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Euripides's *Trojan Women*: A Critique of Asymmetric Conflict?

In this paper we attempt to answer to the following question: In *Trojan Women*, is Euripides criticizing a degeneration of agonism—something we might label as ‘asymmetric conflict’? The question is worth exploring because *Trojan Women* is well known as a powerful, tragic play, which puts the condition of the enslaved (and barbaric, to a Greek eye) women of Troy on stage. The story is certainly well-suited to such a social criticism. Although interpretations and academic studies of *Trojan Women* are more than abundant, our argument is not inspired by secondary literature about the play. Rather, it is inspired by a problem that we continue to face nowadays, namely, that agonistic conflict can easily degenerate into asymmetric conflict—as when somebody too desirous of victory takes unfair advantage of a weaker enemy. Reading the *Trojan Women*, we had the impression that it offered a literary instance of this experience. After developing that first impression with a close reading of this text—and, of course, secondary literature about it—we believe that the *Trojan Women* offers an important and enduring critique of ‘asymmetric conflict.’

Agonism and asymmetric Conflict

Let us start with some definitions. Defining agonism is not easy, given its often concealed presence in a surprising number of human (and non-human) activities. Our starting point is Roger Caillois's definition in *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958), a work in which the French anthropologist not only examines the concept of *agōn* but also its degenerations. The *agōn* is in fact one of the four categories in Caillois's games classification:

A whole group of games would seem to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should

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confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph. It is therefore always a question of a rivalry which hinges on a single quality (speed, endurance, strength, memory, skill, ingenuity, etc.), exercised, within defined limits and without outside assistance, in such a way that the winner appears to be better than the loser in a certain category of exploits.³

The elements of this classification are helpful to circumscribe the concept of *agōn* and to explain its degeneration. First of all, in every competitive activity there must be some "equality of chance," and this means that all the participants in the competition must have, at least in theory, a chance to win (and to prove their value). Secondly, there are certain internal and external limits to the competitive activity which cannot be exceeded (such as time and space, no external assistance, etc.). Therefore, we can summarize the definition of a proper *agōn* in the following way: it is an activity regulated by (implicit or explicit) rules which provide equality of opportunity, in which two or more people challenge each other in order to defeat the other and to affirm themselves. In this regulated activity, the impulses of the individual may burst forth, but should never exceed the limits established.⁴

We understand the concept of conflict, by contrast, as something more general than that of agonism. By conflict we mean any oppositional relationship between individual or collective subjects. In this frame, agonism is a type of symmetrical conflict because the powers of the participants are not so different as to make the competition meaningless. Conversely, if the object of the

³ Roger Caillois, *Man, play and games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 14.

⁴ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Early Notebooks* (KSA VII, 402): "Competition unleashes the individual, while at the same time restraining it in accordance with eternal laws". Cf. Tobias Joho, "The Internal Commotion of Greek Culture: Jacob Burckhardt on the Defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War," *KTÈMA Civilisations de l'Orient, de la Grèce et de Rome antiques* 42, (2017): 127-50.

rivalry is the destruction of the adversary and, at the same time, the relations between the participants are so disproportionate as to render the competition itself devoid of its agonistic nature, we are faced with something that is not an *agōn*. If we think, for example, of the scenes—so frequent in Euripides—of women's suffering in war, of female vengeance, and of struggle between Greeks and barbarians, we are no longer in the agonistic field. These contrasts are rather examples of what we call “asymmetric conflict.”⁵ When the condition of starting symmetry is not satisfied, the conflict has nothing to do with agonism since it aims at the pure and simple annihilation of the opponent. Consequently, agonistic conflict degenerates, according to the modalities indicated by Caillois (violence, will to power, trickery) into asymmetric conflict.⁶

The concepts of “agonism” and “asymmetric conflict” are helpful. Nevertheless, they could seem to be too abstract if we do not locate them in a concrete historical context. Our aim is to test these concepts through the vehicle of ancient Greece. Hellenic culture had its roots in a form of agonism, particularly in education (*paideia*).⁷ Furthermore, as argued by Friedrich Nietzsche, the agonism in Greek education brought with it a cure for the disease intrinsic to most human societies since it curbed impulses that otherwise would have resulted in violent and dangerous disruptions to the social order.⁸

Greek theatre and its didactic role

It is difficult to find an area of Greek life completely devoid of competitive connotations. One of the fundamental media of Greek education, the theatre, cannot be placed outside of the agonistic perspective. Neil Croally nicely captures this point: “the dramatic

⁵ The expression is ours, but see C. Segal, “Violence and the Other: Greek, Female, and Barbarian in Euripides' Hecuba,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 120, (1990): 109 for a discussion of the asymmetrical contrast of Greek and barbarian.

⁶ Caillois, *Man, play and games*, 54.

⁷ W. Jaeger, *Paideia*. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1934–47); J. Burckhardt, *Cultural History of Greece*, trans. Palmer Hilty (New York: Ungar, 1963).

⁸ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest* (KSA I, 783).

festival shared the competitive nature of the public sphere as a whole. Tragedy was agonistic, and both dramatists and protagonists competed for prizes, just like athletes in the Olympic games.”⁹ The centrality of Athenian dramatic *agōnes* in the life of the *polis* should not be overestimated. We can characterize the tragic play as a public display, as a representation or auto-representation of the *polis* and of its citizens.¹⁰ To use Jean-Pierre Vernant’s characterization:

Tragedy is contemporaneous with the City and its legal system. [...] What is talking and what is talked about is the audience on the benches, but first of all it is the City: the City which puts itself on the stage and plays itself.¹¹

Therefore, tragedies have been often interpreted as didactic discourses (didactic in a very broad sense, as something that is part of Greek *paideia*) aimed at transmitting values and ideas.¹² For example, the didactic importance of tragedies is embodied in the *agōn* between Euripides and Aeschylus in Aristophanes’s *Frogs*,

⁹ Neil T. Croally, *Euripidean Polemic: The Trojan Women and the Function of Tragedy* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3. Cf. Plutarch, *Cimon*, 8. 7-9.

¹⁰ Claire Nancy, *Euripide et le parti des femmes* (Paris: Editions rue d’Ulm, 2016), 14; Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Le miroir brisé. Tragédie athénienne et politique* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2001), 61-2, evokes the image of a broken mirror: “Il ne faut pas chercher à voir dans la tragédie un miroir de la cité ; ou , plus exactement, si l’on veut garder l’image d’un miroir, ce miroir est brisé et chaque éclat renvoie tout à la fois à telle ou telle réalité sociale et à toutes les autres, en mêlant étroitement les différents codes.”

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Greek tragedy: Problems of interpretation,” in *The structuralist controversy*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 278-9. Vernant underlines how capitalizing the word allows the City to become like a dramatic character.

¹² Croally, *Euripidean Polemic*, 35, sees the function of tragedy as didactic in nature, with its purpose to question ideology. Among others, see Nancy, *Euripide et le parti des femmes*, 14; Casey Dué, *The Captive Woman’s Lament in Greek Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 137.

where the two poets argue about which was the most useful for the education of the Athenians.¹³

The use of theatre as education to transmit political values to a wide audience—we could say to the entire male population of the *polis* if we keep in mind the large number of spectators who attended the representations¹⁴—was not exclusively a medium for supporting the shared ideology of the moment. Here we will use the term “ideology” to mean something like “the authoritative self-definition of the Athenian citizen.”¹⁵ In such a system, it is possible not only to conform to established ideology, but also to make criticism. An example of such criticism is Euripides's drama, in which the contradictions of Athenian society, especially those arising from the disparity between men and women, were staged.¹⁶ In *Trojan Women*, not only does Euripides show the connections between agonism and war, but he also gives voice to women and slaves, the victims of an agonistic model distorted and transformed into “asymmetric conflict.” In short, Euripides seems to criticize the Athenian ideology of his time by representing the contradiction between their agonistic ideals and their asymmetrical social practices in the theater.¹⁷

Trojan Women

Euripides staged the trilogy *Alexandros*, *Palamedes*, and *Trojan Women*, as well as a satyr play, *Sisyphus*, in 415 BCE, during the Peloponnesian War.¹⁸ Various attempts have been made to

¹³ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, especially 1007-98; Croally, *Euripidean Polemic*, 20-1.

¹⁴ The Dionysian theatre in Athens held up to fourteen thousand people.

¹⁵ This definition is taken from Croally, *Euripidean Polemic*, 44. For the use of “ideology” in relation to ancient societies and in particular Athens see Diego Lanza and Mario Vegetti, “L'ideologia della città,” in *Marxismo e società antica*, ed. Mario Vegetti, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1977), 259-88.

¹⁶ The most obvious contradiction is the following: in Athenian society, only men who had citizenship had decision-making power but the consequences of the political choices fell on the whole society, including women and those males without political rights.

¹⁷ See Dué, *The Captive Woman's Lament*, 149-50.

¹⁸ See Nancy S. Rabinowitz, “Trojan Women,” in *A Companion to Euripides*, ed. Lura K. McClure, (New York: Blackwell, 2017), 199-210.

describe the plot of *Trojan Women*. Some say it is a play about “the dreadful effects of war,” and thus a condemnation of purposeless and excessive bellicosity. Others say it is a drama of “total nihilism;” still others an anti-war piece.¹⁹ Even if the author’s intent is not clear at first glance, we can, however, say something with respect to the form and structure of the tragedy. Following the indications of Ann Suter,²⁰ we may observe that the whole tragedy is a lament. It was meant to make women heard through an authoritative voice. Indeed, Euripides’s strategy is to use this female genre as a form of political criticism.

We also agree with Casey Dué when she says that *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).”²¹ The central point therefore seems to be that Euripides uses the genre of lamentations, connoted as the proper place in which women had the possibility to speak, to carry out a critique of a certain aspect of Athenian ideology that would have led to the defeat of Athens itself in the Peloponnesian War. As well as the internal audience of the tragedy (the Achaean soldiers), the real audience (Athenians) could start to reflect and possibly think about criticizing mainstream Athenian ideology.²²

The hypothesis that Euripides wrote this tragedy in strict connection with the pillage of Melos is disputed among scholars. *Trojan Women* was first performed in March of 415 BCE, three months after the episode of Melos. The city remained largely

¹⁹ See Croally, *Euripidean Polemic*, 253, for bibliographical references.

²⁰ Ann Suter, “Lament in Euripides’ *Trojan Women*,” *Mnemosyne* 56 (2003): 1-28.

²¹ Dué, *The Captive Woman’s Lament*, 136.

²² Suter, “Lament in Euripides’ *Trojan Women*,” 24. But we do not think, as Suter does, that in the finale of the *Trojan Women* it is possible to find a real reconciliation of the contradictions exposed in the tragedy. Euripides intentionally did not portray the funeral rite as an act of contentment and reconciliation, maximizing the pathetic effects of Hecuba’s final lamentation. See Vincenzo Di Benedetto, *Euripide. Troiane*, (Milano: Rizzoli, 2018), 73, 242-3.

neutral during the Peloponnesian War, but in the summer of 416, Athens invaded the island and, after the Melians refused to fight Sparta, the Athenians occupied the city, executing all the adult men and selling the women and children into slavery.²³ Some scholars contend that Euripides would not have had time to write a tragedy referring to this episode;²⁴ for others the connection cannot be omitted, given the resonance that the pillage of Melos had and that Euripides would have represented this historical fact in his tragedy.²⁵ Be that as it may, Euripides did write this play in a period of crucial choices, while his city was in the middle of a war with Sparta. Furthermore, we must draw attention to the fact that there had already been an unsuccessful proposal in 427 BCE of mass execution for the citizenry at Mytilene. Therefore, in different contexts, the Peloponnesian War was a conflict that shared some practices of the Trojan War: killing the men and enslaving the women and children. The tragedy must be read in a strict connection with the political events of the time, as Dué writes:

[I]f we assume that the *Trojan Women* is a play about imperialism (or, more generally, war), and specifically about Athenian imperialism within the context of the Peloponnesian War, we might argue that Euripides has

²³ See Thucydides, 5.84

²⁴ Ruth Scodel, "The Trojan Trilogy of Euripides," *Hypomnemata* 60 (1980): 139; Maria Van Erp Taalman Kip, "Euripides and Melos," *Mnemosyne* 40 (1987): 414-9; Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 219; Keith Sidwell, "Melos and the Trojan Women," in *Trojan Women: a collection of essays*, eds. David Stuttard and Tamsin Shasha (York: AOD, 2001), 30-44; Peter Green, "War and morality in fifth-century Athens: the case of Euripides' Trojan women," *The Ancient History Bulletin* 13 (1999): 97-110; Joseph Roisman, "Contemporary Allusions in Euripides' Trojan Women," *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 15 (1997): 38-47.

²⁵ Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy*, (London: Methuen, 1948), 244; Heinrich Kuch, "Die troische Dramengruppe des Euripides und ihre historischen Grundlagen," in *Die gesellschaftliche Bedeutung des antiken Dramas für seine und für unsere Zeit*, eds. Walter Hofmann and Heinrich Kuch (Berlin: Akademie, 1973), 105-23.

dramatized the effects of war on women in order to challenge the ideology of imperialism.²⁶

The tragedy begins on the beach at the end of the Trojan War; the captive Trojan women await their departure to Greece and their new status as slaves. The Greek herald Talthybius arrives to tell them of their allocation to Achaean men. For the duration of the play, Hecuba remains on stage and interacts with Cassandra and Andromache about the destiny assigned to them. Talthybius enters in the middle of Andromache's speech to announce that the Greeks have decreed the death of Astyanax — Andromache's little son. In the subsequent scene, Menelaus enters to take Helen away, and Hecuba tries unsuccessfully to convince Menelaus to kill her. In the end, Talthybius brings Astyanax's body to the women for burial and the Trojan women depart for the ships.

The first signal of Euripides's critique appears in the end of the prologue, where Poseidon gives the following warning: "Foolish is the mortal who sacks cities and yet, / after giving over to desolation temples and tombs, / holy places of the dead, perishes later himself."²⁷ It seems that the problem with war is that it leads to an excess of violence and the pillaging of sacred sites. Therefore, the victorious army is not satisfied with affirming their own supremacy over the other in the context of an agonal conflict, but the invader rages against the population and the city already won, thus performing an act of *hybris*. This is a clear case of asymmetric and destructive conflict, involving two sides that are evidently not proportioned in power. The violent action in this case will then turn against the one who carried it out: this is the lesson and the warning of Poseidon.²⁸

Cassandra's speech

After the first confrontation between Hecuba and Talthybius, Cassandra enters and encourages the women to celebrate her

²⁶ Dué, *The Captive Woman's Lament*, 149.

²⁷ Euripides, *Troades*, vv. 95–7: μῶρος δὲ θνητῶν ὅστις ἐκπορθεῖ πόλεις / ναοὺς τε τύμβους θ', ἰερά τῶν κεκμηκότων / ἐρημίαι δούς <σφ> αὐτὸς ὤλεθ' ὕστερον.

²⁸ Euripides, *Troades*, vv. 87–97.

"wedding" to her new Greek master, Agamemnon. The other women think Cassandra is crazy, but she in fact has prophetic powers and knows that both Agamemnon and herself will soon die. In a long section of Cassandra's speech, Euripides expresses his critique of the asymmetric conflict with a very emotional and rhetorical discourse:

In their hunt for / Helen, the Greeks lost countless men, /
because of one woman, one love affair. / In a hateful
cause, their general, so clever a man, / killed what was
dearest to him, sacrificing for / his brother his delight in
children in his / house, for the sake of a woman, and / that
a woman who had not been carried / off by force. No, she
went willingly. / Then, after they came to the banks of /
Scamander, they died one by one, / though they were
being stripped of no / boundary lands nor their native
country / with its high towers. And those whom / the war
god took never saw their / children again. They were not
shrouded / in robes by their wives' hands but they / lie in
a foreign land. And it was a similar / story back at home.
The wives died as / widows, the fathers / with no sons in
their houses—they had / brought up their children in
vain. And / there is no one who can let fall an / offering of
blood upon the earth at their / graves.²⁹

Cassandra's speech highlights the horrors of war and underlines the condition of the Achaeans who are forced to fight in a conflict of which Helen is the only cause. It is not difficult to see ironic traits in Agamemnon, when Cassandra defines him as

²⁹ Euripides, *Troades*, vv. 368-82 (Morwood trans.): οἱ διὰ μίαν γυναῖκα καὶ μίαν Κύπριν, / θηρώντες Ἑλένην, μυρίους ἀπάλεσαν. / ὁ δὲ στρατηγὸς ὁ σοφὸς ἐχθίστων ὑπερ / τὰ φίλτατ' ὤλεσ', ἡδονὰς τὰς οἴκοθεν / τέκνων ἀδελφῶι δούς γυναικὸς οὖνεκα, / καὶ ταῦθ' ἐκούσης κού βίαι λεληισμένης. / ἐπεὶ δ' ἐπ' ἀκτὰς ἤλυθον Σκαμανδρείους, / ἔθνηισκον, οὐ γῆς ὄρι' ἀποστερούμενοι / οὐδ' ὑψίπυργον πατρῶϊδ'· οὐς δ' Ἄρης ἔλοι, / οὐ παῖδας εἶδον, οὐ δάμαρτος ἐν χεροῖν / πέπλοις συνεστάλησαν, ἐν ξένηι δὲ γῆι / κείνται. τὰ δ' οἴκοι τοῖσδ' ὅμοι' ἐγίγνετο· / χῆραί γ' ἔθνηισκον, οἱ δ' ἄπαιδες ἐν δόμοις / ἄλλως τέκν' ἐκθρέψαντες· οὐδὲ πρὸς τάφοις / ἔσθ' ὅστις αὐτῶν αἶμα γῆι δωρήσεται.

“so clever a man” (ὁ σοφὸς), saying afterward that he sacrificed his greatest good—his daughter Iphigenia—to go to war against Troy. The female condition is underlined when we consider the fate of the Achaean women left in Greece, forced to raise their children as widows. Cassandra’s speech shows what we might call a “feminine and non-ideological view” of war: a certain view on the health and salvation of loved ones against the artificial importance of the ideological values imposed by the *polis*. Without falling into the different ideological vision that the woman is the care-taker, we would simply affirm that the female characters of this tragedy are not conditioned (as the male characters are—Talthybius in fact never takes into consideration the possibility of saving Astyanax) by the imperialist ideology that leads to asymmetric conflict.

Euripides’s female characters, often accused of being too intellectual (see the cases of Phaedra and Melanippe), are in fact especially aware of their choices, and their speech testifies clear intentionality. They are therefore capable of justifying their actions (*logon didonai*), something which is normally the realm of the Athenian male citizen.³⁰ Moreover, it is significant that Cassandra is a prophetess of Apollo, and thus she has the gift of a supernatural knowledge; but at the same time, she is cursed and her accurate prophecies are not to be believed by anyone. The criticism of Athenian imperialism reflects the same dynamics. This criticism is made by those who, while being *de facto* part of Athenian society, were *de jure* excluded as they had no rights of citizenship.

However, Cassandra’s speech does not lead to a form of pacifism that totally rejects the war. In the end, she reaffirms the principle whereby the wise man should flee the war. Here, we can see a reference to the previous ironic appellation of Agamemnon as “the wise”. But, Cassandra continues, if war is inevitable, you

³⁰ Cf. Nancy, *Euripide et le parti des femmes*, 24. See also Justina Gregory, *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 158-60.

have to fight and die with glory: "Whoever is wise (εὖ φρονεῖ) should fly from making war; / but if he comes to this, a noble death will crown / his city with glory, a coward's end with shame."³¹ Here we notice a distinction that Euripides intends to introduce in the play. On the one hand, agonism as such is not under criticism; the hero must not flee the battle in a war context. On the other hand, we can see a clear indication about the awful effects of all asymmetric conflicts.

Andromache's speech

In *Trojan Women*, there is another speech that is central to the critique of asymmetric conflict. Immediately after Andromache is told by Talthylbius to surrender her son for execution, she undertakes a lengthy protest. Significantly, the Greek messenger underlines the absolute impotence of Andromache in front of the facts:

Let this happen and you will appear the wiser. Do not cling on to the child but grieve over your woes with a noble heart. You have no power—so do not delude yourself that you have. There is nowhere you can turn for help. No, you must think about your situation. Your city and your husband are no more. You are conquered, and we are capable of fighting against a single woman.³²

The tragic situation of Andromache is exacerbated by her condition as a solitary woman and a widow. This fact accentuates the difference between a (prize) woman and a (winner) man, indicating that we are faced with an asymmetric conflict. But her answer in respect to this desperate condition is a strong accusation

³¹ Euripides, *Troades*, vv. 400-2: φεύγειν μὲν οὖν χρὴ πόλεμον ὅστις εὖ φρονεῖ / εἰ δ' ἔς τόδ' ἔλθοι, στέφανος οὐκ αἰσχρὸς πόλει / καλῶς ὀλέσθαι, μὴ καλῶς δὲ δυσκλεῆς.

³² Euripides, *Troades*, vv. 726-32 (Morwood transl.): ἀλλ' ὧς γενέσθω καὶ σοφωτέρα φανῆι / μήτ' ἀντέχου τοῦδ', εὐγενῶς δ' ἄλγει κακοῖς, / μήτε σθένουσα μηδὲν ἰσχύειν δόκει. / ἔχεις γὰρ ἀλκίην οὐδαμηῖ σκοπεῖν δὲ χρὴ / πόλις τ' ὄλωλε καὶ πόσις, κρατῆι δὲ σύ, / ἡμεῖς δὲ πρὸς γυναικὰ μάρνασθαι μίαν / οἴοι τε.

against the blind violence of the Greeks who are about to kill the little Astyanax: “O Greeks, you who have invented barbaric cruelty, / why are you killing for no reason this boy?”³³

Twenty-five centuries later, we are still surprised by the violence and the resonance of such an observation: those who claim to have progressed to the highest degrees of culture and civilization use their power and cleverness in a way that leads to the worst regression.³⁴ Euripides simply demands pity from the audience for a violent act that has no real motivation.³⁵ The Greeks won the war, but at the same time they proved that the brute force of weapons is incompatible with civilization. The demystification of violence, for a Greek, could not have been greater.³⁶ Andromache, then, instead of representing the traditional figure of the mother who cries for her misfortunes, represents the one who, in a state of suffering, finds the strength to explicitly criticize the model of Greek masculine culture which accepts asymmetric conflict.

Euripides shows in this tragedy that the victors become vicious; they are “barbarian” in the pejorative meaning of the word, that is, war makes them behave like their constructed “other.” The *Trojan Women* does not question victory *per se*, but a notion of war which is ideologically constructed so as to require a certain sort of victory and certain types of violence: war is criticized not as *agōn* but as asymmetric conflict. Euripides’s strategy for questioning an ideological product like war is to represent its deleterious consequences before thousands of people.

The philosopher Bernard Williams wrote in *Shame and Necessity* that “[in the *Heracles*] Euripides suggested—and Euripides always suggests, he never shows—that there might have

³³ Euripides, *Troades*, vv. 764-5: ὦ βάρβαρ' ἐξευρόντες Ἕλληνες κακά, / τί τόνδε παῖδα κτείνειτ' οὐδὲν αἴτιον.

³⁴ Cf. Nancy, *Euripide et le parti des femmes*, 86.

³⁵ Cf. Pietro Pucci, *Euripides' Revolution Under Cover* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 71-3.

³⁶ Cf. Giuseppe Fornari, *Da Dioniso a Cristo. Conoscenza e sacrificio nel mondo greco e nella civiltà occidentale* (Genova: Marietti, 2009), 636.

been a way out."³⁷ A way out of what? Here the context is the *Heracles* in comparison and contrast with Sophocles's *Ajax*. While Sophocles showed the necessity of suicide in Ajax's case, Euripides suggested that, in the case of Heracles, there might have been a way out—namely, a way of avoiding suicide (and Heracles indeed follows this suggestion and avoids suicide).

Euripides's representation of the devastation and sorrow caused by the Trojan War is a critique of asymmetric conflict. At the same time, however, Euripides invites us, throughout the *Trojan Women*, to imagine what might have been a world without the excesses of the Trojan War and all the pain and suffering it caused. In this view, Euripides would have put forward not only a critique of a degenerated agonistic model, but also the suggestion of possible alternatives. Overall, the issue of asymmetric conflict is problematized, and Euripides invites the spectator to reflect on the contradictions that a degenerated agonistic model implies. As we have seen, the exhortation to reflect often comes from characters (women and children) which represent marginal groups of Athenian society.³⁸ These characters embody possible alternative models, even though they do not bear a real proposal that succeeds in subverting the mainstream ideology. Rather, they exacerbate the very contradictions of Athenian society. Euripides's teaching is problematic and provocative; it makes one consider possible alternative models. After having shown the effects of, and having criticized, the asymmetric model, Euripides and the women of Troy *suggest* that we look elsewhere, to other worlds, people and places, where the asymmetric conflict will not come up again, or at least, without such violence.³⁹

³⁷ B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1993), 73.

³⁸ Suter, "Lament in Euripides' *Trojan Women*," 21.

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