

Euripides' Trojan Burial Ritual

Argyropoulou Sotiria

(Department of Theatre Studies, University of the Peloponnese, Greece)

Abstract: The rituals of mourning and burial held a prominent place in the tradition and life of the inhabitants of ancient Athens during the classical period. The living had specific obligations towards their dead and leaving a dead body unburied was considered hubris and could provoke the wrath of both the gods and the dead. The fear of the wrath that this event could provoke, leaving a dead body unmourned and unburied, is a theme that we often encounter in Attic tragedy. In this study we will identify the points concerning the process of these rituals in the tragedy *The Trojans* by Euripides, with emphasis on the part of the lamentation which constitutes the core of the drama's theme. Mourning and offerings to the dead, the transport of the body and finally the burial of the body were closely intertwined and the entire ritual took the form of a celebration as it included movement and songs, with the women who made up the close family circle having the first role in carrying out the mourning process.

Key words: Euripides, tragedy of the trojans, funeral ritual, Ancient Greek Society

1. Introduction

Euripides' *The Trojans* was first performed at the Great Dionysia, around 415 BC, during the Peace of Nicaea, as the Athenians enjoyed a brief respite from the Peloponnesian War, and is a work that is considered one of the poet's later tragedies. The drama is associated with the attacks on Milos and the Sicilian campaign and is a quintessential anti-war work, depicting the suffering of war since the destruction of Troy, with the lamentation and mourning of women forming the emotional background of the action.

In this study, we will first refer to the process of the funeral ritual during the classical era and the particularities by which it is characterized, which particularities are directly related to the text of the *Trojans*. We will then identify those points in the drama in which the various stages of the funeral ritual are highlighted, with the point of reference being the stage of mourning which occupies a large part of the text and represents the general atmosphere of the drama, as well as the process of burial, elements which constitute two inseparable expressions of the same customary belief about the obligations of the living towards the dead, in ancient Greek culture.

It is interesting to note that the greatest emphasis throughout almost the entire drama is given mainly to the stage of mourning on the occasion of the bodies of the heroes that remained unburied and that the only complete funeral ritual that includes the burial process and takes place on stage concerns the death of Astyanax, son of

Argyropoulou Sotiria, Professor, Department of Theatre Studies, University of the Peloponnese; research areas/interests: modern European literature; comparative literature; critical, literary and cultural theory; philosophical approaches to literature and art; gender studies; history/historiography; Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin; modernism/modernity; literature, theatre and the arts. E-mail: sotiargi@gmail.com.

Andromache and grandson of Hecuba, who was the last male descendant of the royal family to be killed by the Greeks and whose death symbolizes the definitive end of the city of Troy.

2. The Ritual

The funeral ritual in ancient Greek society of the classical period consisted of established stages involving the preparation of the remains, the wake of the deceased, the mourning of relatives, the funeral procession, as well as the offerings at the grave in the days following the burial.

The *prothesis* (the English translation is intention) concerned the public display and wake of the deceased and during the 5th and 6th centuries BC it took place in the home or its courtyard. The relatives prepared the body of the deceased by washing it, perfumed it and dressing it in white, after first closing its eyes and mouth, while sometimes they put a coin in its mouth. Then they placed the body on a funeral bed covered with various aromatic herbs that were considered to ward off evil spirits and decorated the head with a wreath of laurel and celery. During the wake of the deceased, the relatives sometimes cut their hair and covered their body with it. Finally, the women stood around the bed and the customary mourning for the deceased began.

Mourning was closely intertwined and closely followed the respective stages of the funeral ceremony. The mourning act included movement and song and was the responsibility of the closest relatives, mainly women, and had a dual character as on an objective level it was intended to honor the deceased, while on a subjective level it gave expression to conflicting emotions. Mourning for heroes or the destruction of a city was an important genre in ancient Greek culture in the classical period. In contrast to the *prothesis* which was considered a formal event, mourning at the grave of the deceased had a more personal character as it was limited to a specific number of people and aimed at direct communication between relatives and the deceased.

On the third day after the burial, as well as on the ninth, the thirtieth day, one year after death, and on specific holidays, offerings were made at the grave in order to appease the spirits of the dead. The offerings were part of the celebration in honor of the deceased. The relatives initially offered a lock of their hair, along with wine, oils and perfumes, while at the same time saying prayers and then offered the deceased honey, milk, water, wine, a mixture of flour, honey and oil called *pelanon*, *kolliva* and celery. The woman left the offerings on the grave and began the supplications with gestures usually found during the *prothesis*. Finally, in addition to food and drink, the dead were also offered wreaths, clothing, lyres, flutes, ribbons, torches, as well as lamps that were left lit on the grave.

3. In-Text References

The first mention of the burial ritual in Troy is found at the very beginning of the drama, as well as a large part of the first episode, as Hecuba's monody, the Chorus's parody, the dialogue with Talthybius, and the entrance of Cassandra, form a single lament that is constantly renewed and continuously escalates.

In Hecuba's opening monologue in verses 118-20, who lies sprawled on the ground lamenting and mourning for her lost homeland, "I will shake my body, beating it to and fro, as I will mourn with incessant tears, whispering. This is the song of the unfortunate who cry bitter calamities", while a little further on in verses 141-2 and 147-9, she mentions "with my head, for mourning, wretchedly shaved" and "let us take up the lament together, I will begin the lament". Hecuba's personal lament culminates in a cry that the Chorus in lines 155-7 has heard and makes its entrance saying, "For I have heard, your sorrowful cries, and fear has torn the hearts of the Trojans."

From the entrance of the second Hemichorus in line 179 until just before Talthybius's entrance in line 240, there is a series of agitated questions interrupted by laments about the fate awaiting the captives.

In the first episode of the play, which in its introduction has the character of a dresser, with Hecuba responding to Talthybius after being informed that she has been cast as Odysseus' slave, her lament is expressed through the movements of her body, "Strike your shaved head, tear your cheeks with your nails, Aah, ah, my woe", while she herself closes the episode with a mournful statement in lines 518-21, "Lying on the ground with a stone pillow, I will give up my last breath in lamentation. Do not count any of the tyrants happy, before they die".

In the same episode, in the second monologue after her entrance on stage, in verses 385-89 Cassandra states, "And those whom Ares took, they did not see their children and the hands of their wives did not shroud them, but they lie buried in a foreign land", also in verses 390-91 she says that "and no one was there to offer a little blood to their graves", as well as in verses 396-99 that "and those whom the pole killed, their own people brought them to their homes dead and buried them in their native land shrouded". Neglecting the duties that corresponded to the living in relation to the dead, namely the etiquette of mourning and burial, was a very serious event, so much so that it could provoke the wrath of the gods, and it is a theme that constantly recurs throughout Greek antiquity and especially in tragedy.

The second episode opens with painful cries, in a commode between Andromache and Hecuba, with the former lamenting the hostile disposition of the gods, attributing to them the responsibility for the destruction of Troy and then, in a long lamentation, speaking of the fate that awaits her. Then, in lines 644-5 she refers to the fact that the Greeks offered Polyxena as a sacrifice at the tomb of Achilles, "Your daughter Polyxena is slain; they slaughtered her at the tomb of Achilles, a gift for his lifeless shadow", while in line 653 Andromache refers to the ritual, saying characteristically, "I covered her with veils and wept over her dead body".

A little later in the same episode, in verses 757-61, we see the magnitude of the importance of the burial of the deceased, when the herald Talthybius advises Andromache to behave wisely and to renounce any inclination to resist, because in this way they would recklessly lose the last concession, namely that they be allowed to bury the child, "If you utter a bad word that angers the army, then your son will not be buried nor will they have mercy on him. If you do not speak, enduring the calamity calmly, he will not remain unburied and the Achaeans will show a better opinion of you." The second episode ends with Andromache holding Astyanax in her arms, lamenting, leaving the scene with a pang of pain

In the third stanza of the drama, the Chorus, in lines 1091-93, laments for the men of Troy who were lost in battle and whose bodies remained unburied and for this reason their souls cannot rest "Oh! my dear, oh! my husband, who are you lost and your body remains unburied and unwashed, and your soul flutters here and there".

The soul had to fight to free itself from the body (psychorragain), while if a promise had remained unfulfilled or kinship ties and family obligations had been neglected, the soul could not leave the body easily.

The play's conclusion is nothing more than an endless lament that escalates the lament for Astyanax even more intensely. Talthybius makes his entrance holding Astyanax's corpse and conveys to Hecuba Andromache's words about how to bury her son in lines 1149-56, while also referring to the burial process, "Her little one asked to be buried in this (Hector's bronze shield) instead of a cedar coffin, instead of a stone tomb. He told us to place him in your arms and to decorate him with wreaths and veils", while in verse 1160 Talthybius, passing by Scamander, washed the child's body and is now ready to dig a grave for him, "I washed the dead body and its wounds" and ultimately helps in the burial of this innocent victim.

Hecuba, in her funeral oration over the body of her dead grandson in verse 1192, refers to the custom of offering hair to the dead, “I will cut my best braid for you from my hair and bring it to your grave” and in verses 1208-10 her long lamentation continues, with a commode in which she refers to the funeral attire “Go and bring whatever ornaments we have left for our unfortunate dead; for rich funeral attire is not our lot.”

In lines 1215-16, the Trojan Chorus follows Hecuba's orders and adorns the dead body with whatever coins they have saved from the disaster, “Behold, Phrygian spoils these women bring the dead to you to adorn”, while their mournful cries accompany the mourning process. In line 1229, Hecuba, speaking to the corpse of Astyanax, says characteristically, “With Phrygian ornaments and veils I adorn your body” while in lines 1231-32 she offers a wreath on the shield of her dead son Hector, “And you, my good shield of Hector, take this wreath from me”.

The decoration and the *prothesis* of Astyanax's corpse are realized on stage, with his father's shield becoming his tomb instead of offering him protection. His grandmother Hecuba, in her lament, emphasizes the marriage that Astyanax would have made if he had lived, as well as the contrast between the body of her son Hector while he was alive and his shield (f, 1194-99). The play ends in a paroxysm of suffering with Hecuba, after a short lamentation, wanting to throw herself into the fire. The end of the play is composed by a commode, with the women crying out their pain to the dead.

4. Conclusions

It is clear that the play vividly depicts the suffering of war through the destruction of Troy, and pain, mourning and lamentation play a leading role, expressing loss and evoking pity for the women and children. We could say that the entire drama is a funeral ritual for the lost city of Troy itself, as from the very beginning Hecuba, lying on the ground, sings with the Chorus a lament that focuses on the consequences of war, especially for women.

Hecuba mourns for the city and its wealth, since she is no longer the queen of Troy since the city was destroyed. The women, through their mourning and heartbreak, one could say that they are “burying” the dead city and with it their lives, which will never be the same, just before they depart for their new reality as slaves of the Greeks. For the men of Troy, war is synonymous with death, and the women honor their dead with their mourning, since they are unable to bury their dead bodies, constantly emphasizing the vital importance of not leaving the bodies unburied.

The simple ritual of the burial of the little Astyanax at the end of the play emphasizes even more the necessity of burying the dead in ancient Greek society, when with whatever means they have and even though they have nothing left as everything has been destroyed, the women decorate and bury the dead body on his father's shield, with Talthylus contributing significantly to the process by respecting and cleansing the body of the dead child.

References

- Albin Lesky (2010). *Η τραγική ποίηση των αρχαίων Ελλήνων – Ο Ευριπίδης και το τέλος του είδους*, μτφρ. Νίκος Χ. Χουρμούζιαδης, Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης, Αθήνα.
- Ευριπίδης (1992). *Τρωάδες*, Αρχαία Ελληνική Γραμματεία «οι Έλληνες», μτφρ Τάσος Ρούσος, Κάκτος, Αθήνα.
- Margaret Alexiou (2008). *Ο τελετουργικός θρήνος στην Ελληνική παράδοση*, Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης, Αθήνα.
- Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz (2021). *Τρωάδες*, Laura K. McClure, *ΕΥΡΙΠΙΔΗΣ – 35 ΜΕΛΕΤΕΣ*, μτφρ. Δ. Μουρατίδης Φ. Πετίκα-Ψαρούλη Μ.Δ Ράμου Ε. Σιστάκου Α. Ρεγκάκος, University Studio Press, Θεσσαλονίκη.