Tragic Troy and Athens: heroic space in Attic drama
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Summary

This book examines the physical presentation of the heroic world in tragedy, in short the ‘tragic world’. This presentation includes the landscape, buildings, and objects of this world.

1. Heroic space in tragedy: the state of the art
The heroic world belongs to the distant past of the Greeks and is presented by them in literature and visual arts. Ancient and modern scholars have examined the heroic past in tragedy and have primarily identified ‘faults’ in its presentation (e.g. scholiasts, Stricker). They regard the Homeric epics as the model for the tragic world and deviations from Homer as incorrect. This view is probably based on Homer’s paramount position in classical Greek society and his dominant influence on Greek literature. Non-Homeric elements are ascribed by interpreters to the time of the tragedians themselves, called ‘anachronisms’, and treated in terms of an artistic failure; ‘incongruous’ and ‘dramatically inappropriate’ are commonly used phrases for them (e.g. Stevens, Lee). Easterling, who has analysed the language of anachronism, states that its conspicuousness is toned down by the use of vague and poetic words. For this convention she introduces the term ‘heroic vagueness’. Some scholars distance themselves from the idea of a Homeric world and regard the tragic world as by and large a reflection of the present.

This study analyses the supposed Homeric character of the tragic world and the literary function of contemporary elements. Are they really ‘dramatically inappropriate’ or do they have a function in the plot?

2. Remembering heroic space: a framework of analysis
The analysis of the form of the tragic world makes use of the interdisciplinary theory of Memory Studies, which analyses the processes that influence a representation of the past. The heroic representations of the tragedians are dependent on three factors:

(1) Tradition: the tragedians have to follow predecessors (poets, artists) whose representations had already become authoritative in the community. Every tradition, as the sum of earlier representations of the past, contains elements, such as events, people, and spaces, that cannot be omitted in a new representation. These elements are called the ‘canon’ of the past and lend the new representation authority.

(2) Innovation: the tradition also contains elements that can change. Representations of the past must remain meaningful for the community, even when the social and cultural situations are changing. The tradition is therefore continuously...
adjusted to the beliefs, needs, and values of the community in the present. This means that traditional elements that no longer support present conditions are ‘forgotten’ and that contemporary elements are projected onto the past. This process is partly conscious and partly unconscious. Traditional elements that no longer support the context are sometimes nonetheless preserved in a new representation as archaisations, if they are considered ‘genuine’ or ‘typical’ elements of the past. Using the example of the changing characterisation of the heroic king Theseus, I demonstrate that the Greek heroic world is dynamic and that the concept of anachronism, which presupposes a fixed (static) world, cannot be applied to it.

(3) Lieux de mémoire: places in the real, actual landscape can be associated with the past. On the one hand, the archaic and classical Greeks related physical landmarks to existing traditions; on the other, elements of the landscape could inspire new stories about the past. A single landmark is sometimes connected to various, even mutually contradictory, stories. The analysis of the function of spatial elements in the plot makes use of literary theory on space. Space has one of the following roles in a story: (1) setting: space that creates a location for the events; (2) thematic function: space that supports or reflects a theme of the plot; (3) symbolic function: space that contains cultural or ideological connotations; (4) characterising function: space that relates to the traits or disposition of a character; (5) psychologising function: space that bears on the feelings or emotions of a character.

3. Troy
This chapter investigates the presentation of Troy in tragedy. Comparisons between tragic and Homeric Troy evaluate the supposed Homeric character of the tragic world.

The presentation of tragic Troy contains canonical spaces adopted from the tradition. On the one hand, they are characteristic spaces intrinsically connected to Troy, such as the river Scamander and Mount Ida. On the other hand, they are linked to canonical events, such as the tomb of Achilles where the sacrifice of Polyxena takes place. Canonical spaces legitimise the representation of the past and at the same time have a dramatic function in the plot (characterising, thematic). Some canonical spaces of tragic Troy are also present in Homeric Troy. This need not imply imitation of Homer, as Homer and the tragedians could have followed the same canonical traditions, independently. Several canonical spaces, such as the tomb of Achilles, are present in the real, contemporary landscape of Troy as lieux de mémoire. These places support the memory of the stories connected to them.

The tragedians also fill Troy with non-canonical spaces, such as the temple of Artemis and the sacred groves in the Trojan plain. These spaces are invented by
the tragedians themselves and are therefore absent in Homeric Troy. Like canonical spaces, invented ones have a dramatic function in the plot. They are not ‘dramatically inappropriate’ or ‘incongruous’, as scholars have claimed.

As for construction, buildings and objects in tragedy (both traditional and innovative) do not resemble those in Homer but those of the fifth century. In other words, they are projections of the contemporary time of the tragedian. For example, temples in Homer are built with a stone foundation and a thatched roof, but those in tragedy are provided with colonnades, triglyphs, and golden sculptures that are characteristic of fifth-century temples. Other examples of projection in tragic Troy include the gymnasium, the agyieus altar, and the inscription on Astyanax’ grave. Since contemporary buildings and objects are generally described in contemporary language, Easterling’s concept of ‘heroic vagueness’ must be rejected.

The tragedians do not refer to specific buildings of archaic-classical Troy (Troia VIII), such as the sanctuary of Cybele. These buildings were probably regarded as too modern for the heroic past. Thus, buildings in tragic Troy have a generic contemporary design. Conversely, the tragedians refer to tombs of the real, classical Troad. Since some of these dated from the Bronze Age, references to these tombs archaise tragic Troy.

4. Athens
This chapter examines the presentation of Athens in tragedy. Since Athens plays only a marginal role in Homer, the tragedians use local traditions for the presentation of the city. The presentation of Athens shows similarities as well as differences from that of Troy.

A first similarity is the dominant influence of tradition. The tragedians use canonical spaces for the presentation of Athens: both characteristic spaces, such as the palace of Erechtheus, and spaces connected to canonical events, such as the Long Rocks where the Cecropids fall. Several canonical spaces are present in the real, actual landscape of Athens as lieux de mémoire. The fact that the tragedians more frequently refer to Athenian than to Trojan lieux de mémoire does not imply that Athens contained more lieux de mémoire than Troy, but that the tragedians and their audience were better acquainted with heroic spaces in Athens than in Troy.

Like tragic Troy the tragedians fill tragic Athens with innovative (non-canonical) spaces. They invented these spaces in the case of Troy but adopted them from the real, actual landscape in the case of Athens. An example of an innovative (non-canonical) space adopted from the real landscape is the cave in the Long Rocks, which Euripides presents as the place where Ion is exposed. Had the tragedians modelled heroic Athens according to their own imagination, as in the
case of heroic Troy, the tragic city would presumably contrast too much with the real city, which was known to the audience.

Buildings and objects in tragic Athens resemble equivalents of the fifth century, as do those in Troy. Examples include the *peripteros* temple of Athena, her statue with a Gorgon shield, and the ballot stones of the Areopagites. Scholars have identified buildings and objects of tragic Athens with specific equivalents in the classical city, such as the Parthenon and the statue of Athena Parthenos. Nevertheless, since tragedy does not contain references to specific (unique) elements of classical buildings and objects, it is in my view more likely that the tragedians present structures with a generic contemporary design, as in the case of tragic Troy.

By referring to specific old elements of actual Athens, such as the olive tree and the Long Rocks, but not to specific modern buildings, such as the Parthenon, the tragedians archaise the image of Athens in their plays. This is also the case for tragic Troy, in which case the tragedians refer to old tombs on the actual plain but not to modern buildings of contemporary Troy.