

The agon of hope and fear

In seneca's Troades

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Too many critics argue that seneca wrote his tragedies to expound his philosophic doctrines, and they are not meant to be acted⁽¹⁾, for they are totally without dramatic life⁽²⁾. These critic's overall opinion has been largely rejected for a number of very good reasons⁽³⁾.

It seems to me that the cause of this hostile opinion towards seneca's tragedies is clear: by comparison with most Greek tragedies senecan tragedy is deficient in strict unity of action in the Aristotelian sense. However, to examine seneca's tragedies in this sense, only, is to ignore much of the power of these tragedies. The tragedy which I propose to discuss in this paper is the Troades⁽⁴⁾.

Throughout the Troades, hope and fear have been represented as a tangle of inescapable oppositions and contradictions between individuals; Agamemnon and Pyrrhus, Andromache and Ulysses. In the construction of this type of plot, where parallel and contrast are raised to principle of dramatic structure, unity may come through conflicting themes and motifs.

The prologue portrays the destruction of Troy as complete⁽⁵⁾. The city's protector, Hector, is dead, the city fallen and in flames. Priam, its king, is dead and thought of as buried under his entire kingdom⁽⁶⁾, or lying on the shore a

headless corpse ⁽⁷⁾. Troy is thus so completely destroyed that there appears to be no further evil to be feared ⁽⁸⁾, and no other resort but a hope in the future.

For the conquered, Troy might live on through priam's line, and this is the way plots begin to move in the course of the tragedy. First, Agamemnon hopes to save priam's daughter, Polyxena ⁽⁹⁾, and then Andromache hopes to save his grandson, Astyanax ⁽¹⁰⁾. Dramatic excitement and suspense are generated by these two attempts.

Agamemnon had not wanted Troy leveled to the ground ⁽¹¹⁾, as Hecuba has described it in the prologue ⁽¹²⁾, and he now hopes what is left of Troy to survive ⁽¹³⁾. When Agamemnon recommends a policy of mercy towards the conquered, it is because he recognizes the equality of the present Greek success and Troy's past glory ⁽¹⁴⁾. The similarity makes him fear priam's fate:

Tu me superbum, Priame, tu timidum facis ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Priam, you make me proud, you make me afraid.

Agamemnon's hope to rescue Polyxena puts him in conflict with Pyrrhus. Victory for Pyrrhus is power, a licence to inflict anything on the defeated ⁽¹⁶⁾, Agamemnon redefines it as dangerous good fortune, a warning to preserve moderation ⁽¹⁷⁾. Pyrrhus comes to the conclusion that fear lies behind Agamemnon's rejection of Polyxena's sacrifice. He accuses his general of cowardice (*Timide, cum increpuit metus* ⁽¹⁸⁾), cowardly, when fear has unnerved you; *Tu gravi pavidus metu, nec..... fortis..... tremens* ⁽¹⁹⁾, you, quaking with crippling fear, not courageous..... trembling,).

Dramatic excitement and suspense are generated by Agamemnon's debate with Pyrrhus, and if Agamemnon had won, the ultimate fate of the city would

have been different, for the royal Trojan line could have been survived. The hope could have been accomplished, and there could have been a movement in the play towards a happier future. Instead, this potential movement is blocked by Calchas' declaration that the Fates demand the deaths of both Polyxena and Astyanax ⁽²⁰⁾. Agamemnon silently surrenders; his hope to save what was left of Troy is frustrated, and he has no further role to play in the tragedy. While Polyxena is brave (*animus..... fortis* ⁽²¹⁾), proud (*audax virago* ⁽²²⁾), and defiant (*ferox* ⁽²³⁾), in facing her doom, Agamemnon, on the contrary, could not defuse his fear.

The persistent fear robs even the victor, Agamemnon, of power for (*clementia*) mercy. Agamemnon whose natural identification should be with power is disassociated from the victorious Greeks by his preoccupation with the past destruction of Troy:

*equidem fatebor - pace dixisse hoc tua,
Argiva tellus, liceat - affigi phrygas
vincique volui: ruere et aequari solo
etiam arcuissem, sed regi frenis nequit
et ira et ardens hostis et victoria
commissa nocti. quidquid indignum aut ferum
cuiquam videri potuit, hoc fecit dolor
tenebraeque..... (24).*

For my part, I'll confess - forgive me for saying that,
O Argive land, I wished to see the phrygians beaten down
and conquered: but overthrown and raved to the ground-
would that I could have spared them that, but wrath the fiery foeman,
victory given to night's charge, these cannot be kept in hand.
These could be deemed unworthy in me or brutal,
pain and darkness made that.

Now, we come to the agon of hope and fear in the Andromacheo Ulysses scene. The theme is taken up from the preceding choral ode and explored more fully ⁽²⁵⁾. Andromache moved by the appearance of Hector in her dreams ⁽²⁶⁾, tries desperately to save Astyanax, who is the only hope for the Phrygians, *spes una Phrygibus* ⁽²⁷⁾, so that he might revive Troy, make war upon the Greeks, and avenge the death of his father. Astyanax demolishes Andromache's fear (*nihil timere*) ⁽²⁸⁾, and fills her with hope ⁽²⁹⁾.

For the Greeks Astyanax is to be feared, he is the male child, and symbolizes for the Greeks the military potential of the surviving people of Troy, and as such he must be killed. He is the living successor of Priam and Hector. When he is mentioned for the first time, Calchas refers to him as, Hector's child, the grandson of Priam, (*Priami nepos Hectoreus*) ⁽³⁰⁾. His name is never used, he is always identified through his relationship either to one or the other of the ruling house or to Troy; as the 'small shoot of the house' (*parvulam stirpem domus,*) ⁽³¹⁾, a defender and champion of Troy (*Troici defensor et videx soli*), ⁽³²⁾, a future Hector ⁽³³⁾, a glory of a fallen house ⁽³⁴⁾. The Greeks fear that Astyanax will one day threaten their children:

magna res Danaos movet,

futurus Hector: libra Graios metu. ⁽³⁵⁾

a great consideration drives the Danaans,

a future Hector: Free the Greeks from fear.

Ulysses tries to justify himself by rationalizing the unavailability of killing the boy ⁽³⁶⁾, and by making it clear that he is the mere agent of fate and the army command: (*Graiorum omnium procerumque vox est*) ⁽³⁷⁾ my voice is that of all the Greek chieftains. Yet, Ulysses could not conceal his own fear of

Hector's son, who is likely to become a second Hector:

*dicebat Hector, cuius et stirpem horreo;
generosa in ortus semina exurgunt suos* ⁽³⁸⁾.

Hector used to say it, and I shudder at his offspring,
nobility's seeds grow up to equal their sourse.

The arrest of Astyanax in the tomb of Hector ⁽³⁹⁾ where he was hiding threatens the hope of the Trojans while, at the same time, reinforces the fear of the Greeks. Ulysses believes that he is protecting the mothers and children of Greece from future bloodshed ⁽⁴⁰⁾, and protecting ultimately his own son Telemachus ⁽⁴¹⁾.

Andromache, However, struggles to protect her hope, to save Astyanax from death. When Andromache has Astyanax kneel in supplication to Ulysses ⁽⁴²⁾, she likens her son to Priam, and she invokes Hercules' act of mercy as a precedent:

*iacet ante pedes non minor illo
supplice supplex vitamque petit* ⁽⁴³⁾.

At your feet is prostrated a suppliant not less
than that other suppliant, and he appeals for his life.

The attempt at supplication is doomed, and self - defeating, for in calling Ulysses' attention to Hercules' act of mercy to Priam, Andromache reinforces the association of her son with his noble Trojan ancestry, and thereby provides Ulysses with the very reasons why the child must not be allowed to escape: she reminds Ulysses of what Astyanax might grow up to threaten. Hence, Ulysses' answer is that while he is moved by a mother's grief, he is more moved by the fear of the same grief facing mothers in Greece ⁽⁴⁴⁾. And then, Andromache tries desperately to appease Ulysses' fears on this account by changing her

definition of Astyanax from a royal prince and threat to Greece to a mere child, a slave, and no threat at all ⁽⁴⁵⁾. Yet she fails to save her son; her hope, and he is led off by Ulysses ⁽⁴⁶⁾ where he faces death fearlessly (*intrepidus*) ⁽⁴⁷⁾ and defiantly (*ferox,*) ⁽⁴⁸⁾.

Thus, it is this paradox: the parallelism between the efficient victors unable to feel secure and the deficient victims able to cause fear. In other words, the persistent fear robs the victors of feeling power while hope fills the victims with power. The Troades is not, therefore, if considered in the light of its dramatic attitudes and tension, a debased tragedy, but it speaks for some sort of unity on which I hope to have shed some light .

Notes

(1) Tyrrell, R.Y., Latin Poetry, Oxford, 1895, p. 93.

Mendell, C.W., Our seneca, New Haven, 1941, p. 23.

Beare, W., The Roman stage, London, 1964, p. 42.

(2) Mackail, J.W., Latin Literature, Oxford, 1895, p. 26.

(3) I refer here to some studies which represent the opposite opinion towards seneca's tragedies: Coffey, M.C., Seneca and his Tragedies, PACA, vol. 3, 1960 pp. 14-19.

Barden, G., The Rhetoric And Psychology of Power In The Dramas of Seneca, Arion 9, 1970, pp. 5-41.

Shelton, J.A., A Dramatization of Inner Experience; The Opening Scene of Seneca's Agamemnon, Ramus, 6, 1977, pp. 33-43.

See also my Ph.D dissertation:

Gods And Morals In Senecas' Prose And Verse Writings.

(4) I choosed one of seneca's tragedies which I have not dealt with in my Ph.D dissertation.

(5) Troades, vv. 1-163.

(6) Ibid, v. 30.

(7) Ibid, V. 141.

(8) Hecuba, for example, refuses to be subjugated in spirit as she is subjugated in body . She redefines herself as a source of fear: *sola sum Dannis metus* (v. 62): I alone am a Terror to Greeks.

Andromache is another example: on having Astyanax, she fears nothing (*nihil timere* v. 423).

(9) Troades, vv. 250-370.

(10) Ibid, vv. 409-813.

(11) Ibid, vv. 278-279.

(12) Ibid, vv. 14-15.

(13) Ibid, vv. 285-286.

(14) Ibid, vv. 265-266.

(15) Ibid, v. 270.

(16) Ibid, v. 333, 335.

(17) Ibid, v. 273-275.

(18) Ibid, v. 302.

(19) Ibid, vv. 315-317.

(20) Ibid, vv. 360-370.

(21) Ibid, v. 1146, 1153.

(22) Ibid, v. 1151.

(23) Ibid, v. 1152.

(24) Ibid, vv. 276-283.

(25) See the choral ode line 399. Fear is expressed in lines 423, 425-426, 431, 437, 477, 496, 505, 513, 515, 530, 548, 551, 576, 586, 588, 592, f., 609 f, 612, 618, 626, 631-632, 642, 662, 742, 767,

790. Hope and loss of hope is expressed in lines 425, 490, 741, cf. Andromache speeches 461-476 and 768 ff.

(26) Troades, v. 443 ff.

(27) Ibid, v. 462.

(28) Ibid, v. 423.

(29) Ibid, vv. 469-474.

(30) Ibid, v. 369.

(31) Ibid, v. 456.

(32) Ibid, v. 471.

(33) Ibid, v. 551.

(34) Ibid, v. 766.

(35) Ibid, vv. 550-551.

(36) Ibid, vv. 529-551.

(37) Ibid, v. 526 f.

(38) Ibid, vv. 335-536.

(39) Hector's tomb, where Astyanax is hidden in order to save his life, has a symbolic and dramatic function. Since we hear of *futurus Hector* (v.551), we could say that the tomb unifies Astyanax with his father Hector who may come to life through him.

(40) Troades, v. 737.

(41) Ibid, vv. 592-593.

(42) Ibid, vv. 708-717.

(43) Ibid, vv. 732-733.

(44) Ibid, vv. 736-738.

(45) Ibid, vv. 739-748.

(46) Ibid, v. 813.

(47) Ibid, v. 1093.

(48) Ibid, v. 1098.