"Escaping" Tragedy: Metadramatic ὄψεις of Euripides' *Helen* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*

Justina Gregory (2005) claims that "allusions to the chorus and actors as inhabiting the world of the theater, or to the audience as spectators of a play, are now acknowledged to have a place in tragedy as well as comedy." Greek tragic poets being self-conscious and realizing the artistic status of their work would explicitly or implicitly comment on the theatrical context of their plays, their *mythopoiesis*, and conventions of the theatrical experience. Poetic self-awareness is especially distinct in Euripides, as Isabelle Torrance (2013) has recently argued. According to Torrance, Euripides in his tragedies aims at underlining his skills as a tragic poet, employing a variety of strategies to highlight the novelties of his *mythopoiesis*.

In this paper, I argue that Euripides emphasizes his skills as a scriptwriter and draws attention to the dynamics of his poetry not only on a *metapoetic* level which "reminds the audience of tragedy's status as a scripted poetic composition" (Torrance 2013); but mostly on a *metadramatic/metatheatrical* level that reaffirms tragedy's status as a performance, broadening the audience's theatrical experience. When a poet seeks to make his audience aware of his poetic identity and the conventions of his art, then his work is rendered self-referential, and drama becomes metadrama. I suggest that the metadramatic aspect of Euripides' plays is mostly conveyed through a character who takes on the role of the on-stage creator, functioning as the poet's literary analogue. These characters conceive a deceptive inset play that offers insights into the poetics of Euripides' plays, transforming the audience's theatrical experience into a metadramatic/metatheatrical one.

More specifically, I focus on two of Euripides' "romantic intrigue plays": *Helen* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. I contend that these two plays feature two female figures, Helen and

Iphigenia respectively, who control the dramatic action and display superior knowledge in playacting. Their authorial role and the self-reflectivity of Euripidean poetics are realized in three interweaving ways.

First, both tragedies include key-words that point at the deceptive quality of Helen's and Iphigenia's plots, resonating the illusionistic nature of theatrical mimesis: μηχανή, τέχνη, λόγος, μῦθος, σόφισμα. Both Helen and Iphigenia conceptualize and act out an escape plot, based on deceit whose success depends on their skill to play a role and mislead their on-stage audiences. According to Gorgias, poets were almost expected to "deceive" their listeners and in doing so they were fulfilling the obligation that is the true nature of their art (Falkner 1998). Therefore, Helen's and Iphigenia's illusionary inner plays, which expose the distinction between illusion and reality, could be viewed as a reflection of the actual Euripidean plays, enabling their real-life audiences to explore a quintessential mechanism and convention of theater and dramatic illusion.

Secondly, both inset poets display a high level of awareness of all the information that is integral to the development of their plots, and just like actual poets they combine them to create successful plays. Euripides' heroines are characters (with the exclusion perhaps of the chorus) who know what is the λόγος and what the ἔργον about them, how to manipulate, convince or deceive other characters, where fiction starts and where reality ends. The interplay between illusion and reality is particularly prominent in their interaction with their on-stage audiences, which argues for Helen's and Iphigenia's poetic status and therefore the metadramatic effect of Euripides' titular plays.

Greek tragedy imitates reality through techniques of make-believe that create an engaging illusion and "by creating illusion tragedy seeks to convey truth" (Segal 1997). The spectators silently accept this convention of dramatic illusion knowing that what they watch is a

fiction, but simultaneously they allow themselves to be "deceived" by the illusionistic power of the theater, staged by the dramatist. This twofold experience that the playwright creates for his audience is reflected on Helen's and Iphigenia's interaction with their on-stage audiences: Theonoe (*Helen*) and the chorus (*Iphigenia in Tauris*) on the one hand project the "silent" agreement between poet and spectators, as they agree not to reveal the poetesses' on-stage illusion, while Theoclymenus and Thoas respectively are "trapped" in Helen's and Iphigenia's deception.

Finally, I argue that these two Euripidean tragedies which are carefully structured around a pattern of illusion-reality-deception-escape (new reality) show that Euripides is fully aware of tragedy's status as performance, and that he seeks to enable his spectators to experience his plays on several levels at the same time, as successful theatrical viewing requires (Gregory 2005).

Bibliography

Falkner, T. 1998. "Containing Tragedy: Rhetoric and Self-Representation in Sophocles'
   Philoctetes." *CA,* Vol.17 No.1, 25-58.

Gregory, J. 2005. "Euripidean Tragedy." In J. Gregory, ed., *Companion to Greek Tragedy*.
   Malden. 251-270.

Segal, C. 1997. *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae*. New Jersey.

Torrance, I. 2013. *Metapoetry in Euripides*. Oxford.