grief, but the audience would only feel fear and pity.⁶ The tragic emotions of fear and pity are characteristic of a third-person point of view and typical of the bystander's response to suffering. Thus, empathy in ancient Greek drama rooted into an "aesthetic emotion" provoked by the fictional representation on stage and filtered through the spectator's subjective emotions.

A guide to this complex and dynamic system of identification on stage was the Chorus, which not only participated and acted in the drama but also, intentionally or unintentionally, triggered fear and pity in the audience by showing the *choreutēs*' reactions to the events because they acted as internal

spectators of the drama. The *choreutēs* usually embody marginal social groups (women, old men, or slaves) who are excluded from the political life of the community but are nonetheless emotionally involved in the storytelling, so their destiny is strictly connected with the lot of the main characters. In this way, therefore, the Chorus enjoys an apparently contradictory position: external to politics but internal to the plot. The socially marginal position allows it to have a bottom-up point of view on the actions onstage, as far as the Chorus voices the usually unheard social groups and their maxims of popular wisdom (*gnomai*). On the other hand, the emotional bond that the Chorus establishes with the characters encourages the empathic response of the audience.

The Chorus involves the audience in a synesthetic way by means of music, dance, and singing, and their performance is aimed at triggering a collective emotional response: so that the Athenian citizens may empathize with them as a community. The *choreutēs* become the physical, cognitive, and emotional link between the heroes in the drama and the fifth-century Athenian audience. The Chorus, therefore, guides the spectator through the tangle of tragical emotions by filtering, displaying, and expressing feelings as a bystander.

This participative feeling played a social and political function as far as it could foster a sense of attachment and connection both among the citizens and between these and the *polis* and could habituate them to thinking and feeling responsibly together. This also explains why the *choreutēs* constantly switch from the first person singular to the first person plural and backwards (from “I” to “we” and vice versa). Their perspective takes on the challenge of expanding the individual and collective standpoints and aims to cultivate individual and collective emotions as a whole.⁷

Moreover, such a civilisation as classical Greece makes the audience particularly receptive and open to common emotions experienced in a collective context, in which the citizens meet as members of a social group. It becomes clear that a collectively experienced emotion carries motivational and normative power. Thus, the Chorus becomes a paradigmatic institution that leads the audience to “institutionalize” those emotions that are considered virtuous for a prosperous development of the city (such as religious respect for the deities and their inscrutable divine willpower, or the awareness of human limits) and to free themselves from those that are reputed prejudicial for the entire social body (such as uncontrolled emotions of fear or rage; arrogance and *hybris* against the deities, or flagrant breach of social and religious laws). By commenting on the events of the plot, the *choreutēs* address and shape the moral development of the citizens because they embody the voice of the community that educates its citizens to balanced emotional self-control.

To elicit this kind of “spectatorial aesthetic”, ancient drama requires narrative structures paradigmatically built to convey emotions,⁸ a metaphorical vocabulary, and an emotional language, as well as a particular acting rhythm, which – in the case of the Chorus – becomes musical rhythm.

It is possible to recognise in Greek dramatic narration some linguistic and cultural patterns containing paradigmatic scenarios that elicit emotions accordingly. War stories represent a narrative pattern *par excellence* that should trigger pity and fear in a society so deeply rooted in warriorhood. I will now consider the “emotion-triggering” paradigmatic structures of the Athenian tragedy by focusing on two pieces of work, namely *Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus and *Trojan Women* by Euripides.

Seven against Thebes: the ethos of warriorhood

During the Persian war, Athens became the symbol of Greek freedom and the Athenian citizens experienced for the first time fear of being vanquished and the anguish over the threat of slavery. The educational task of tragedians, therefore, was twofold: on the one hand, they gave paramount prominence to the heroic values to enhance the people’s civic and patriotic will to protecting their homeland; and on the other hand, they voiced the anguish and dread of the citizens who had to endure the direst effects of the conflict.

In Aeschylus’s *Seven against Thebes* (467 BC), Polynices, Oedipus’s son, invades his own homeland to remove his brother Eteocles from the throne. The two brothers have agreed to rule over the city in turn, but when Eteocles refuses to yield the throne and breaches the agreement Polynices allies with the lords of Argos and moves to war. Eteocles embodies the perfect ruler, and as he gathers all the best of his army, he plans the deployment of his troops with coolness, yet being aware that he will eventually fall in battle. On the contrary, the Theban maidens, who constitute the Chorus, are lost in despair as they barricade themselves in the city. The king rebukes them harshly and repeatedly for their words of fear and self-pity, accusing them of crushing the morale of the besieged. As Michael Gagarin has observed, the play “does not present a conflict within Eteocles himself”, as usually occurs in Greek dramas, in which the characters come to grips with their own inner demons, but “between him and the Chorus” (*Aeschylean Drama*: 125).

The entire tragedy focuses on the problem of knowing what one should really fear: after Eteocles decides to meet his brother in battle, the Chorus weighs different fearful scenarios: the pollution stemming from fratricide; the consequences for the city if the enemies breach the gates; and the risk of being ab-

ducted as slaves in case of defeat. Eteocles explicitly invites the women to repress any expression of fear, to trust in the citizens' deities (Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*: ll. 34-35), and to inspire courage in the soldiers, instead of frightening them with their lamentations (l. 270). The choice of the dramatist to set the play just before the beginning of the battle is strictly aimed at enhancing the role of fear in the entire drama. The imminent conflict is announced by the Scout, who has just described to king Eteocles what he saw "with his own eyes" (l. 41): seven heroes swearing the oath to destroy the city to the ground or die on the battlefield. The Scout emphasizes the urgency of the moment in an alarmed tone: soon the enemies will be at the city gates and their courage is compared to that of "a lion with the war in his eyes" (l. 53). The Scout, therefore, incites the king to prepare for immediate reaction, using the nautical metaphor of a careful helmsman who should "secure the city before Ares's blasts storm down upon it" (l. 63), before "the wave of their army now crashes over the dry land" (l. 64). The metaphors of the city as a ship and the king as a good (or bad) helmsman are *topoi* of the Athenian theatrical language. However, what attracts my attention the most is the extension of this semantic field to the war theme. The war is represented as a storm sent by Ares and the army as "a terrestrial wave" (l. 64) ready to rush down against the city with its squalls of war. The link between the war-related concept and the semantic of the water is here announced and will characterise the entire drama.

While the first reaction of the king is praying to the deities in a faithful attitude of submission, the Chorus' perspective sharply contrasts with the apparent calm and clarity of mind of Eteocles: as soon as the women appeared on stage, they cry in utter agitation. The rhythmic music of their entrance, played in a dochmiac metre and consisting of an increasing succession of short and long vowels, emphasises their aggravation (Visvardi, *Emotion in Action*: 149).⁹ They "cry for great sufferings" (l. 78) as the army has begun to approach. Nevertheless, although they cannot be eyewitnesses of the events like the Scout, their anguish builds as they hear the sounds of the enemy forces preparing for the assault:

In terror I wail loud cries of sorrow.
 Their army is let loose! Leaving camp, – 80
 look! – the mounted throng floods swiftly ahead.
 The dust whirling in the air tells me this is so –
 its message is speechless, yet clear and true.
 And now the plains of my native land under
 the blows of hooves send a roar to my ears; the sound flies 85
 and rumbles like a resistless torrent
 crashing down a mountainside. (ll. 79-86)

Close Encounters in War Journal – Issue n. 4 (2021): "Close Encounters in War and the Emotions"

The sounds and noises of war mostly suggest a vivid perception of the approaching enemy. The stomping of hooves seems a roar to the ears of the women (ll. 83-84); spears clatter (l. 100); and the bridles in the mouths of the horses rattle with a deadly sound (ll. 121-122): the hearing perception contributes to reproducing the well-known noises of battle that come to life on stage through the words of the Theban women.

They clearly envision and voice what they hear and see in their minds. Synesthetic expressions (e.g. "I see the clash", l. 104) and the detailed description of several battle aspects also enhance the overlapping of sight and hearing: the hubs of the chariots creaking beneath the axles load (ll. 151-153), a hail of stones striking the battlements from afar (ll. 158-159), the shaking of spears (l. 155), and the bronze-bound shields (ll. 160).¹⁰ These aural and synesthetic images permit the audience to experience the terrifying atmosphere of the siege. This kind of "enargeia" intensively involves the emotional sphere of the spectator, making them believe they can really see the enemy army approaching and thus re-experience the same fear that they probably felt during the Persian assault on Athens, when the Persian king Xerxes took over the Acropolis and burned it, destroying all its sanctuaries and temples. In ancient drama, the plot is often set in a city different from Athens: this theatrical expedient was necessary to create some distance from the themes of the tragic performance. Such a spatial distance provoked cognitive and emotive distancing, thus permitting the audience to face important and painful local issues but by seeing them unfold in another city, that is, in another community. Thebes, in particular, was a sort of "body double" of Athens, something like a mirror in which the Athenians could observe the dynamics of their own political and social life (Zeitlin, *Thebes*: 144-145). Thus, in Aeschylus's tragedy, Thebes becomes an image of Athens besieged by the Persians just thirteen years before (Ieranò, *Introduzione*: xii).

Among the auditory effects, the "barbaric" racket of the Argive army stands out (Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*: l. 463) as typical of foreign people who speak incomprehensible idioms, an uncanny contributing factor to the spread of terror. This reference to a non-Greek speaking invader eventually makes the emotive role of the Chorus' laments manifest, i.e. re-enacting the memory of anguish and fear experienced during the Persian assault. The maiden's cries of fear, mixed with the clash of distant weapons, accompany the description of the battle: the sounds of war from the outside combine with the fearful weeping within the city to convey a feeling of total confusion. To intensify the emotive mood of the performance, the metaphors of water – already used by the Scout – resound to express the devastating force of the war. As the Chorus perceives it,

the noise of the horses' hooves recalls the roaring sound of an irresistible mountain torrent (l. 84), and the lined-up army ready for the battle resembles a "wave of men that breaks loudly over the city, raised up by the blasts of war" (ll. 114-115). Again, in the crucial moment of the choral lament, when it becomes clear that Eteocles has to fight against his brother, the Theban maidens comment: "Now it is as if a sea of evils pushes its swell onward. As one wave sinks, the sea raises up another, triple-crested, which crashes around the city's stern" (ll. 758-760). Finally, when the city is safe, the Scout declares: "The city enjoys fair weather and has taken on no water even though it has been buffeted by many waves" (ll. 795-796). All these maritime images contribute to de-anthropomorphise warfare, reducing it to a natural phenomenon, which means something that is basically out of human hands. The war strikes like a storm sent by Ares and the king, in whose hands rest all hopes, cannot do anything without praying to the deities for their favour, to which both Eteocles and the Chorus commit themselves (ll. 69-77; and 265-270). Although Eteocles shares with the Chorus the awareness of the unpredictability of war, which strikes on humanity just like a storm, his reaction to the maidens' cries is violent. By calling them "insufferable creatures" (l. 182), the king reacts vehemently against them and the entire female gender. According to him, their lamentation endangers the *polis* (l. 190) because by clamouring and running through the city, these cowardly women let "the wave of war" rush inside the walls, thus inevitably transmitting their terror to the citizens.

Eteocles, who wants to represent himself as a "good city's chief", encouraging and supporting the citizens during difficult moments, strives to control the circulation of fear in Thebes. In Thucydides's *The Peloponnesian War* (2, 60, and 4), also Pericles is depicted as particularly concerned with the fear of his fellow citizens during the Peloponnesian War, and in his discourse he points to the fact that excessive focus on private fear and anger deprives the Athenians of the ability to consider communal safety. Because uncontrolled fear robs people of their capacity to think clearly and make plans and decisions, it is needed to keep fear below uncritical levels. Eteocles's reaction to the wailing maidens reveals the crucial role of the Chorus in influencing emotionally the social community, both the Theban citizens within the drama and the Athenian audience sitting in the theatre. By voicing and enacting fear, they also generate a similar reaction that spreads among the citizens: the king, therefore, asks the Theban women to keep quiet (Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*: l. 250) because they are anticipating a disaster that will not eventually occur. However, despite his request, the women keep on crying as they fear slavery once their city has been destroyed.¹¹ Rape and slavery were fearful plagues for any woman after an invasion: to be carried away from their homeland and enslaved to another city,

submitted to a savage master, was the most painful lot for women. In the first stasimon, thus, the Chorus enact the most-feared destruction of the city, dramatizing the enslavement of the women, who are taken away, dragged by their hair, their clothes being torn after their men have been slaughtered and the crops destroyed and devastated (ll. 321-333):

It is a great cause for grief to hurl a primeval city
 to Hades in this way, quarry and slave of the spear,
 ravaged shamefully in the dusty ashes
 by an Argive man through divine will. 325
 And grief, too, to let the women be led away captive –
 ah ah! – young and old,
 dragged by the hair, like horses,
 with their cloaks torn off them. 330
 A city, emptied, shouts out
 as the human booty perishes with mingled cries.

The maidens have not yet been taken captives and yet their lament features the same themes of traditional songs of captive women, including codified metaphors, pathetic expressions, and the image of the enslaved girls degraded to beasts and roughly dragged away like horses (l. 328) by their new masters.¹² The very *polis* is identified with its women and depicted as a young maiden enslaved by the conquerors (ll. 321-322): as the women go away into captivity, the entire city cries out in despair (l. 331). Explicit terms referring to fear – the anaphor of the substantive “grief” (ll. 321 and 326) and their exclamation of anguish (“ah! ah!”, l. 328) – constitute the basis of self-pity. Their premature lament intensifies the fearful atmosphere of the tragedy and consequently triggers the empathetic response in the spectators, who feel horror and pity for the doom of the vanquished women.

Trojan Women: the desperation of the vanquished

Choruses of captive women are relatively common in Greek tragedy.¹³ One of the most emotionally intense cases is doubtless Euripides’s *Trojan Women*, performed in 415 BC during the historical conflict between Athens and Sparta. This drama forces the audience to ponder the repercussions of war through the lament of the Trojan women captured by the Greeks. In contrast to the traditional structure of tragedy, all kinds of conflict among the characters here disappear. Onstage, moreover, no significant contemporary action unfolds, for all that matters as to the plot has already happened. Troy has fallen, the Greeks

Io! Io!
 What Argive, or man from Phthia,
 Or islander, will take me far from Troy 190
 To a life of misery?

Hecuba
Pheu! Pheu!
 Where will I, an old grey woman,
 Go to be a slave?
 A useless old drone,
 Stand-in for a corpse
 Pale ghost of the dead?
Aiai! Aiai!
 Will I be a doorkeeper,
 Or nurse to some child, 195
 I, who has honoured as Queen of Troy?
 (Euripides, *Trojan Women*: ll. 176-196)

The Chorus is divided into two half-Choruses that dialogue with Hecuba, condoling and amplifying her grief through their own. No harmonic discourse, no gnomic utterance, or moral teaching come from the Chorus: their voice is interrupted and fragmented by sorrow and fear that permeate the entire drama. The Chorus' function onstage consists in highlighting the despair and anguish of the characters, using an interactive form of lamentation (such as the painful alternation of short questions and answers between Hecuba and the Semi-Chorus B, that increases the *pathos* of the dialogue) and accompanying their suffering with exclamations of grief or unarticulated interjections (ll. 176; 186; 190; and 193), and with words of commiseration for their communal lot.

The *Trojan Women* describes a scenario that resembles a modern humanitarian crisis and depicts the feelings and grief of displaced people, especially women, seeking refuge from war and annihilation. Through an in-depth analysis of the lexicon of the play, one sees that the prominent pattern is a "us vs. them" dynamic. The master-slave scenario is evoked by the repetition of the root *δουλ** ("slave") when referred to women, and *δεσπότη** ("master") when referred to men. Most of the verbs referring to the male characters are expressed in the active voice, while the women are frequently the passive recipients of the victors' actions (e.g. "to be allocated", l. 29; "dealt to", l. 32; "reserved", l. 33; "classified", l. 35; "was slaughtered", l. 40; "will be forced", l. 43; and "we are taken", l. 1310).

The Trojan women are dehumanised and deprived of their free agency. Such

a process, perpetrated at the hand of the Greeks, who can decide what treatment the vanquished should receive, consists in objectifying human beings. As Finley states, indeed, we can define slavery as “the status in which a man is, in the eyes of the law and public opinion and with respect to all parties, a possession, a chattel, of another man” (Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*: 97).

The slavery pattern is a coral-theme in this drama, and the Chorus plays an extra-ordinary role because the *choreutēs* lose the organic expression of their thoughts and, as a consequence, their educative function, becoming just a dialogical counterpart of the protagonists’ sorrow (De Benedetto, *Euripide*: 223-238). To well comprehend this new choral narrative, it is necessary to view the composition of the *Trojan Women* in light of its contemporary historical events. From 431 until 404 BC, Athens waged the Peloponnesian War. In 416, Athens and Sparta engaged in different efforts to secure an alliance with the island of Melos, but when the Melians refused to become a tributary state under the rule of Athens and opted for remaining neutral, the Athenians responded violently. Thucydides portrays the brutality of Athenian troops in exerting their supremacy over the Melians: “They killed as many of the Melian men as they were able to capture, whereas they enslaved children and women” (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*: 5.116.4). Whether the Melian episode prompted the *Trojan Women* is an object of debate,¹⁴ but the issue might be superseded by considering that Athens was indeed at war and that episodes of such kind were the normality, for the time being.¹⁵

After transforming the Delian League into the Athenian Empire, the Athenians became sackers of cities and captors of women and children. They systematically subjugated those cities that revolted, rejected forceful alliances, or refused to provide troops for the Athenian armies in the Peloponnesian War. Modern critics have often interpreted Euripides’s dramas about the Trojan war (such as *Andromache* or *Hecuba*) –the *Trojan Women* in particular – as a protest against the Peloponnesian War (Duè, *The Captive Women’s Lament*: 107).¹⁶ This play, after all, was produced in 416, in concomitance with the destruction of Melos and the disastrous Sicilian expedition.¹⁷ While such a reading may be far too simplistic, it is unquestionable that after the end of the Periclean regime Euripides’s dramatic production lost progressively contact with contemporary politics (Di Benedetto, *Euripide*: 190-192). The dramatist mostly disapproved of the demagogues, who were inapt to guide the citizens through mindful and moderate political choices. Euripides had always defended the democratic principles and supported the Periclean program, which aimed to make Athens and its empire powerful. But when democratic life ceased to be guaranteed

because of demagogical abuse of power, he decided to exclude the political themes from his plays. His works, dating to the later part of the Peloponnesian War, focused on a nostalgic desire for peace, repeated requests for an armistice with Sparta, and a sincere rejection of all kinds of violence. His aim became to show on stage the cruel consequences of war: the desolate ruins that remain on the battlefield, the mourning of the fallen warriors, and in particular the desperate condition of women, who were exposed to rape and slavery. The Trojan past became a sort of mirror of the contemporary military events and the emotional force of the laments of the Trojan women played a paramount role on stage.

It is now important to establish on what level the Athenians were supposed to relate to them. Edith Hall has observed that Troy, exactly like Thebes, “functioned as a mythical prism through which the fifth century refracted its own preoccupation with military conflict” (Hall, *Introduction*: ix). Over the course of its history, Athens seems to have maintained a complicated relationship with the Trojan war. In sixth-century Athenian literature and art, the fall of Troy was depicted as a great sacrilege at the hands of the Achaeans, who perpetrated many atrocities.¹⁸ The sack of Troy was even represented on the Parthenon metopes. According to Ferrari, the Athenians would identify themselves more with the conquered Trojans than with the victorious Achaeans, as a reminder of the sacrilege committed by the Persians in Athens in 480 BC (Ferrari, *The Ilioupersis in Athens*: 126). The ruins of Athena’s temples that had been burned down were incorporated into the new program for the building of a new temple of Athena, the Parthenon, in imperishable memory of the Persian sack, which is the reason why the plundering of Troy was illustrated on the Parthenon itself. The Parthenon’s sculptures could be interpreted not only as an emblem of victory over the Persians, as most scholars retain, but they could also invite to compare the Persian invasion and devastation of Greece to the Greek invasion and destruction of Troy. In the fifth century BC, on the contrary, Euripides identifies in his tragedies the Athenians with the Achaeans – who pillaged and destroyed Troy – and forces his audience to reflect on the dramatic consequences of the Athenian’s aggressive politics in the contemporary Peloponnesian War.

In this drama, not only the Trojans and other captives are presented sympathetically, but the Trojan women are even depicted as morally superior to the Greeks who enslave them.¹⁹ An emblem of that is the cruel behaviour towards Astyanax, the only child of Hector and Andromache and last heir to the throne of Troy, who, although still an infant, is taken away from his mother’s arms and cast from the city walls into his death:

Talthybius

He must be thrown from the towers of Troy. Accept it.
 You'll be wiser for that; don't stand in the way.
 But bear your pain like the great lady you are
 And don't imagine that you have any power
 To change this: you don't. You are powerless; just look around!
 Your city is destroyed and your husband is dead; you are a slave;
 We can easily deal with a single woman. So I do not want you to fight.
 Nor do anything to incur anger, nor call down any curses on the Greeks. [...]

Andromache

[...] Oh you Greeks you have found torture worse than any barbarian's!
 Why do you kill this child who has never done you any wrong?
 (Euripides, *Trojan Women*: ll. 725-734; and 764-765)

The messenger's pragmatic piece of advice about the adequate behaviour that Andromache should keep after hearing the terrible destiny of her child is an echo of the well-known Melian dialogue reported by Thucydides:

Melians: And how could it be just as good for us to be the slaves as for you to be the masters?

Athenians: You, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster; we, by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you. [...]

Melians: Then surely, if such hazards are taken by you to keep your empire and by your subjects to escape from it, we who are still free would show ourselves great cowards and weaklings if we failed to face everything that comes rather than submit to slavery.

Athenians: No, not if you are sensible. This is no fair fight, with honour on one side and shame on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you.

(Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*: 5.92-93; and 100-101)

In the words of the Athenian messenger "the law of the strongest power" rules, just like in Thalthybius's advice to Andromache. "The stronger do what they have the power to do and the weaker accept what they have to accept" (5.89), the ambassador says to the Melians, summarising the ideas of supremacy on which the Athenian empire rested.

The disapproval of this kind of demagogic politics also becomes clear as Andromache capsizes the epithet "barbarian", explicitly accusing the Greeks of

being “barbarians” (Euripides, *Trojan Women*: ll. 764-765), for they murdered an innocent. The lack of mercy towards women and babies was a usual practice in ancient wartime, and for this reason, the insistence on the feelings of the vanquished produces a profound emotional effect on the audience.

In the *Trojan Women*, the spectator is confronted with the suffering of the Trojans, both protagonists and the Chorus. Their laments trigger pity in the Greek audience and, employing this quintessential emotion of tragedy, move the spectators to empathise with the experience of the Trojan women (Duè, *The Captive Women’s Lament*: 111). As the tragedy erases the boundaries between the vanquished slaves and the victors, so the distinction between the Greeks and the foreigners is blurred and even subverted. The contrast between the Greeks and the Trojans often serves only to highlight the sameness of their suffering, for the laments of the Trojan women are fundamentally Greek in form and theme, and their very “Greekness” overrides the otherness of ethnicity and social status. The effect aimed to wholly erase all distinctions between the Greeks and foreigners, male and female, slaves and free individuals. Within the strict boundaries of the tragic performance, these distinctions could be questioned, explored, and experienced by an audience of Greek citizens (112). Disillusioned by politics, Euripides aimed to upset the Athenians by challenging their self-awareness, by modifying the traditional narrative structure of the play,²⁰ constructing this piece of work not as a unitary story but by stitching together single pieces of lamentations, and by overturning the roles of victims and oppressors.

Conclusions

Choral performances in both plays are focused on the female perspective. While male heroes could usually kill their warrior opponents or be killed with honour defending their homeland, women were left with the only chance to cry their fallen husbands, sons and brothers and to endure a destiny of rape and slavery. What is foretold by the Theban maidens waiting for the enemy assault is actually enacted in the words of the Trojan women: the grave – albeit premature – fear of the maidens becomes the pitiful condition of the defeated Trojan women. Both agree in claiming that it would be far better to die than suffer this kind of abuse: “I declare that the dead will do better than the captives” (Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*: ll. 336-337), the Theban maidens say, and similarly states Andromache: “I think not to be born is the same as death, and to live with suffering is worse than dying” (Euripides, *Trojan Women*: ll. 636-637). This is the female common opinion about the war in ancient times as well as today when rape – although no longer slavery – continues to be one major fear

for women exposed to war.

Both the tragedians use the feminine perspective to problematize the ideological conception of the fear of war. In Aeschylus's play, the Athenian audience are asked to remember proudly how they bravely repelled the barbarian invasion and, on the other hand, to feel more comfortable with the fear, which is presented as an inevitable aspect of war that should however be put under the control of reason. Aeschylus's teaching consists in not ignoring the emotional aspects of war but in heroically overcoming the backdrops of any emotive reaction to war and its effects. During the Peloponnesian War, instead, the Athenian audience was asked to confront some recent political and military decisions of their government by witnessing the suffering of the Trojan women. Euripides dramatizes the effects of war on women to challenge the bellicose ideology of Athenian imperialism. It is worth remembering that in both the plays, the connection of war and fear includes such emotions as desperation and self-pity and that these emotions, in turn, imply some direct experience of war and combat. By experiencing and collectively displaying emotions, the Chorus influences the citizens' decision-making process and contributes to form the common opinion of the community. The Chorus consistently influences the characters' and the audience's perception of dramatic events and their ethical consequences. The pleasure that the spectators derive from identifying themselves with a collective body – and the “emotive distance” that characterises the empathic communication of these dramas – makes it easy to assess the emotional component of judgment for both the individual and the community within and, potentially, without the plays.

References

- Aéliou, Rachel. *Euripide, héritier d'Eschyle*. Paris: Belles Lettres, 1983.
- Aeschylus. *Seven Against Thebes*. Translated by Herbert Weir Smyth. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926.
- Alexiou, Margaret. *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*. Cambridge: Rowman & Littlefield, 1974.
- Anderson, Michael. *The Fall of Troy in Early Greek Poetry and Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Antony Kenny. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Arnott, Peter. *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Close Encounters in War Journal – Issue n. 4 (2021): “Close Encounters in War and the Emotions”

- Bierl, Anton. *Dionysos und die griechische Tragödie. Politische und metatheatralische Aspekte im Text*. Tübingen: Narr, 1991.
- Boardman, John. *Athenian Red Figure Vases of the Classical Period*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989.
- Bowra, Cecil Maurice. *Euripides' Epinician for Alcibiades*. «Historia», 9 (1960): 68-79.
- Calame, Claude. *Performance Aspects of the Choral Voice in Greek Tragedy: Civic Identity in Performance*. In *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*. Ed. by Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne. Cambridge: University Press, 1999. 125-153.
- Cairns, Douglas. *Horror, Pity and the Visual in Ancient Greek Aesthetics*. In *Emotions in the Classical World*. Ed. By Douglas Cairns and Damien Nelis. Stuttgart: Steiner, 2017. 53-77.
- Croally, Neil. *Euripidean Polemic. The Trojan Women and the Function of Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Dale, Amy Marjorie. *The Lyric Metres of Greek Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948.
- Dawson, Doyne. *The Origins of Western Warfare. Militarism and Morality in the Ancient World*. Colorado: West View Press, 1996.
- Delebecque, Edouard. *Euripide et la guerre du Péloponnèse*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1951.
- Di Benedetto, Vincenzo. *Euripide. Teatro e società*. Turin: Einaudi, 1971.
- Duè, Casey. *The Captive Women's Lament in Greek Tragedy*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2006.
- Euripides. *Trojan Women*. Translated by Marianne McDonald. In *The Living Art of Greek Tragedy*. Ed. by Marianne McDonald. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003. 21-70.
- Ferrari, Gloria. *The Ilioupersis in Athens*. «HSCP», 100 (2000): 119-150.
- Finley, Moses. *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.
- Foley, Helene. *Choral Identity in Greek Tragedy*. «Classical Philology», 98, 1 (2003): 1-30.
- Friedrich, Rainer. *Everything to Do with Dionysos? Ritualism, the Dionysiac, and the tragic*. In *Tragedy and the Tragic. Greek Theatre and Beyond*. Ed. by Michael Stephen Silk. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 257-283.

- Gagarin, Michael. *Aeschylean Drama*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Gentili, Bruno and Liana Lomiento. *Metrica e ritmica. Storia delle forme poetiche nella Grecia antica*. Milan: Mondadori, 2003.
- Goldhill, Simon. *Collectivity and Otherness – The Authority of the Tragic Chorus: Response to Gould*. In *Tragedy and the Tragic. Greek Theatre and Beyond*. Ed. by Michael Stephen Silk. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 244-256.
- Goldie, Peter. *The Emotions. A Philosophical Exploration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Goossens, Roger. *Euripide et Athènes*. Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1962.
- Gould, John. *Tragedy and Collective Experience*. In *Tragedy and the Tragic. Greek Theatre and Beyond*. Ed. by Michael Stephen Silk. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 217-243.
- Griffin, Jasper. *The Social Function of Greek Tragedy*. «Classical Quarterly», 48 (1998): 39-61.
- Hall, Edith. *Introduction*. In *Euripides' Hecuba, The Trojan Women, Andromache*. Ed. by James Morwood. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. i-xii.
- Halliwell, Stephen. *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- . *Aristotle and the Experience of Tragic Emotion*. In *Between Ecstasy and Truth. Interpretation of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus*. Ed. by Stephen Halliwell. Oxford: University Press, 2011. 208-236.
- Hamilton, Edith. *A Pacifist in Periclean Athens*. In: *Euripides. Trojan Women*, Translated by Edith Hamilton. New York: Bantam, 1971. 1-11.
- Ieranò, Giorgio. *Introduzione*. In: *Eschilo. Persiani – Sette a Tebe*. Translated by Giorgio Ieranò. Milan: Mondadori, 1997. v-xxvi.
- Kaimio, Maarit. *The Chorus of Greek Drama within the Light of the Person and Number Used*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Finnica, 1970.
- Konstan, David. *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks. Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.
- . *The Tragic Emotions*. «Comparative Drama», 33, 1 (1999): 1-21.
- Lada-Richards, Ismene. *Empathic Understanding: Emotion and Cognition in Classical Dramatic Audience-Response*. «Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Association», 39 (1993): 94-140.

- Lord, Albert. *A Singer of Tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.
- Marinis, Agis. *Seeing Sounds: Synaesthesia in the parodos of Seven Against Thebes*. «Logeion: A Journal of Ancient Theatre», 2 (2012): 27-60.
- Maxwell-Stuart, Peter. *The Dramatic Poets and the Expedition to Sicily*. «Historia», 22 (1973): 397-404.
- Munteanu, Dana LaCourse. *Grief: the Power and Shortcomings of Greek Consolation*. In: *Emotions in the Classical World*. Ed. by Douglas Cairns and Damien Nelis. Stuttgart: Steiner, 2017. 79-103.
- . *Tragic Pathos. Pity and Fear in Greek Philosophy and Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Parry, Adam (Ed.). *The Making of Homeric Verse*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- Pickard-Cambridge, Arthur Wallace. *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Säid, Suzanne. *Greeks and Barbarians in Euripides' Tragedies: The End of Differences?* In: *Greeks and Barbarians*. Ed. by Thomas Harrison. New York: Routledge, 2002. 62-100.
- Segal, Charles. *Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Sheppard, Anne. *The Poetics of Phantasia. Imagination in Ancient Aesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.
- Snaevarr, Stefán. *Metaphors, Narratives, Emotions. Their Interplay and Impact*, Amsterdam: Brill, 2010.
- Schnyder, Bernadette. *Angst in Szene gesetzt. Zur Darstellung der Emotionen auf der Bühne des Aischylos*. Tübingen: Narr, 1995.
- Stanford, William Bedell. *Greek Metaphor. Studies in Theory and Practice*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1936.
- Taplin, Oliver. *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus. The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
- Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Martin Hammond and P. J. Rhodes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Vidal-Naquet, Pierre. *The Place and Status of Foreigners in Athenian Tragedy*. In: *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*. Ed. by Christopher Pelling. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. 110-119.

- Visvardi, Eirene. *Emotion in Action. Thucydides and the Tragic Chorus*. Leiden: Brill, 2015.
- Waern, Ingrid. *Zur Synaesthesie in griechischer Dichtung*. «Eranos» 50 (1952): 14-22.
- Westlake, Donald. *Euripides' Troades: 205-229*. «Mnemosyne», 6 (1953): 181-191.
- Zanker, Graham. *Enargeia in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry*. «Rheinisches Museum für Philologie», 124 (1981): 297-311.
- Zeitlin, Froma. *Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama*. In *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?* Ed. by John Winkler and Froma Zeitlin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. 130-167.

¹ The *Iliad* represented the cultural expression of early Greek society. The historical background of the Homeric poem is the late Bronze Age, in the early twelfth century BC, but its composition probably dates to the eighth century BC in a context of aristocratic rule. Oral literature was central to the educational-cultural function of the itinerant rhapsode, who composed epic poems out of memory and improvisation and disseminated the aristocratic values about warfare, via song and chant, during his travels and at the Panathenaic Festival. About the educational and cultural function of the oral Greek epic, see in particular Havelock (*Preface to Plato*). On the methods of oral composition and his psychodynamics effects on the audience, see Lord (*A Singer of Tales*); Parry (*The making of Homeric Verse*); and Ong (*Orality and Literacy*). Such virtues as honour and responsibility were central to the aristocratic ethic of warfare. Single combat or duel was the apical moment of the battle, during which also excesses of pride, vengeance and cruelty were displayed. These kinds of values dwelled on in the literary tradition and the cultural imagery also after the socio-political conditions changed and Athens became a democratic city that based its military power on the hoplitic phalanx. This was a collective combat unit made of heavily armed citizens whose prevalent values were loyalty, discipline, and camaraderie. For an overview of this issue see Dawson (*The Origins of Western Warfare*).

² Tragedies and comedies were performed in dramatic festivals of Athens, called *Dionysia*, which also constituted an essential part of the cult of Dionysus. This was the god of theatre and in general governed all those activities through which the worshippers could experience the ecstatic overcoming of the human condition (e.g. through alcoholic intoxication or by being possessed by mania, the divine force of the god, during the mystical liturgies. On this issue see Pickard-Cambridge (*The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*). All citizens were encouraged to attend the Dionysus' theatre and to watch the dramas, in which the spectators were emotionally involved in the events performed. In a certain sense, the spectators were possessed by the Dionysian force of *empátheia* and identified themselves with the characters' reactions to the events. For more details on this specific issue, see Bierl (*Dionysos*); and Friedrich (*Everything to Do with Dionysos?*). The power of such emotional communication between the actors and the spectators was also employed by the democratic government to spread the main values of the city, which usefully influenced public opinion about the most relevant public events. The focus of the performance, moreover, did not limit to the tragedy's

plot: the contents of the tragedies were very traditional. The dramatists represented well-known stories borrowed from traditional and local myths. They did not aim to surprise the audience with some unexpected conclusions of those stories but to focus their attention on one specific theme. The characters embodied different points of view about moral, political, and religious issues and the audience was guided to reflect on them and to build up their own opinion. This new way of telling mythical stories was functional to make the audience aware of the democratic management of public life founded on the exchange of points of view and rhetoric. See Arnott (*Public and Performance*); and Griffin (*The Social Function of Greek Tragedy*).

- ³ On this issue, see in particular Zanker (*Enargeia*); and Sheppard (*The Poetics of Phantasia*).
- ⁴ Konstan, in *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, mainly examines the relationship between emotion, feeling, and cognitive components on stage.
- ⁵ The same concept is illustrated in Plato's *Republic* (606b). See Halliwell (*The Aesthetics of Mimesis*: 77).
- ⁶ See Cairns (*Horror*: 71-72). Halliwell affirms: "When we feel pity, we do not share the sufferer's subjectivity: however much we may draw emotionally near to it, or move vicariously with its psychological expression, we remain, qua feelers of pity, outside the immediate, 'first-person' reality of the pain, whether physical or mental" (*The Aesthetics of Mimesis*: 216).
- ⁷ About the role of the chorus in the Greek tragedy, see Calame (*Performance Aspects*); Goldhill (*Collectivity and Otherness*); Gould (*Tragedy and Collective Experience*); Kaimio (*The Chorus of Greek Drama*); and Foley (*Choral Identity in Greek Tragedy*). On the choral emotivity in tragedy and its relationship with collective emotions, see Visvardi (*Emotion in Action*); and Lada-Richards (*Empathic Understanding*).
- ⁸ The idea that emotions are linked to narrative structures was initially proposed by Goldie (*The Emotions*) and later developed by Snaevarr (*Metaphors, Narratives, Emotions*).
- ⁹ About the pathetic function of the dochmiac metres in *Seven against Thebes*, see Gentili & Lomiento (*Metrica e ritmica*: 241-242). The scholars underline that in the first parodos the long succession of astrophic dochmiac verses is functional to convey the description of the fear of war and the dangers of an enemy invasion. Taplin (*The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*: 141-142) suggests a scattered entry of the Chorus on stage basing his suggestion on the internal evidence of the dochmiac astrophic lyrics.
- ¹⁰ For a more detailed overview of the rhetorical and cognitive rule of the synaesthesia in *Seven against Thebes*, see Marinis (*Seeing Sounds*). On this topic in ancient Greek literature, see Stanford (*Greek Metaphor*); Waern (*Zur Synaesthesie*); and Zancher (*Enargeia*).
- ¹¹ Eteocles: "Damn you! Will you not endure these events in silence?" / Chorus: "Gods of our city! Do not let my fate be slavery!" (ll. 252-253).
- ¹² For a comparison between the formal structure and the lexicon of ritual lamentation and the choral performance of slave women, see Alexiou (*The Ritual Lament*).
- ¹³ On the issue, see Duè (*The Captive Women's Lament*).
- ¹⁴ According to Bowra (*Euripides' Epinician for Alcibiades*), *Trojan Women* could be written only after the Melian slaughter (winter 416), considering that Euripides composed the Epinician for Alcibiades in the summer of 416 BC. But Di Benedetto (*Euripide*: 185) argues that this dating, established in Euripides's favour for Alcibiades, cannot be proved, as well as direct involvement of Alcibiades in the expedition against Melo cannot be proved.
- ¹⁵ When Mytilene revolted too against Athens, some years later, the Athenians made a very similar decision: "And out of anger, it seemed good to the Athenians to not only kill the

-
- Mytilineans who were there, but to kill all of the Mytilinean men, and to enslave their children and women" (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*: 3.36.2).
- ¹⁶ Croally (*Euripidean Polemic*: 254) sees the function of tragedy as didactic, its purpose consisting of questioning ideology. Thus, for him, *Trojan Women* represents "the consequences of war for the structures of thought, the beliefs, values – the ideology – in which Athenians lived, and in which tragedy and its functions were conceived (and challenged)."
- ¹⁷ Edith Hamilton called Euripides "a pacifist in Periclean Athens" and *Trojan Women* "the greatest piece of anti-war literature there is in the world" (*A Pacifist*: 243). About the same theme see also Delebecque (*Euripide et la guerre du Péloponnèse*: 245-262). On the play's relationship to contemporary historical events see also Westlake (*Euripides' Troades*); Goossens (*Euripide et Athènes*: 520-534); and Maxwell-Stuart (*The Dramatic Poets*).
- ¹⁸ Many tragedies dealing with the Trojan war themes were produced in the second half of the fifth century BC., but curiously the sack of Troy as a subject of vase painting became less and less common. After 420 it nearly ceased to be represented. See Boardman (*Athenian Red Figure Vase*: 229).
- ¹⁹ Segal (*Euripides*: 171). About the same issue see also Aélion (*Euripide*); (Croally, *Euripidean Polemic*: 103-115); Anderson (*The Fall of Troy*: 106); Vidal-Naquet (*The Place and Status of Foreigners*: 114); Ferrari (*The Ilioupersis in Athens*: 127-128); and Saïd (*Greeks and Barbarians*).
- ²⁰ According to Aristotle's analysis of the dramatic structure (*Poetics*: 1450 b27), a drama should imitate a single whole action, that "has a beginning and middle and end". He, therefore, splits the play into two parts (complication and unravelling) and establishes that five major narrative acts should contain the entire dramatic arc (exposition; rising action; climax; falling action; and denouement). It is important to bear in mind that Aristotle's work was not normative as to dramatic composition but rather aimed at describing the dramas that were most commonly represented in Athens since the fifth century BC.